

THE AGRARIAN RHETORIC OF RICHARD M. WEAVER

BY

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Abstract

The rhetorician and philosopher Richard Weaver has been an unfairly marginalized figure in rhetorical studies, consigned to the margins for his conservative political views and insistence upon the reality of Platonic transcendental forms. In this dissertation, I advance an argument that Weaver is not only a major figure who deserves reexamination, but also that a true understanding of Weaver must be based upon his education and training by the Southern Agrarian writers, critics, and poets. Analyzing Weaver's writings through the framework of Agrarian thought, I use the categories of practice (practical and traditional knowledge), place (geographic identity), and solidarity (societal common purpose) to suggest new ways forward for rhetorical studies, rhetorical education, and civic life.

Acknowledgements

One of the goals of doctoral work in the humanities, more than a few faculty members remarked to me during the last half-decade, is to “enter the conversation”: to take one’s place at the table of scholarly debate and discussion. The subtext of this reminder is that there is no such thing as the mythical lone scholar, toiling away like Montaigne in a neo-Gothic castle tower. Indeed, no scholar gets through any level of work alone. Many people have helped me in manners beyond measure.

In the Department of Communication Studies, students and faculty alike are fortunate to count Suzanne Grachek and John Fackler as allies. Suzanne and John make the department run, and I am extremely grateful to them for all the help over the years. John and I talked literature and politics many times, and I doubt he knows how much those conversations meant to someone desperately needing a break from high theory.

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Dr. Charles Marsh served as my outside committee member, and I'm so grateful to him for the lessons in Isocratean thought and the helpful research suggestions. Dr. Marsh is a classical rhetoric scholar in the journalism school—no easy feat in the age of the algorithm. I have told every journalism major I've encountered at KU to seek him out, take his class, and simply *listen*. He is a true bright spot in the KU professoriate.

Dr. Beth Innocenti was my first teacher in my first class on my first day of the doctoral program, and on that day we read none other than Richard Weaver—excerpts from *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, to be exact. If you'd told me on that day that he would be the subject of my dissertation, I would likely have replied: “This boring curmudgeon?” Surely Dr. Innocenti's enthusiasm for that text lodged somewhere in my subconscious, for when I came across an excerpt from *Ideas Have Consequences* two years later, purely by chance while looking for another work, something in my mind clicked. She is a remarkable scholar, a kind and supportive teacher, and owner of the greatest laugh in Lawrence. She also gave me two of the best pieces of advice in graduate school: “When in doubt, return to the text,” and “Make every sentence true.” Seems shallow, until you try to follow it exactly.

Anyone in rhetoric will know the name of Dr. Robert Rowland, but to know him by his (frighteningly prolific) publishing reputation alone is to miss what a truly amazing scholar and teacher he is. When I was doing my written comprehensive exams in an office across from his, I overheard an unhappy undergraduate complaining to Dr. Rowland about his grade in an inappropriately angry voice. Dr. Rowland replied, calmly but firmly, “Those are just opinions—make *arguments!*” It was excellent advice, delivered in an almost Homericly intercessory way, and I'd like to think my answers from that point forward were a little better. He is a brilliant

debater, a helpful and supportive teacher, and he has one of sharpest minds I've ever encountered. His influence on my thinking was, and remains, profound.

I had one stroke of great fortune in the fall of 2013: despite his retirement, Dr. Donn Parson agreed to serve on my committee. What can one say about him? Yes, is a legendary figure in debate and argumentation. Yes, he has shaped the field in ways yet to be understood and has shepherded legions of students through the realm of rhetoric. But he is more than that. He is one of the wisest people I've ever known, and without question one of the broadest thinkers. He always encouraged us to think beyond narrow disciplinary confines and to ponder the deepest questions. He taught me more than I think he will ever realize, and his questions still guide my search for answers—at a time and in a place, of course.

My wife, Bridey, has been an unshakeable foundation of calm, patience, assistance, resolve, and general support. I would never have survived this past half-decade if it were not for her. We certainly didn't make it easy on ourselves; we moved an incredible six times during the program—oh, and we had a child—but through it all she was positive, supportive, and endlessly patient with her husband, who grew more and more morose with each new chapter of social theory and cultural critique. Misanthropy, apparently, loves company—and I have the best company of all.

In June 2013, after completing a hellish season of comprehensive exams, I went through a bit of an emotional crisis. My work seemed of little tangible value; my scholarly accomplishments paled when held up to material problems; I wondered if academia was right for

me. I explained as much in a rambling and occasionally incoherent email to my adviser, Dr. Jay Childers. A couple of days later he wrote back, greeting my complaints head-on and addressing my qualms with personal stories of his own. It is clear to me now that it was one of the most important messages I've ever received in any medium. (He probably wishes there weren't *many* such emails.)

It seems banal to say that Dr. Childers has been more than an adviser to me; surely every graduate student has felt the same way. But since the banal things usually end up being the truest things, I'll go ahead and assert it. He has seen me through every question, every breakdown, and every achievement of the last five years. He praised, criticized, cajoled, rebuked, edited, coaxed, and lectured me into what I am today. It often took me far too long to accept his advice, which led me to say "You were right" to him more times than I could possibly count.

Every positive professional and scholarly attribute I have is due to him. Every negative trait I still possess endures in spite of his effort. He is at once a man of extraordinary intelligence, vast wisdom, and wide interests: as apt to quote poets as rhetoricians, quick to recommend novels and academic works alike, fearful of society's path but optimistic about the capacity for change.

I fear I can never hope to repay him for all he has done for me. Doubtless he has shaped me in ways I have yet to grasp. I dedicate this work to him, with great admiration and unending gratitude.

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Abbreviation Guide:

Ideas Have Consequences: IHC

The Ethics of Rhetoric: ER

Language is Sermonic: LS

Life Without Prejudice: LWP

Visions of Order: VO

The Southern Tradition at Bay: STB

The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver: SE

In Defense of Tradition: IDT

I'll Take My Stand: ITMS

God Without Thunder: GWT

Rhetoric is a form of human transcendence, a way we open ourselves to the influence of what is beyond ourselves and become receptive, a way we participate in a larger world and become open to the lives of others, a way we learn and change.

-- James Crosswhite

We speak not only to tell other people what we think, but to tell ourselves what we think. Speech is a part of thought.

-- Oliver Sacks

Communication that is not also communion is incomplete.

-- Allen Tate

Chapter 1: Introduction

Give me a place to stand and I can move the world.

-- Archimedes

What is wanted is not to restore a vanished or to revive a vanishing culture under modern conditions which make it impossible, but to grow a contemporary culture from the old roots.

--T. S. Eliot

Few would dispute the assertion that Kenneth Burke was a major figure in the history and theory of rhetoric. Imagine, however, that rhetorical scholars devoted classroom time, journal space, and conference agendas only to a tiny fraction of Burke's work—a chapter from *Counter-Statement*, say, or the first half of *Permanence and Change*, with no attention paid to anything beyond that. Surely the field would eventually question this very narrow application of Burke's work, since to truly understand Burke requires broad immersion in the wide spectrum of his corpus. Focusing only on a limited slice does not do justice to the thinker, nor to his remarkable body of work.

This is exactly the case, however, with another major figure in the history and theory of rhetoric: Richard Weaver. Rhetorical scholars have focused almost exclusively on a very narrow portion of Weaver's work—namely, small parts of *ER* and *LS*. But to attempt to understand Weaver based solely on these two works is to miss Weaver's central, cosmological message: things can only be truly understood when ordered within a larger context and interpreted holistically. To focus on the rightness or wrongness of the tree, as scholars have done with Weaver, is to miss the significance and substance of the forest.

Further, our discipline has seen fit of late to reevaluate landmark thinkers and their application in rhetoric—and, crucially, to evaluate an author's *entire* work and not simply the classic texts. Several examples have arrived in recent years: Christian Lundberg's *Lacan in*

Public, Nathan Crick's *Democracy and Rhetoric: John Dewey on the Arts of Becoming*, Paul Stob's *William James and the Art of Popular Statement*, and Scott Stroud's *John Dewey and the Artful Life*. With the discipline trying to define its focus and its place in higher education, rhetorical scholars have turned to some of our original intellects and reevaluated their entire careers in order to better understand the role of rhetoric in academia and in culture. Weaver, however, has so far been omitted from this renaissance.

Thankfully, scholars are increasingly arguing that such a reevaluation of Weaver is fitting and overdue. Patricia Bizzell notes that "Weaver... is due for a revival" in the rhetorical tradition.¹ Even more recently, Thomas B. Farrell argues that "the triumph of an information age, the disappearance of anything approaching a public 'attention span,' makes much of Weaver's diagnostic still pertinent to our times."² Still more interestingly, James P. Beasley argues that "Weaver's rhetorical positions have never been stronger," and that "Weaver's influence has grown in popular culture in spite of his ideas being out of favor with scholars."³ A new and larger evaluation is necessary to both understand and correct this discrepancy.

To see how overlooked Weaver has been one need only look to the field's most prominent journals. Contemporary rhetorical scholars rarely engage his work, and when they do the invocations are generally either references to parts of his well-known works or explorations of more philosophical subjects. He has been cited just a handful of times in the last decade in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, and only one essay explored his work in any depth.⁴ Weaver is similarly underrepresented in the pages of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, where he is deployed mainly in arguments about definitions and terminologies—all well and good, of course, but the scholarly work there often focuses only on his main works. *Rhetoric Review* contains a few larger discussions, including one particularly close examination, but for the most part only

Weaver's central works are engaged and usually just in a passing mention of a concept like ultimate terms.⁵ As one might expect, given his perennial Platonic themes, Weaver makes a few more appearances in *Philosophy & Rhetoric*. Still, however, works about the South and about the uses of rhetoric in society are largely ignored, and substantive discussions of his work are still usually outliers.⁶

What is needed is a broader survey of Weaver's work, not simply to do justice to the intellectual legacy of a major figure in our field but to truly understand Weaver's work on rhetoric. Rhetoric, for Weaver, was more than simply various forms of arguments and appeals—more, in other words, than is contained in his works specifically dealing with argumentation and language. According to Weaver, rhetoric was the means by which the individual makes core beliefs known, and the process by which communities arrived at moral truths. In other words, rhetoric was an ontological process of *living* more than it was a formal structure of the means of persuasion. It is how we join together in causes, how we understand our position in the universe, and how we become citizens of a place.

My goal in what follows is not only to recover Weaver's broad body of work but also to suggest a new way to understand that work. I argue in this dissertation that Weaver's writings and philosophy are best understood through the lens of *agrarian* rhetoric, and that Weaver can only truly be understood as a thinker firmly entrenched in the Agrarian tradition.⁷ Rhetorical scholars have not traditionally embraced agrarian studies, as Jeff Motter and Ross Singer argued in a recent review essay in *Quarterly Journal of Speech*.⁸ But agrarianism may offer a way to understand a fundamental goal of Weaver and of rhetoric at large: the location of "spacious" ideas around which we can all come together to advance noble ends and achieve social solidarity.

Motter and Singer identify three guiding *topoi* for agrarian rhetoric, which I will use as entry points in analyzing Weaver's writings: practice, or the "act of cultivation [which] take[s] on a normative dimension that suggests how one should or ought to act"; place, or how "people live and work together in practical simplicity"; and solidarity, which is "constructed by one's place-based practices, not abstract interests."⁹ Perhaps not surprisingly, given that Weaver's intellectual forebears were the Southern Agrarians, these three *topoi* can be fairly called the three major themes of Weaver's work—both in rhetoric and in social criticism. Rather than simply taking these *topoi* as a readymade analytical framework, I will use them as starting points: I will examine each in turn and find places in Weaver's writings where one might explore the broader concepts that underlie each.

What is unique about these three modes of understanding life is that they offer a counterpoint to abstraction, that great flaw of modernity. Asking people to be loyal to a place, a practice, or a community is fundamentally different than asking them to be loyal to a concept—freedom, for example, or American exceptionalism. By contrast, Weaver argued, as I do here, that our focus should be on what is local and tangible and immediate because we grasp those things better than we do mere ideas about a nation. Therefore, Weaver was foremost a regionalist because he felt a direct connection to a certain region, one of heritage and sympathy. Since rhetoric must be at least partially concerned with the formation of citizens, I suggest here that an agrarian understanding—of both Weaver's work and its lessons for rhetorical ethics and citizenship—can offer a better way to build solidarity and social cohesion. Moreover, the three agrarian themes make up Weaver's goal of "spaciousness": an idea that can bond people together metaphysically and move us toward noble common ends. These ideas cannot be imparted as much as they must be *lived*: spacious ideas arise through daily experience and connection, not

through mere repetition. Thus a spacious idea like aiding a neighbor can only take metaphysical form when a person regularly *sees* it enacted by certain people of a certain place. It cannot take shape only when political leaders *identify* it as a key trait of Americans.

The agrarian framework that guides Weaver's work is a counterpoint to the abstraction and fragmentation of modern life, while practice is a rebellion against modernity's emphasis on technique. Agrarianism offers wholeness and tangibility against the abstraction of modernity. There may be no better statement of this stance than a collection of essays by the Southern Agrarian writers, who found the agrarian lifestyle to be the very embodiment of the counter-Enlightenment. John Crowe Ransom, for example, thought agrarianism's "self-sufficient, backward-looking, intensely parochial" way of life stood against modernity's separation of the individual from the land, from tradition, and from a sense of place.¹⁰ For the Agrarians, connection to the land was a direct antidote to the rootlessness and vacuity so lamented by Weaver; if the individual is connected to the natural life cycle, to stewardship of the land, and to the solidarity of provincialism, she can resist the fragmentary forces of modernity. This provincialism is "man's interest in his own center," said Stark Young, and it allows the individual to feel anchored to a way of life, and to nature itself.¹¹

The connection to nature is an essential component of the agrarian life, as its proponents see modernity as corrupting the premodern human dependence on nature—"the most ancient and the most humane of all the modes of human livelihood," as Ransom puts it.¹² Modernity has severed this connection and instead sought to use the instruments of progress to dominate nature, which inevitably leads to dehumanization.¹³ The key problem here is essentially one of time and control: agrarian thinkers say that humans should follow the cycles of nature and submit to its power, while modernity advances dominion over nature and mastery of its capacities. This

doctrine of progress makes us conceive of the world, and our own abilities, as continuously evolving; Hegel and Comte, among others, encouraged this view of reality as “world-process” whose historical and social phenomena evolve along with physical and biological phenomena.¹⁴ Thus the cyclical permanence of nature is replaced by the transient upheaval of progress.

Most valuable in nature, agrarian rhetoric argues, is its inherent teleology. When we are stewards of the land, we clearly see things fulfilling their own ends—and this prods us to view ourselves as similarly *telos*-driven. But modern life, by encouraging instrumental thinking and domination of nature, made the individual, as Lyle Lanier put it, “concerned not so much with saving his soul as with making himself comfortable, and with improvement of the world through cooperative social effort.”¹⁵ As a response, agrarian writers like Wendell Berry offer a renewed connection to the land: “If we apply our minds directly and competently to the needs of the earth, then we will have begun to make fundamental and necessary changes in our minds. We will begin to understand and to mistrust *and to change* our wasteful economy, which markets not just the produce of the earth, but also the earth’s ability to produce.”¹⁶ Just as we use the doctrine of progress to escape unpleasant things, so too do we use domination over nature to escape “sweat and sorrow” only to also lose “love and excellence, health and joy.”¹⁷ If agrarianism had a motto, it might borrow that of the Benedictine monastic order: *laborare est orare*—to work is to pray. In agrarian rhetoric, wholeness for the person is achieved through tangible work in a specific place.

One can clearly see the applicability of the agrarian rhetorical framework to the works of Richard Weaver. Indeed, Weaver wrote to a friend that once he began his doctoral work he converted to the “Church of Agrarianism.”¹⁸ In true agrarian fashion, Weaver encouraged development of *practice*, or the cultivated form of being and doing that relies upon accumulated

knowledge and contains inherent norms and values; *place*, or a sense of belonging to a specific region with its own tradition, heritage, and values that help create social norms; and *solidarity*, or the feeling of common pursuit that comes with belonging to a specific and tangible set of experiences, and which helps bind one to other members of a group. Above all else the agrarian rhetorical framework seeks to move people away from abstraction—allegiance to a set of symbols binding us to people we never encounter and with whom we share little in common—and toward tangibility and immediacy. When we devote a greater focus to the places we inhabit, the people we see, and the traditions we embody, Weaver and the agrarians argued, we create the conditions for development of virtue and ethics. This tradition argues that we need direct encounters with the consequences of our actions and direct experiences with the traditions of our forebears in order to truly understand what it means to be an ethical citizen.

This was the true message of the wide body of work by one of our field's major figures, and yet that message has been lost in the field's treatment of him. Instead of a holistic understanding of Weaver's larger structure of thought—all of which, crucially, is vital to his theories of rhetoric—we have focused only on a small fraction of his work and marginalized or dismissed the remainder. Scholars in history have evaluated the broader Weaver, but our field has mostly overlooked it. I aim to correct that imbalance and to advance the relevance and application of agrarian rhetoric.

In this chapter I will first address how our discipline has treated Weaver and argue that said treatment has been both limited and unfairly narrow in scope. My conclusion is that a new examination of his work is both necessary and highly relevant to the field. I will then sketch a brief biographical portrait of Weaver, and finally offer more detail on the philosophy and practice of agrarianism that will illustrate agrarianism's major tenets and traditions.

The Treatment of Weaver in Rhetorical Studies

The vast majority of the scholarly attention paid to Weaver by our discipline has focused on his theory of argument. Perhaps this is understandable, given our concern for the mechanics of argumentation. But one should also find this narrow focus to be quite curious; after all, the basics of Weaver's theory comprise just two chapters in one book. Broadly, the field's treatment of Weaver breaks down into three approaches: technical analyses of his theory with a focus on argumentation; whole-cloth rejections based upon his politically conservative views; and admissions, sometimes begrudging, of the usefulness of his work.

Many scholars in the first category find methodological fault in Weaver's theory. Lois J. Einhorn, for example, admired Weaver's belief that "through the study of literature and rhetoric, [students] could learn the evocative power of words. Weaver viewed rhetoric, then, as a powerful means for restoring order to society."¹⁹ She even sympathizes with his desire for rhetoric that "presupposed an antecedent dialectic" that focuses on the "essence or nature of something."²⁰ However, she faults the theory and is skeptical of its widespread application. She notes, in a rejection common in evaluations of Weaver, that acceptance of his hierarchy of argument—from circumstance, from cause and effect, from definition—requires acceptance of the spacious principles that underlie the theory. But according to Einhorn, Weaver "failed to provide a way for someone who does not accept his first premises from the start to step into his system."²¹

What Einhorn and other critics miss is that Weaver's goal was not to expand the premises to suit the rhetors—it was, rightly or wrongly, to expand the rhetors to suit the premises by attaching them to tangible things with transcendental foundations. This flaw is a result of

considering Weaver's rhetorical theory outside the scope of his other work. His works beyond *ER*, *IHC*, and *LS* make clear that the role of rhetoric *must* be seen within the context of his cultural critiques. This is not so much a mistake as an incident of short-sightedness, but it is one that appears again and again in rhetorical studies. Most critics simply ignore the majority of Weaver's work because they deem it irrelevant to his theory of argumentation. In fact, it is anything but.

Take, for example, Dennis R. Bormann's study of Weaver's analysis of Edmund Burke and the argument from circumstance. Bormann devotes his entire essay to this *one* element of *one* chapter of *one* book by Weaver, and then rejects Weaver's judgment as "no longer applicable in Burke's time and even less applicable today."²² Throughout the essay, Bormann characterizes the hierarchy from argument as the only aspect of Weaver's career relevant to rhetorical critics. But to do this is to miss what Weaver forcefully argued was the goal of rhetoric, including the hierarchy of argument: to move people toward noble goals. One simply cannot consider his theory of rhetoric without also considering the ultimate purpose of that theory, nor without considering the intellectual tradition that helped produce that theory.

Other scholars in this scholarly category reject Weaver's theory because they indict him for not following his own advice. John R.E. Bliese, for example, deems Weaver's theory unacceptable because Weaver did not take Edmund Burke's entire substantive position into account when criticizing the latter's style of argument. It is ironic, then, that Bliese himself does not fully examine Weaver's entire substantive position when criticizing his hierarchy of argument. Instead, he surveys the relevant portions of *ER*, solely comprising work on argument, and then concludes that Weaver's position on Burke is flawed because "one cannot use a process of arguing as the sole means of defining a political position."²³ Indeed one cannot; Bliese's

failure to consider the rest of Weaver's work is both unfortunate and highly representative of the work in the field.

An especially odd characteristic of the first category of responses—those who question Weaver while relying solely on his technical arguments about rhetoric—is that they often fault Weaver for his theory's lack of universal application. In other words, they ask: how is the rhetor to proceed if she rejects the first premises? There are two possible responses to this. The first is that it ignores the broad swath of Weaver's work that emphasized the importance of particularism and regional distinction, both essential elements of the agrarian framework. Weaver wanted a rhetor to be in line with the first premises and principles of her culture, and that does not necessarily mean universality. The second response is that Weaver's philosophy *aspires* to universality because he saw the agrarian tradition as that most worthy of emulation.²⁴ Those who reject his arguments without considering the full range of his work, including his goals for rhetoric, do a disservice to the field.²⁵

The second category of rhetorical studies of Weaver's corpus comprises those works even less helpful for a full understanding of Weaver: the articles that reject Weaver on the basis of his political principles. Foremost among these is an essay by Sharon Crowley, who believes that Weaver must be ejected from the rhetorical canon entirely because his views depart from the ruling orthodoxy of our time—specifically, because he criticized “freedom, equality, and democracy as well as liberalism, communism, and the women's movement.”²⁶ Her complaint is that rhetorical theorists whose views on rhetoric spring from “offensive” ideology cannot be held up as worthy either of emulation or study. Indeed, if she had her way with the rhetorical canon, Weaver's work “would appear there no longer.”²⁷

Crowley's objection is rooted in what she sees as a fundamental unintelligibility in Weaver's premises of argument—in the very concept of a “spacious” rhetoric rooted in a “metaphysical dream” of a Platonic world of ideals. “It would be nice to know,” Crowley asks with near-derision, “how Weaver imagined that rhetors gain access to the ‘metaphysical dream’—is it done by virtue of long study and careful preparation, or must one simply keep her ears and eyes open?”²⁸ But Weaver's other works answer her question: the metaphysical dream emerges from a regional culture that preserves the “permanent things,” to use T.S. Eliot's famous term, that help maintain that culture's sense of cohesion and unity. Thus the South's metaphysical dream consisted of chivalry, a sense of place, and the older religiousness, according to *STB* and *SE*. The metaphysical dream of the modern liberal academic, as Crowley would likely recognize, would include openness, tolerance, and free debate. A metaphysical dream emerges from the culture and its participants, and its codes are codified in the goods that culture considers noble. This is exactly in line with agrarian thinking.

Too much of our field's work regarding Weaver—including other work by John Bliese, Donald Cushman and Gerard Hauser, Ross Winterowd, and Michael Sproule—is structured this way. To reject a theorist because his views do not comport wholeheartedly with what we consider to be our enlightened attitudes is both shallow and indicative of poor scholarship. Unfortunately, this is how most of the work regarding Weaver operates: his ideas are reduced to a fraction of his total output, his ideas are faulted for their lack of total applicability, and then his ideas are denied a hearing because he is a conservative who espoused many unpopular views.²⁹ Besides being a specious reading of his career, this dominant position is of dubious merit for the rhetorical academy. Very few people have focused on what ideas we might recover from

Weaver's work, *even if* portions of those ideas strike us as dated or irrelevant. In this project I have addressed that gap in scholarship and criticism.

The third category of rhetorical studies of Weaver veers closer toward acceptance of his principles, though this category is a small minority indeed and is now decades old. Most of these essays sympathize with Weaver's goal of using an agrarian rhetorical framework to foster virtue and ethics, arguing that at some point rhetoric as a field must decide on *something* that is worth aiming for—that the absence of an enshrined ethical stance reflects not openness but reluctance to offend any ethical standpoint. Such a position is taken by Ralph T. Eubanks, who argues that only when a rhetorical theory “is concerned with human purpose, enduring human values, and a sense of ‘oughtness’ will it be equipped to show the ‘new man’ a better version of himself.”³⁰ At some point, in other words, rhetorical theory needs to be prescriptive: it must move people toward ends that we consider noble. Relying on a descriptive stance for rhetoric, in which the tools of persuasion are merely described to students without education in how they are to be used, is untenable—as is a position that nothing is noble, or, worse, that everything is.

What critics like Eubanks, Richard L. Johannesen, Walter H. Beale, and William C. Havard see in Weaver's work is the possible foundation for an alignment between rhetoric and ethics: the realization of Weaver's career-long goal.³¹ Eubanks and Baker, for example, write that liberal arts education has “forsaken its mission” as it has stopped educating students “in how man may best use his freedom,” and that universities have “abandoned their ancient and honorable task of training young people to live informed, intelligent, and integrated lives.”³² This is to be lamented, of course, but of particular concern to this line of criticism is the virtual absence of rhetoric from the conversation. As the field turned away from prescriptivist stances, it largely gave up its role in informing what *ought* to be the ethical stances of citizens. But rhetoric

according to Eubanks and Baker, “is a dynamic force in the nurture of human values; it must therefore find a central place in any plan which claims concern for man’s quest for values, and that looks toward the amelioration of man’s present state of anhedonia.”³³

As Beale put it, since “Rhetorical education is an attempt to shape a certain kind of character capable of using language effectively to carry on the practical and moral business of a polity,” we must educate students in “the joining of eloquence and wisdom in the pursuit of the good society.”³⁴ The two ideas, eloquence and wisdom, are not merely complementary but are in fact always already conjoined. To train a student in eloquence without offering directions for using it is as useless as training a student in wisdom without offering directions for expressing it. Both rhetoric and ethics, these critics argue, must be the twin forces of liberal education. Weaver’s rhetorical theories, when seen in light of his overarching cultural project, offer a potential way forward. They offer the rhetorician a means for advancing true and honest rhetoric toward noble ends while minding social solidarity.

From an analytical standpoint, this third category—which is really a sort of catch-all for all the works not mostly or wholly hostile to Weaver—is too dated to still be considered relevant. These essays represent an engagement with Weaver in the years after his death, when posthumous works were appearing and the field was trying to understand his ideas and their significance. It also represents a different time in our field, before the advent of the critical rhetoric project and its “permanent critique” stance. It was easier a few decades ago to discuss a set of ethical standards around which rhetoric might rally, and to explore ways for rhetorical education to be firmly steeped in the Western ethical tradition. Today, such claims might very likely be met with anything from surprise to anger. However, the critical approaches embodied in this third category still have potential value when placed within an agrarian framework, which

emphasizes specific place- and tradition-based understandings of ethical foundations. Thus despite its age, this category's legacy is nonetheless essential to the project at hand.

An agrarian understanding of rhetoric and ethics, as suggested by the final approach to Weaver's work, would stress the necessarily close proximity between the individual and the experience of practice, place, and solidarity. The "pursuit of a good society" can only occur when the individual citizen has close contact with both good and society. But extend the citizen too far, too broadly in the direction of ideals and away from tangible connection, and her experience becomes too abstract. If we apply the agrarian framework to Weaver's work, as I do in what follows, then the immediate and the proximate becomes the basis for ethics. Weaver claimed that only when we are ensconced within a network of practice, place, and solidarity—which can only arise at the local and the regional—can we fully form ideas of ethics and citizenship and culture.

Weaver's holistic view of rhetoric and society, in which ideals must be embedded in material practices, is a direct legacy of agrarianism, in which ideals can only flourish within a network of practice, place, and solidarity. Just as Weaver thought transcendental forms were at stake in our language use, so too does agrarian philosophy see forms disappearing when experience becomes too abstract. My sympathies generally lie with the final line of scholarly approaches to Weaver (although, as I will discuss in the conclusion, the Weaver program is not without its serious flaws). Unfortunately, this view is relatively unpopular and has not found a wide audience in our field because few critics, and almost none in recent years, have examined the work of Weaver beyond the few texts deemed immediately relevant to rhetorical theory—and those who do tend to reject his ideas for political reasons. This disciplinary affliction cries out for treatment.

A brief Weaver biography

Weaver was born in 1910 in Asheville, NC, to Dick Weaver, a junior partner in a livery stable, and Carrye Embry, the owner of a millinery shop.³⁵ After Dick died in 1915, Carrye moved the family to Lexington, KY, to be closer to her family. Weaver attended the Academy of Lincoln Memorial University, a preparatory school in Harrogate, TN, then enrolled at the University of Kentucky. While at Kentucky, Weaver was a well-known liberal and even worked for the American Socialist Party after graduation. In 1932 he was offered a scholarship to begin a master's degree in English at Kentucky, but he left after a year when he was offered a better scholarship at Vanderbilt University, where he would encounter the Southern Agrarians.

“It would be difficult to overstate the importance of Weaver's period of study with the Southern Agrarians at Vanderbilt,” Smith writes, and indeed these years turned out to be epiphanic for Weaver.³⁶ He completed his thesis, “The Revolt Against Humanism: A Study of the New Critical Temper,” under the guidance of John Crowe Ransom—perhaps the chief intellectual star of the Agrarians, and the man around whom the entire movement rotated. Weaver received his degree in 1934 and began doctoral work; two years later he left to find a teaching position that might support him while he completed his dissertation on Milton. During this time, as he would later chronicle in his famous essay “Up From Liberalism,” he abandoned liberalism as philosophically incoherent and began his conversion to the “Church of Agrarianism.”

He taught for one year as an instructor at what is now Auburn University, then took a position as assistant professor of English and director of forensics at Texas A&M University, where he was “deeply disturbed by the mood of militant philistinism he encountered there.”³⁷

He fled the campus whenever he could, spending weekends and breaks in Houston and Mexico, and summers in study programs at Harvard and the Sorbonne. One of the most formative experiences of his life came after the Harvard summer, on the drive back to College Station: “It came to me like a revelation that I did not *have* to go back to this job, which had become distasteful, and that I did not *have* to go on professing the clichés of liberalism, which were becoming meaningless to me.”³⁸

Weaver set aside his Vanderbilt dissertation and applied to a new doctoral program at Louisiana State University, noting in his application that he considered himself “a Southern nationalist.”³⁹ He spent 1940 to 1943 in the program, with summers at the University of Virginia and the University of North Carolina. Cleanth Brooks, the Southern Agrarian and literary critic, directed his dissertation entitled “The Confederate South, 1865-1910: A Study in the Survival of a Mind and a Culture.” After teaching one year at North Carolina State University, he was offered—after some lobbying by Brooks—a position as instructor of English in the College of the University of Chicago.⁴⁰

It was here that Weaver truly bloomed as a teacher, a public intellectual, and an Agrarian. Though his teaching load was heavy—three courses per quarter—and his involvement in curriculum planning was also arduous, he arranged his schedule so that he could do several hours of dedicated scholarly work each day. He published academic essays on composition and rhetoric, earned plaudits as a highly admired teacher, and still published book reviews, cultural criticism, and other pieces in outlets like *Modern Age*, *National Review*, and *Commonweal*. Though he has posthumously acquired a reputation for hermetic and even monastic behavior, Weaver was a sociable colleague and frequent presence at University parties.⁴¹

In 1947 Weaver finished a project he called “The Adverse Descent,” about the crisis in Western moral and intellectual life. It would soon be accepted by the University of Chicago Press and be published in 1948 as *Ideas Have Consequences*, a title Weaver disliked greatly but which has since become a frequent slogan of American cultural conservatism. A wide-ranging intellectual history and savage attack on modernity, the book met with many critical reviews in the liberal urban press but also received glowing endorsements from the theologians Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, among others. The book helped him secure a promotion to assistant professor (he became associate professor in 1951, and full professor in 1957).⁴²

The next few years were some of Weaver’s most productive. Satisfied with his cultural critique in *IHC*, he refocused his scholarly sights on the South and on Southern literature, publishing essays in *Georgia Review*, *Sewanee Review*, and *Hopkins Review*. He also completed the book our field knows best, 1953’s *The Ethics of Rhetoric*. A highly accomplished scholarly work, *ER* would secure him lasting fame in the fields of English and rhetoric and establish him as a major voice in matters of language. During summers in this period, Weaver traveled to a house he had purchased in Weaverville, NC, a city founded by his ancestors, and in which he placed his aging mother. His orations to his assembled family each summer, to be discussed below, contain some of his best thoughts on community and culture.

After the publication of these two books and his new friendship with Russell Kirk, whose landmark text *The Conservative Mind* was published in 1953, Weaver became an increasingly visible presence in a resurgent American conservatism. He gave many invited speeches in places like New York and New Haven, and wrote essays and reviews for various conservative publications—26 in *National Review* alone, in just two years.⁴³ For someone who still taught a full load every semester, it was a staggeringly prolific output of writing and lecturing. In 1957 he

published a textbook, *Composition: A Course in Writing and Rhetoric*, and was invited to be a key speaker at a Vanderbilt Literary Symposium, which cemented both his connection to the Agrarians and his reputation as a serious intellectual of the South and of agrarianism.

In 1961 he finished the manuscript for *Visions of Order*, which he saw as a follow-up work to *IHC*. In the following, very successful two years the book was reviewed and accepted, Weaver received a special award at the national convention of the Young Americans for Freedom, and his invited lectures at major universities became highly praised publications and pamphlets. Most importantly and surely most gratifyingly for Weaver, he was invited to join the faculty at Vanderbilt—lodestar of the Agrarian movement and the site of his first agrarian explorations. He accepted, but on April 2, 1963, he was felled by a heart attack at just 53 years old. His dedication to scholarship ensured that, in addition to his three published books, there was material for four posthumous collections.

How ought we assess the life of Weaver? It was a life of the mind, certainly; he qualifies, I believe, for an old-fashioned title that may yet retain some cultural currency: he was a man of letters. Had he lived, we might have received still more of his Southern writings, cultural critique, and theories of rhetoric. But even with a life cut tragically short, he managed to produce an impressive array of work, both scholarly and popular. This made him, according to the historian Eugene Genovese, one who ranked “among the most significant intellectuals of America in [the twentieth] century.”⁴⁴

There was a sentiment among the Agrarians that there is value in exile—that is, that one must leave a place to see it most clearly. Many members of that esteemed group worked outside the South: at Kenyon, Yale, Minnesota, Middlebury, and elsewhere. So too may it have been with Weaver, who wrote that the Agrarian exile actually represented “a strategic withdrawal to

positions where the contest can be better carried on.”⁴⁵ His best work came when he was trapped in what he considered the “megalopolis” of Chicago, far from his ideal agrarian setting. From that vantage point, he could see the benefits and the flaws of his native and beloved land. If he had remained only in the South, perhaps we would never have had his astute writings on the Southern mind.

Weaver also represented an intellectual type that has, to our great detriment, become something of an anachronism: he was a generalist. As I will explore in detail below, a central plank of agrarian thinking is that the human must be master of a wide range of skills, and that specialization is a pernicious outgrowth of modernity. Weaver can be classified as a thinker in rhetoric, history, intellectual history, political philosophy, English, and ethics—not to mention his works of literary and cultural criticism. It is increasingly rare to find such scholars today. This may be another reason to study the whole life and whole works of Weaver: perhaps we can recover something of how scholars might once again become wide-ranging thinkers.

Since I argue throughout this project that the only true way to understand Weaver’s rhetorical theories is through a holistic understanding of his work, and that Weaver was first and most importantly an Agrarian thinker, in the next section I survey the philosophy and history of American agrarianism, with special focus on the Southern Agrarian movement that so influenced Weaver. My hope is that a greater understanding of these lines of agrarian thinking helps illustrate Weaver’s goals in his writings on rhetoric, which have been so narrowly interpreted and analyzed by our field.

The philosophy of Agrarianism in America

Russell Kirk is famous for asserting that conservatism is not an ideology, but rather a way of life. So too might we consider agrarianism: it is, according to Berry, “primarily a practice, a

set of attitudes, a loyalty, and a passion; it is an idea only secondarily and at a remove.”⁴⁶

Perhaps the reason it has never lent itself terribly neatly to a political program is because of this argumentative shortcoming; it is difficult to reduce a way of life to a catchy slogan or set of bullet points.

The agrarian tradition in the United States has obvious roots in the works of Thomas Jefferson, who trumpeted the virtues—for both person and nation—of the yeoman farmer. Early American history is often condensed, rather simplistically, into a battle of ideas between Jefferson (small farms, small government, decentralization) and Alexander Hamilton (industry, cities, finance, strong national government), with the usual conclusion being that Hamilton won both the battle and the war. This sort of Jeffersonian agrarianism, which has been covered well by scholars, is the antecedent of most back-to-the-land movements since that time. Emerging from this school of thought is the important idea that direct localism is better for citizens than abstract cosmopolitanism.

What I focus on here, however, is the influence of the Southern Agrarians, who penned the aforementioned *ITMS* in 1930. The thrust behind this version of Agrarianism, according to the literary scholar Louis D. Rubin, Jr.’s introduction, is not a vision for a nation but rather a counterattack from a threatened tradition against an encroaching, tyrannical industry-state monopoly. “The tradition out of which [the twelve Southerners] were writing was that of pastorage; they were invoking the humane virtues of a simpler, more elemental, nonacquisitive existence, as a needed rebuke to the acquisitive, essentially materialistic compulsions of a society that from the outset was very much engaged in seeking wealth, power, and plenty on a continent whose prolific natural resources and vast acres of usable land, forests, and rivers were there for the taking.”⁴⁷ Or, as the Agrarian Herbert Agar put it a few years later, “There is the issue: Is

modern America, or is any united section of modern America, capable of desiring and defining a society based on principles rather than opportunism, on a moral image of what it wishes the life of man to be rather than on a more or less regulated scramble for possessions?”⁴⁸

In other words, where Jeffersonian agrarianism laid out an idyllic vision of an ideal society, Southern Agrarianism was fighting back against a centralized economic system that transformed citizens into what Agar called “‘economic man,’ a sort of highest common denominator of human weaknesses,” and which formed a society “whose cupidity is abnormally intense.”⁴⁹ This is the very vision laid out by Weaver in *IHC*: a society based purely on consumption and libertinism, where moral imagination is dead and any exploitation of resources or humans is justified as a necessary sacrifice to the almighty god of Progress: economic growth.

To counter this, Agrarianism proposed a nation of small property owners who would focus on their land and their region, making subsistence the first concern and wealth accumulation the second. The reasons for this were metaphysical as much as they were economic: according to Allen Tate, “A true property system will be composed of a large proportion of owners whose property is not to be expressed solely in terms of exchange-value, but retains, for the owner, the possibility of use-value.”⁵⁰ The land *means* something to the small agrarian farmer, in other words—something beyond merely what it is worth. This in turn helps create more direct modes of living and more tangible connections to both earth and fellow citizen, according to Berry: “A man who is trying to live as a neighbor to his neighbors will have a lively and practical understanding of the work of peace and brotherhood, and let there be no mistake about it—he is *doing* that work. . . . A good farmer who is dealing with the problem of soil erosion on an acre of ground has a sounder grasp of that problem and *cares* more about it and is probably doing more to solve it than any bureaucrat who is talking about it in general.”⁵¹

The Agrarian vision was not merely an alternative worth considering; it was an urgent and necessary corrective to an industrialized society based on consumption and destruction of difference. Part of the problem with that materialistic culture—and here is where Agrarianism breaks most sharply with Jeffersonian agrarianism—is its foundation in democracy. According to one scholar, the Agrarians embraced “a Jeffersonian rejection of industry but add[ed] a love of the Old South and a distinctly non-Jeffersonian suspicion of democracy.”⁵² Democracy, the Agrarians felt, too strongly emphasized the sovereignty of individual rights and too tepidly incorporated notions of community and solidarity. Democracy also lacked, in their view, a sufficient emphasis on virtue and any sort of teleological approach to ways of living. It too easily leads, they believed, to consideration of means over ends and to acceptance of a purely economic approach to society: if this action gets us more things or rights, then it is good. For Aldo Leopold, another intellectual heir of the Agrarians, there was no “more complete regimentation of the human mind than that accomplished by our self-imposed doctrine of ruthless utilitarianism.”⁵³ Such utilitarianism, this argument went, emerges from the stark greatest-good-for-the-greatest-number emphasis of democracy.⁵⁴

Better, then, to accept that societies inevitably break down into social hierarchies and hence to accept republican government. This so-called “aristocratic agrarianism,” would strongly influence Weaver’s thought on social cosmology and order. The problem with this philosophy, however, is that it’s more than a little odd to champion the virtues of the common man and the small farmer while also advocating a hierarchical society and republican government. The Agrarians, it is worth remembering, were hardly yokels—most held advanced degrees and had studied at both Ivy League and top European schools.⁵⁵ Thus the movement’s roots, as James

Montmarquet puts it in a nicely turned phrase, “were to be found more in the Great Books than on the Great Plains.”⁵⁶

But this potential incommensurability should not prompt rejection of the philosophy itself. The Agrarians saw inequality as a social inevitability, because they were “traditionalist[s] rooted in the history of accustomed forms and habits.”⁵⁷ This is why Weaver would later take (rather uncomfortably, to our ears) the example of the plantation as a microcosm of cosmological order: because each person recognized a role in society; there was no doctrine of universal egalitarianism, and the world was better off for it. Weaver “maintained that aristocracy and patriarchy, which placed some men in the service and under the protection of others,” was healthy, and that egalitarianism “threatened to obliterate the sources of discrimination and therefore the standards of judgment that demarcated civilization from savagery,” as a historian of that era has said.⁵⁸ This idea assumes that we should all see ourselves as subservient to something or someone, and the best choice is something natural.⁵⁹

Just as the wealthy class in the United States was once known for a strong sense of *noblesse oblige*, so too did the Agrarians see themselves—despite their generally elite intellectual (and sometimes material) heritage—as stewards of respect for the land and the people who work it. Andrew Nelson Lytle, one of the contributors to *ITMS*, wrote that, when contesting the soulless materialism of finance-capitalism, “the answer lies in a return to a society where agriculture is practiced by most of the people. It is in fact impossible for any culture to be sound and healthy without a proper respect and proper regard for the soil.”⁶⁰ Other Agrarians later relaxed this exacting standard a bit in favor of getting people closer to the land by decentralizing power, structuring communities around the places that produce their foods, and putting more people in touch with the sources of their food and the consequences of their actions.

One can only find self-actualization—that great quest of modern culture—by, as Berry put it, “recognizing physical landmarks, by connecting [oneself] to practical circumstances,” instead of the psychological self-indulgence of inward self-seeking.⁶¹

Stewardship of the land also benefits the modern citizen by providing a sense of wholeness to counteract the fragmentation of modern life. A central “pillar of agrarianism,” according to Frank Lawrence Owsley, is that “the agrarian population must dominate the social, cultural, economic, and political life of the state and give tone to it.”⁶² They should do so because they have a natural connection to the harmony and wholeness of nature, and thus can see things in wide scope rather than in narrow focus. In modern finance-capitalism, according to the scholar James Freyfogle, “Nature is typically fragmented into distinct parts—into parcels of land and discrete natural resources—its parts then valued piece by piece. Humans are fragmented, too, our lives divided into specific roles and our labor treated as another market commodity. It is hard to spot and appreciate the connections when all we see are the pieces. It is hard to uphold the long term when the market encourages consumption today.”⁶³

Because how we view nature influences how we view ourselves, according to agrarianism, this fragmented outlook renders us equally fragmented. This specific critique has been leveled since the Enlightenment but has especial resonance in the modern United States. Roderick Nash saw both the legacy of Francis Bacon in westward expansion and the “conquering” of nature as a rejection of the drive to live in harmony with it.⁶⁴ The post-bellum era in particular, with its emphasis on wealth and centralization of power, saw a “desperate retreat indoors, toward consumerism and specialization,” as Aaron Sachs put it.⁶⁵ The problem with this, according to Southern Agrarian (and Weaver mentor) Donald Davidson, is that Americans had “become the image of what they contemplated”—if they look at the landscape

and see skyscrapers and specialization, then they will become specialized themselves.⁶⁶ But if they look at the landscape and see harmony with nature—and, more importantly, *live* that harmony by being faithful stewards of the land—then such a landscape will help form more complete people.

Weaver, like his Agrarian forebears, was a strong critic of the applied tools of science—not because he rejected science’s epistemology but because he disliked its ambition to explain all phenomena, divide realms of knowledge, and demystify all elements of life. This renders Agrarianism, with its emphasis on harmony and wholeness and stewardship, almost overtly theological. And it’s true that it can be difficult at times to separate critiques of modernity from advocacy of Christendom’s restoration. But modern agrarians tend to speak less about God and more about the power of nature. Thus while Ransom could write of his “defense of orthodoxy,” today we hear from public policy scholar Peter Brown: “Our primary orientation to the world should be ethical *and mystical* (characterized by a sense of awe and joy)—at once grounded in emotion and thought. Scientific knowledge, its related technologies, and economics should be in service to what Albert Schweitzer called an ethic of reverence for life.”⁶⁷ The language may be more secular, but the message is the same: means must be subservient to noble ends, and those ends must be rooted in the knowledge that we cannot know all things. Humility, either before God or before the natural order of the world, is a central plank of Agrarian thought and of Weaver’s thought.⁶⁸

For Weaver’s mentor Ransom, as for Friedrich Nietzsche, the demotion of the Judeo-Christian God was a tragic event. Modernity had replaced God with purely physical phenomena, and science represented the effort to permanently eliminate the supernatural. But Ransom, and later Weaver, believed this diminished the importance of myths in cultures, which provide

guiding lessons on how to live and remind us of our own limitations. According to Ransom, “*Myth resorts to the supernatural in order to represent the fullness of the natural...* [Myth-makers say] ‘Do not try to verify: not demonstrable, not historical: go and try them... *The myth is not descriptive, it is prescriptive.*”⁶⁹ Weaver likewise believed in the power of myth, writing in *STB* that the Old South’s “reality had existed somehow in the willed belief, or the myth.”⁷⁰ Myths are necessary for people to live, and the powers of science—which, for Weaver, were most damningly revealed in the development of the atomic bomb—are always at war with nature. Worse, science destroys our sense of limits and lends itself too easily to economic reason and utilitarianism.

An obvious question arises, however: with all this emphasis on the mystical and the ineffable, is Agrarianism an ideology or a political project? I have argued above that the Southern Agrarians saw it as their task to offer an alternative to the materialist, consumerist, mass society. Some scholars have argued that the Agrarians are just the latest in a long line of “Romantic Agrarians,” a legacy originating with the pastorals of Virgil and extending through Rousseau, Frost, Blake, and Wordsworth, and that they simply construct an image of the past in their heads and pine for the loss of an ideal.⁷¹ And yes, perhaps the Agrarians’ praise for a long-defunct system that availed itself of slave labor will strike us today as politically untenable, and thus limiting in its practical possibilities.

But to consign the Agrarians to the margins of history is to both judge them unfairly and fail to understand how they viewed their own project. For one thing, consider the world the Agrarians were facing. As Malcolm Cowley described the world contemporaneously greeting the Lost Generation, “Something oppressed them... it was Mass Production, Babbitry, Our Business Civilization; or perhaps it was the Machine, which had been developed to satisfy men’s needs,

but which was now controlling those needs and forcing its standardized products upon us by means of omnipresent advertising and omnipresent vulgarity—the Voice of the Machine, the Tyranny of the Mob.”⁷²

More importantly, consider just how distinctly anti-capitalist the Southern Agrarians were—or at least anti-industrialism.⁷³ Consider Owsley’s definition of Agrarianism’s enemy: “This enemy is a system which allows a relatively few men to control most of the nation’s wealth and to regiment virtually the whole population under their anonymous holding companies and corporations, and to control government by bribery or intimidation.”⁷⁴ If this quote appeared out of context, it might easily be taken for some Occupy Wall Street platform. But this virulent anti-industrialism was a central theme of Agrarianism, and would resurface again and again in Weaver’s work. This, along with their determination to offer a viable alternative to this economic arrangement, moves them out of the Romantic Agrarian margins and squarely into the ranks of political and economic crusaders.

Here, for example, is Ransom in his introduction to *ITMS*: “The tempo of industrial life is fast, but that is not the worst of it; it is accelerating. The ideal is not merely some set form of industrialism, with so many stable industries, but industrial progress, or an incessant extension of industrialization. It never proposes a specific goal; it initiates the infinite series.”⁷⁵ The emphasis in industrialism is on progress and nothing else, and the Agrarians offer a counterpoint in small, local organization. The aim of *ITMS* was not to offer some rosy view of the past, as Montmarquet suggests—it was to start a national movement against the “enslavement of human energies.”⁷⁶ Indeed, the historian Paul Conkin asserted that *ITMS* was “a prelude to an organized agrarian movement.”⁷⁷ And though *ITMS* does not “intend to be very specific in proposing any practical measures,” according to Ransom, it does make an explicit economic claim: “The theory

of agrarianism is that the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations, and that therefore it should have the economic preference and enlist the maximum number of workers.”⁷⁸

Specifics were to come later, in both the follow-up text to *ITMS* (the less cohesive and less successful *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence*, published in 1936 and focused more tightly on criticism of business) and in essays published in outlets like the *American Review*. Ransom, for example, in his essay “Happy Farmers,” devoted an entire section to chronicling all the work involved in running a small subsistence farm and how they might “cancel out the farmer’s need of money.”⁷⁹ He offered these specific visions to contrast the Agrarian emphasis on limited human wants with industrialism’s emphasis on endless desires supplied by the tools of applied science and promoted by advertising and media. It was better to own fewer material possessions and be one’s master than to own a surfeit of goods and toil in some anonymous job—a pursuit Ransom mocks with the modernity-summarizing phrase “screwing on bolt No. 47.”⁸⁰ More specific proposals also came from Owsley, who put forth the five “pillars” of the agrarian economic project: “restoration of the people to the land and the land to the people”; “preservation and restoration of the soil”; making subsistence crops the first consideration; forming a “just political economy” where agriculture is on par with “industry, finance, and commerce”; and the “creation of regional governments” with more autonomy than today’s states.⁸¹

I should also note that as Agrarianism evolved, especially as it revealed itself in *Who Owns America?*, parts of it became decidedly influenced by and aligned with the Distributist movement of England. Advanced by such British thinkers as Hilaire Belloc and G.K. Chesterton, this movement advocated “a property and land redistribution followed by government supervision of small business,” with the goal of returning the land to the people, ending the

power of centralized industrialism, and preserving the metaphysical and stewardship benefits of private property.⁸² The Distributists believed that the only chance at economic salvation was found within widespread distribution of property. Belloc, who contributed to *Who Owns America?*, nicely summarized the juxtaposition of property with the modern citizen's status in industrialism: "Either we restore property, or we restore slavery, to which we have already gone more than half way in our industrialized societies."⁸³ Several of the Agrarians pursued this line of thinking, given its natural alignment with the vision of a small-farm society. Distribution of property had two great benefits: it weakened the power of centralized capitalism, and it returned the people to the land where they were more likely to produce their own goods and be in harmony with nature.

Of course, as Rubin put it, "It was one thing to be opposed to the tawdry slogans of boosterism and what Ransom termed the Gospel of Progress; it was another to tell a farmer to weave his own jeans rather than buy them at a store because it threatened his Agrarian values not to do so."⁸⁴ This raises a larger question for the Agrarians, who saw quotidian concerns and existential concerns as deeply connected: does the economic arrangement shape the philosophy, or does the philosophy shape the economic arrangement? Put differently: must we have an Agrarian system to be virtuous and complete? Is there any separating the ideology from the movement?

No, and this is what makes the Agrarians analytically problematic. They are at once, as Rubin put it, poets writing "a reasoned, intelligent, planned defense of religious values and humane community attitudes as a way of retarding (and in the doing, humanizing) the pell-mell rush of the modern South to adopt the ways, values, and practices of industrial America," *and* a movement to create a society, as Ransom put it, "in which agriculture is the leading vocation,

whether for wealth, for pleasure, or for prestige—a form of labor that is pursued with intelligence and leisure, and that becomes the model to which the other forms approach as well as they may.”⁸⁵ There is that crucial last clause: other forms, meaning governmental and social and ethical arrangements, will follow the agrarian example in their ideal vision.

This means that “in such modest joy in a modest holding [there] is the promise of a stable, democratic society, a promise not to be found in ‘mobility’: our forlorn modern progress toward something indefinitely, and often unrealizably, better,” says Berry.⁸⁶ Indeed, “There is in fact *no distinction between the fate of the land and the fate of the people.*”⁸⁷ Only with a lifestyle of wholeness and tangibility can we create the conditions for virtue and solidarity. This is because ethics must be lived and observed in order to become cultural practice, and they cannot be lived until the conditions are hospitable to them. An agrarian framework is needed for development of agrarian ethics.

I raise all of these issues about Agrarianism as ideology versus political project because these are the same questions that would be lobbed at Weaver two decades later. Many critics of *IHC* would ask, essentially: what would you have us do, return to the 13th century? Must we have your set of philosophical universals in order to have virtue? Must we all flee the cities and become farmers? Weaver, in his work on the South, would answer these questions: by looking back on these societies—which embodied Berry’s “cause of stable, restorative, locally adapted economies”—we can learn something of how we might live.⁸⁸ And yes, there is a specific social and economic arrangement that best supports that. Our goal, Weaver said, should be to foster the conditions for virtue and ethics by remaking our society along smaller, more tangible lines. Donald Davidson offers this vision: “Ethics fuses with action and makes a social harmony only when it is already present at the base of society... it cannot be ‘poured in from the top.’”⁸⁹

This is what so many in our field have missed about Weaver in their narrow focus on his argumentative theories: Weaver was fundamentally an Agrarian, and must be evaluated on those terms if he is to be evaluated honestly and completely. Our field is virtually alone in missing this connection, but it must be recovered. Weaver was “the most prominent disciple of the Vanderbilt Agrarians”; he was their “best expositor”; he was “the most unreconstructed of them all.”⁹⁰ Indeed, the critic Fred Hobson even said Weaver was not saying anything “that Ransom, Tate, and Davidson had not said” in their landmark works.⁹¹ Weaver saw himself as an Agrarian heir, and other scholars confirmed that inheritance. To analyze and categorize Weaver outside the context of Agrarian thought is to misunderstand both the figure and the rhetorical theories.

How this dissertation proceeds

In a study of the history of our discipline’s ethical and political development, Pat Gehrke argued that ethical issues in communication are fundamental to our understanding of and practice within the field. Indeed, a principal concern of our field used to be the “growth of the soul,” and speech education “did not bear so much the mark of science and health but an earlier ethos of morality and integrity... This was a tradition grounded more in the humanities, in the study of... paradigmatic examples from which one should draw moral lessons.”⁹² As recently as 1975, a rhetorician wrote in a major journal that “the most important function of the critic is to act as a moral guardian of civilization.”⁹³ Weaver endorsed such a view. Given that he saw rhetoric as a tool for discerning moral truths and a force for advancing people toward noble goals, he would have considered it integral to include “growth of the soul” as a central task of rhetoric.

And yet this assertion invites immediate objections. In a pluralistic society, how is rhetoric to foster growth of the soul and development of virtue and ethics? Surely the American project is too large, too complex, too fragmented to foster such growth? For these purposes, the

surprising answer is: yes, it is. Asking citizens to structure their metaphysical lives around people they never see, ideas they never tangibly grasp, and places they never visit is mistaken. We can only fully develop senses of virtue and ethics if we understand the traditions and see the implementation in action. We need proximity, immediacy, and tangibility in order to become fully formed selves.

Weaver and the agrarian framework suggest a possible, if not exactly perfect, way forward for rhetoric. By structuring our symbol use around the three planks of agrarianism—practice, place, and solidarity—people can more directly understand why we do, and why we *should* do, certain things in certain places with certain people. The advantage of the agrarian rhetorical structure is that it allows us to use the harmony of nature, fellow-feeling, and affection in order to educate more ethical citizens and encourage virtue in public life. When we see the roots of ideas, see the ideas put in action, and live with the consequences of those ideas, we are compelled to become more fully involved.

Aside from offering a more clearly defined metaphysical understanding, this dissertation advances the discipline by offering a new and more complete understanding of one of our major intellectual figures. Weaver's work has been unfairly marginalized and misunderstood, dismissed and derogated, because of his unpopular political stances and a general unwillingness by the field to analyze his broader body of work. I correct this by approaching his corpus with the agrarian framework, which rhetorical scholars have identified as needing more study, to his entire body of writings. Since Weaver meant for his work to be understood as intricately interconnected—on topics ranging from Southern heritage to argumentation to the perils of mass media—it is only fitting that his work be subjected to such an analysis. The failure of the field thus far to conduct such an analysis is troubling.

Further, this project offers a chance to advance not just a greater understanding of Weaver but of the agrarian rhetorical framework. “Rhetorical scholarship has been absent” from agrarianism, write Motter and Singer, and the field needs “more direct engagement with agrarian studies literature.”⁹⁴ This is especially true given the rise in the last decade of decidedly agrarian lifestyle trends: backyard farming, organic gardening, local food sourcing, crafting, and renewed interest in local politics and governance. As new discourses arise to define and delimit these developments, rhetorical scholars need a greater understanding of how the themes of agrarianism—practice, place, and solidarity—allow individuals to feel closer to a tradition, a region, and a community. In particular, we need a greater understanding of how such ways of living contribute to the development of citizenship—a central concern of rhetorical education.

I offer three central chapters structured around the aforementioned three themes. These three themes are not quite a *method* or a *technique of reading* as much they are, as I identified them above, entry points for understanding Weaver’s work. Weaver was a broad and wide-ranging thinker, tackling many subjects over the course of his short career. I believe the most justice can be done to his intellectual legacy by taking a similarly open approach to his work. In this project I rehabilitate Weaver’s reputation not just as a rhetorical theorist of some measure but as an inheritor of the Agrarian legacy. Indeed, I argue below that to not understand Weaver as an Agrarian is to not understand him at all.

Weaver is not easy to pin down as an intellectual, or even as a scholar. In our time of intensely narrow research programs and highly specialized graduate education, it is almost jarring to encounter a mind that roved so widely and capably over so many elements of language, history, and philosophy. Weaver’s onetime description of a cultural “outsider” could just as easily apply to himself:

There is another type of outsider, however, who may entertain hope of doing something about a culture that is weakening. He is a member of the culture who has to some degree estranged himself from it through study and reflection. He is like the *savant* in society; though in it, he is not wholly of it; he has acquired knowledge and developed habits of thought which enable him to see it in perspective and to gauge it. He has not lost the intuitive understanding which belongs to him as a member, but he has added something to that. A temporary alienation from his culture may be followed by an intense preoccupation with it, but on a more reflective level than that of the typical member. He has become sufficiently aware of what is outside it to see it as a system or an entity. This person may be a kind of doctor of culture...⁹⁵

“Doctor of culture”: words that Weaver would use in describing his mentor Ransom, and words we could easily apply to Weaver today. I aim to fully illustrate the extent of Weaver’s talent as such a figure. This is why, though I have the three central themes of agrarian rhetoric as my starting point, I will not limit myself to them. There are other ideas central to Weaver’s thinking—time, memory, and agency prominent among them—that all combine to make his rhetorical theories of interest to scholars today. Many of Weaver’s concerns are explored here, using the three main themes as entry points.

The theme of *practice* in the works and theories of Weaver are the focus of the second chapter. For this theme, I show how Weaver’s body of work provides a definition of knowledge as traditional, contextual, and embedded in social processes. In this sense, knowledge is cultivated over time and subsequently forms an ethical framework for both how people should act and how knowledge should be used. Especially useful in this chapter will be Weaver’s later works on society, especially *VO* and *IDT*, a collection of his short writings.

The third chapter examines how Weaver’s work uses the agrarian theme of *place*, or how attachment to a specific region and all its attendant traditions and customs help dictate how people live and work together to create a culture. For this theme, I show how Weaver’s works provide rhetorical scholars with a sense of how place—particularly the South, and especially as

revealed in *STB* and *SE*—can help create the conditions for a specific form of rhetoric and thus an ensuing form of rhetorical ethics. In other words, I believe Weaver provides a framework for a rhetorical ethics that requires tangibility in a specific place.

Solidarity is the theme of the fourth chapter, and there I examine how Weaver's works, most notably *IHC*, *ER*, and *LWP*, form a blueprint for social solidarity based upon immediate and consequential exposure to actions and ethics. This kind of agrarian solidarity requires investment in a specific cause, people, or place—as well as a stake in the success or failure of a common enterprise. Weaver's form of solidarity is structured around immediacy because he and the agrarians believe it better compels our participation than do abstract interests and principles. This is of course a challenge to the idea of social cohesion on a national scale, and this chapter in particular will grapple with Weaver's continuing relevance and the enduring problems embedded in the process of creating social solidarity.

Finally, the conclusion not only presents an overview of this new, agrarian understanding of Weaver, but also addresses in greater depth the consequences of Weaver's ideas and rhetorical theories for citizenship and solidarity. Rhetoric as a discipline has a great tradition and a great stake in this latter concern, and in the conclusion I will suggest why Weaver's approach remains useful and instructive—particularly in an age of rootless cosmopolitanism and perpetual infotainment. If rhetoric is to remain an integral practice and subject of study, then we need to have a better understanding of citizenship based upon the agrarian understanding. In the final chapter I also discuss flaws of Weaver's theories and explore ideas from other rhetorical scholars that might help us reconcile the competing goals of solidarity and individual difference.

This project's purpose, then, is twofold. First, it offers a greater and more holistic interpretation of Weaver's work. Second, it advances an understanding of an increasingly

relevant rhetorical framework. Both are useful for rhetorical studies, and with this project I hope to contribute to a broader understanding of both.

¹ Patricia Bizzell, "Editing the Rhetorical Tradition," *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2003), 112.

² Thomas B. Farrell, "The Weight of Rhetoric: Studies in Cultural Delirium," *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, vol. 41, no. 4 (2008), 479.

³ James P. Beasley, "Ideas and Consequences: Richard Weaver, Sharon Crowley, and Rhetorical Politics," *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 32, no. 3 (2013), 273.

⁴ Kenneth R. Chase, "Constructing Ethics Through Rhetoric: Isocrates and Piety," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 95, no. 3 (2009), 239-262.

⁵ Beasley (2013).

⁶ His work often receives brief and begrudging treatment in this journal, as in Thomas B. Farrell, "The Weight of Rhetoric: Studies in Cultural Delirium," vol. 41, no. 4 (2008), 467-487. More often his work is merely nodded at, as in Edward Schiappa, "Second Thoughts on the Critiques of Big Rhetoric," vol. 34, no. 3 (2001), 260-274. Most often the only substantive discussion of Weaver comes from those scholars who have count his works as a specialty, as in G. Thomas Goodnight, "Rhetoric, Reflection, and Emancipation: Farrell and Habermas on the Critical Studies of Communication," vol. 41, no. 4 (2008), 421-439.

⁷ A stylistic note: "agrarian" and "agrarianism" will refer to the centuries-old tradition of land-based practices and ideas, while "Agrarian" and "Agrarianism" will refer to the specific Vanderbilt-based movement of writers like John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, et al. There will at times be overlap, however, since Weaver undoubtedly subscribed to agrarian thought but was also, I argue, a direct intellectual descendant of Agrarian thought. This style issue is complicated by the fact that there is also a great deal of overlap between agrarianism and Agrarianism, but the latter is a distinct movement rather than an idea or concept.

⁸ Motter, J. & Singer, R. "Cultivating a Rhetoric of Agrarianism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 98, no. 4 (2012), 439-454.

⁹ Motter & Singer (2012), 440-441.

¹⁰ John Crowe Ransom, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate," in Louis D. Rubin Jr. (ed.), *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (U.S.A.: Harper & Brothers, 1977), 5.

¹¹ Stark Young, "Not in Memoriam, But in Defense," in Louis D. Rubin Jr. (ed.), *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (U.S.A.: Harper & Brothers, 1977), 343.

¹² Ransom (1977), 19.

¹³ Ransom (1977), 10, 20.

¹⁴ Lyle Lanier, "A Critique of the Philosophy of Progress," in Louis D. Rubin Jr. (ed.), *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (U.S.A.: Harper & Brothers, 1977), 130-133. Marx, obviously, is another proponent of the history-as-process view.

¹⁵ Lanier (1977), 128-129.

¹⁶ Wendell Berry, "Think Little," in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (U.S.A.: Counterpoint Press, 2002), 89, emphasis in original.

¹⁷ Wendell Berry, "The Unsettling of America," in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (U.S.A.: Counterpoint Press, 2002), 45.

¹⁸ John J. Langdale, *Superfluous Southerners: Cultural Conservatism and the South, 1920-1990* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2012), 88.

¹⁹ Lois J. Einhorn, "The Argumentative Dimensions of Theorizing: Toward a Method for Analyzing Theories of Rhetoric," *Central States Speech Journal*, v. 36 (Winter 1985), 282-293.

²⁰ Einhorn (1985) 287, 288.

²¹ Einhorn (1985), 289.

²² Dennis R. Bormann, "The 'Uncontested Term' Contested: An Analysis of Weaver on Burke," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, v. 57, no. 3 (1971), 298-305.

²³ John R.E. Bliese, "The Conservative Rhetoric of Richard M. Weaver: Theory and Practice," *The Southern Communication Journal*, v. 54 (Summer 1989), 401-421.

²⁴ These may at first blush appear contradictory, but the distinction is an important one. Weaver believed that rhetoric should be in line with the spacious ideas of a culture. Southern orators and writers, for example, should follow the accepted themes and unspoken assumptions of Southern culture. Only *after* that point, when rhetoric is aligned with cultural distinctions, should the conversation move to universal principles that would be beneficial if followed by all. To reject his hierarchy of argument as non-universal without considering particular circumstances is myopic.

²⁵ This includes: Roger Gilles, "Richard Weaver Revisited: Rhetoric Left, Right, and Middle," *Rhetoric Review*, v. 15, no. 1 (Autumn 1996), 128-141; Clark T. Irwin, Jr., "Rhetoric Remembers: Richard Weaver on Memory and Culture," *Today's Speech*, v. 21, no. 3 (Spring 1973), 21-26; Rita L. Raho, "Connecting With the Truth: The Rhetorical Responsibility for Ethical Concerns—An Historical Overview," *Journal of the Northwest Communication Association*, v. 22 (Spring 1994), 91-103; Richard L. Johannesen, "Richard Weaver's View of Rhetoric and Criticism," *Southern Speech Journal*, v. 32 (Winter 1966), 133-145.

²⁶ Sharon Crowley, "When Ideology Motivates Theory: The Case of the Man From Weaverville," *Rhetoric Review*, v. 20, nos. 1-2 (Spring 2001), 66-93.

²⁷ Crowley (2001), 90. Crowley is noticeably silent on whether Aristotle, who endorsed a system of slavery, misogyny, and economic inequality, would be similarly ejected.

²⁸ Crowley (2001), 78.

²⁹ More examples of work in this vein: John Bliese, "Richard M. Weaver and the Rhetoric of a Lost Cause," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, v. 19, no. 4 (Autumn 1989), 313-325 (Bliese argued that Weaver's ideas are less worthy because they allude to a mode of living that is no longer possible); Donald P. Cushman and Gerard A. Hauser, "Weaver's Rhetorical Theory: Axiology and the Adjustment of Belief, Invention, and Judgment," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, v. 59, no. 3 (1973), 319-329; W. Ross Winterowd, "Richard M. Weaver: Modern Poetry and the Limits of Conservative Criticism," *Western Speech*, v. 37, no. 2 (1973), 129-138 (Winterowd concludes that "all conservative criticism is shortsighted" because it "sets the contemporary against the traditional"); J. Michael Sproule, "Using Public Rhetoric to Assess Private Philosophy: Richard M. Weaver and Beyond," *The Southern Speech Communication Journal*, v. 44 (Spring 1979), 289-308 (Sproule, in a colossal misunderstanding of Weaver, writes "Notwithstanding 2500 years of Western thought, no one has developed a universally-approved method for 'proving' the worth of a moral position").

³⁰ Ralph T. Eubanks, "Nihilism and the Problem of a Worthy Rhetoric," *Southern Speech Journal*, v. 33, no. 7 (Spring 1968), 187-199.

³¹ Ralph T. Eubanks and Virgil L. Baker, "Toward an Axiology of Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, v. 48, no. 2 (1962), 157-168; Richard L. Johannesen, "Richard M. Weaver on Standards for Ethical Rhetoric," *Central States Speech Journal*, v. 29 (Summer 1978), 127-137; Ralph T. Eubanks, "Axiological Issues in Rhetorical Inquiry," *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, v. 44 (Fall 1978), 11-24; Walter H. Beale, "Richard M. Weaver: Philosophical Rhetoric, Cultural Criticism, and the First Rhetorical Awakening," *College English*, v. 52, no. 5 (1990), 626-640; William C. Havard, "The Rhetor as Philosopher," *The Vanderbilt Tradition: Essays in Honor of Thomas Daniel Young*, ed. Mark Royden Winchell, (USA: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 163-174.

³² Eubanks & Baker (1962), 158.

³³ Eubanks & Baker (1962), 158.

³⁴ Beale (1990), 626, 629.

³⁵ The material in this biographical sketch is drawn from Scotchie (1997); Fred Douglas Young, *Richard M. Weaver, 1919-1963: A Life of the Mind* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995); and, in particular, the introduction by the editor in Ted J. Smith III (ed.), *In Defense of Tradition: Collected Shorter Writings of Richard M. Weaver, 1929-1963* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2000). Smith gives us what is by far the best and most complete chronicle of Weaver's life, and corrects many of the errors that perpetuated for years—including in Scotchie's and Young's biographies. Sadly, Smith died in 2004 before completing his full-length Weaver biography. The project has been taken up by Jay Langdale of Andrew College, who has himself written a superb history of the Southern Agrarians.

³⁶ Smith (2000), xxix.

³⁷ Smith (2000), xxx.

³⁸ Richard Weaver, "Up From Liberalism," *Modern Age* vol. 3, no. 1 (Winter 1958-59), 21-32. Later collected in *Life Without Prejudice*. Weaver's rejection of Texas A&M shares many elements with the rejection of Michigan State University by Russell Kirk, his friend and contemporary in modern conservatism.

³⁹ Smith (2000), xxxi.

⁴⁰ Smith (2000), xxxiii. During this time, Weaver received a IV-F medical exemption from the draft board due to his very poor eyesight. The College of the University of Chicago is the sole undergraduate component of the University of Chicago. In Weaver's day, it was not as prestigious as it is now and Weaver often taught remedial lessons in English.

⁴¹ Though it's true Weaver kept a highly regimented schedule, always teaching and writing at the same time each day and eating similar meals in the College cafeteria, it's a bit of a mystery how he acquired the reputation for solitude. He was known to enjoy the company of female companions and went with friends to a pub near campus each Saturday night. For a particularly vivid example of his roistering, see the chapter by his friend and Chicago colleague Wilma R. Ebbitt, which details his taste for whiskey at parties, in Ted J. Smith III (ed.), *Steps Toward Restoration: The Consequences of Richard Weaver's Ideas* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998), 34-45.

⁴² Smith (2000), xxxvii.

⁴³ Smith (2000), xli.

⁴⁴ Eugene Genovese, "Ideas Had Consequences," *New Republic* no. 214 (June 17, 1996), 36.

⁴⁵ Richard M. Weaver, "Agrarianism in Exile," *Sewanee Review* no. 58 (Autumn 1950), 602.

⁴⁶ Wendell Berry, "The Whole Horse," in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (U.S.A.: Counterpoint Press, 2002), 238.

⁴⁷ Louis D. Rubin Jr., "Introduction," in Louis D. Rubin Jr. (ed.), *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (U.S.A.: Harper & Brothers, 1977), xv.

⁴⁸ Herbert Agar, "The Task for Conservatism," *The American Review*, (April 1934), 3.

⁴⁹ Agar (1934), 3.

⁵⁰ Allen Tate, "Notes on Liberty and Property," *The American Review* (March 1936), 596-611.

⁵¹ Berry (2002), 87, emphasis in original.

⁵² James A. Montmarquet, *The Idea of Agrarianism: From Hunter-Gatherer to Agrarian Radical in Western Culture* (Moscow, ID: University of Idaho Press, 1989), 203.

⁵³ Aldo Leopold, “The Farmer as a Conservationist” (1939), reprinted in Edwin C. Hagenstein, Sara M. Gregg, & Brian Donahue (eds.), *American Georgics: Writings on Farming, Culture, and the Land* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 307.

⁵⁴ We can already see the notion that abstract ideas can lead to undesirable material consequences. In this case, democracy → endless consumption. Weaver would internalize this idea and, as I will discuss in much more detail below, blame the ills of modernity of William of Ockham’s idea of nominalism. This concept still has great influence in cultural conservative circles. A modern example might be sexual freedom → more out-of-wedlock births and spread of disease.

⁵⁵ One is reminded of the frequent observation that most Marxist agitation emerges not from the assembly line but from the ivory tower.

⁵⁶ Montmarquet (1989), 204.

⁵⁷ Ronald Lora, *Conservative Minds in America* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1971), 177.

⁵⁸ Mark G. Malvasi, *The Unregenerate South: The Agrarian Thought of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 227.

⁵⁹ As I just hinted, there is something more than a little discomfiting about praising the social world of a plantation. Obviously, the subservience of some was not exactly by willing choice. The Agrarians’, and Weaver’s, response to the slavery issue was never fully satisfying, as I will address in more detail below. But we ought not reject their ideas because of that, just as we do not reject Aristotle for endorsing social structures that included slaves.

⁶⁰ Andrew Nelson Lytle, “The Hind Tit,” in Louis D. Rubin Jr. (ed.), *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (U.S.A.: Harper & Brothers, 1977), 203.

⁶¹ Wendell Berry, “The Body and the Earth,” in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (U.S.A.: Counterpoint Press, 2002), 106.

⁶² Frank Lawrence Owsley, “The Pillars of Agrarianism,” in Emily S. Bingham & Thomas A. Underwood (eds.), *The Southern Agrarians the New Deal: Essays After I’ll Take My Stand* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 201. It is important to note that since the Agrarians advocated radically smaller units of political organization, “state” here means something closer to “community” or “Georgia” than it does to “the United States.”

⁶³ Eric T. Freyfogle, *Agrarianism and the Good Society: Land, Culture, Conflict, and Hope* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 13.

⁶⁴ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 21-22. Bacon is often considered a progenitor of the philosophy of progress; he, Descartes, and Spinoza make up a sort of triumvirate of villainy for the Agrarians, with occasional cameos from Rousseau and Condorcet.

⁶⁵ Aaron Sachs, *Arcadian America: The Death and Life of an Environmental Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 4.

⁶⁶ Donald Davidson, “Still Rebels, Still Yankees,” in *Still Rebels, Still Yankees and Other Essays* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 232-233.

⁶⁷ Peter G. Brown, “Choosing Ignorance Within a Learning Universe,” in *The Virtues of Ignorance: Complexity, Sustainability, and the Limits of Knowledge* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 167, emphasis in original.

⁶⁸ It’s worth noting, though, that the Agrarians were religious but were perhaps already more mystical than we might consider most mainline Protestants to be. Ransom wrote in his “Introduction: A Statement of Principles” section of *I’ll Take My Stand* that “Religion is our

submission to the general intention of a nature that is fairly inscrutable; it is the sense of our role as creatures within it.” (xlii) The Agrarians were advocates of a religiously oriented society, yes, but many of them lacked the zeal and direct participation of, say, T.S. Eliot. I raise this point because Weaver, like Allen Tate before him, wrote a great deal about the “older religiousness of the South,” and its value in society, without being particularly religious himself. This issue will arise again in a later chapter.

⁶⁹ John Crowe Ransom, *God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy* (New York: Archon Books, 1965), 67-70, emphasis in original.

⁷⁰ *STB*, 224.

⁷¹ Montmarquet (1989), 184, 215. Indeed, Montmarquet argues that in the industrial age *all* agrarianism is romantic by virtue of its unrealistic goals.

⁷² Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920's* (New York: Viking Press, 1956), 217. This is quoted in Louis D. Rubin Jr., *The Wary Fugitives: Four Poets and the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 190. I cite Cowley's full work because even though he was writing about the 1920s voices we traditionally recall—Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Stein, Dos Passos, et al.—the book's descriptions of reactions to the post-World War I American landscape could easily apply to the Agrarians. (“Babbitty” is a reference to Sinclair Lewis' novel *Babbitt*, which is a classic depiction of American middle-class conformity. George F. Babbitt, the main character, was often held up by the Agrarians as an accurate representation of the modern citizen.) Cowley, it might further be worth noting, was good friends with Allen Tate.

⁷³ “Industry” almost seems an antiquated term today, with all our talk of the “knowledge economy” and near-constant interactions with software. “Industrial” conjures for us images of, if not quite Dickensian conditions, at least steel mills and shipyards. But the Agrarians use “industry” and “industrial” to mean the entire complex of centralized capitalism. Anything, in other words, that opposes the small, decentralized agricultural economy. Today we'd lump finance, Silicon Valley, and other allegedly beneficial sectors into this term.

⁷⁴ Owsley in Bingham & Underwood (2001), 202.

⁷⁵ Ransom (1977), xlv-xlv.

⁷⁶ Rubin Jr. (1978), 199.

⁷⁷ Paul A. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 57.

⁷⁸ Ransom (1977), xlvii. The absence of specific proposals from *I'll Take My Stand* has annoyed critics of the Agrarians, but this seems petty. Plenty of cultural critics have offered diagnoses without prescribing specific cures. (Weaver himself would do this in *IHC*.) And isn't there value in the diagnosis? Even if Marx had never called for a proletarian uprising, his criticisms of capitalism would still be valuable. And consider the Agrarians' company: “In expressing disenchantment and dismay over the mechanization and commercialization of American life of the 1920s, of course, they were by no means alone. Such commentators as Lewis Mumford, Walter Lippmann... Stuart Chase... T.S. Eliot... F. Scott Fitzgerald...” Rubin (1978), 195-196.

⁷⁹ John Crowe Ransom, “Happy Farmers,” *The American Review* vol. 1, no. 5 (October 1933), 529.

⁸⁰ Ransom (1933), 531. Today we might substitute “filling out memo No. 47.” The point is that it's just one more task whose utility is too abstract for us to understand.

⁸¹ Owsley in Bingham & Underwood (2001), 210-211.

⁸² Emily S. Bingham and Thomas A. Underwood, "Introduction," in Bingham & Underwood (2001), 20.

⁸³ Hilaire Belloc, quoted in Herbert Agar, "The Task for Conservatism," *The American Review*, (April 1934), 16.

⁸⁴ Rubin Jr. (1978), 221.

⁸⁵ Rubin Jr. (1978), 228; Ransom (1977), xlvii.

⁸⁶ Wendell Berry, "It All Turns on Affection," National Endowment for the Humanities Lecture (2012), available at <http://www.neh.gov/about/awards/jefferson-lecture/wendell-e-berry-lecture>.

⁸⁷ Berry (2012), 5, emphasis added.

⁸⁸ Berry (2012), 5-6.

⁸⁹ Donald Davidson, "An Agrarian Looks at the New Deal," in Bingham & Underwood (2001), 129-130. He is quoting from his own essay in *I'll Take My Stand*.

⁹⁰ Lewis P. Simpson, "The Story of M.E. Bradford," *Southern Literary Journal* no. 26 (Spring 1994), 103; M.E. Bradford, *Remembering Who We Are: Observations of a Southern Conservative* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 88; Thomas Landess, "Is the Battle Over... Or Has it Just Begun?" *Southern Partisan* 3 (Spring 1983), 19. All of these are cited in George H. Nash, "The Influence of *Ideas Have Consequences*," in Ted J. Smith III (ed.), *Steps Toward Restoration: The Consequences of Richard Weaver's Ideas* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998), 107.

⁹¹ Fred Hobson, *Tell About the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 326. It appears in Nash (1998), 119.

⁹² Pat J. Gehrke, *The Ethics and Politics of Speech: Communication and Rhetoric in the Twentieth Century* (USA: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 56.

⁹³ Anthony Hillbruner, "The Moral Imperative of Criticism," *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, v. 40 (1975), 228-247.

⁹⁴ Motter & Singer (2012), 441-442.

⁹⁵ *VO*, 7.

Chapter 2: Weaver and the Forms of Agrarian Knowledge

Technique, however brilliant, is an employment of means. Perhaps our error is the ignoring of first and final causes, which cannot be studied without some conception of the whole man.

-- Richard Weaver

Time present and time past/Are both perhaps present in time future/And time future contained in time past.

-- T. S. Eliot, "Four Quartets"

Imagine two sailboat captains stepping onto the pier, where their respective crews await. The first attended the finest schools, has read every book about sailing, and has watched training videos covering every possible sailing scenario. The second has a sixth-grade education, but has been sailing professionally for two decades and has logged thousands of hours on board while traversing every possible type of calm and rough seas. Under whom would you rather sail?

This scenario, while obviously reductive and simplistic, is a classic one when it comes to limning different types of knowledge. As thought experiment, it introduces the starting conceptual term for this chapter, *practice*, which Motter & Singer identify as one of the three guiding *topoi* of agrarian rhetoric. They call practice an "act of cultivation [which] take[s] on a normative dimension that suggests how one should or ought to act"; for this exploration, I will focus on how the concept of practice is an essential component of both the Southern Agrarians and of Weaver's rhetorical theories and guides for living. In this chapter I will interpret this term broadly, discussing practice as it relates to Weaver's theories of knowledge, nature of argument, and ideas of tradition, history, and memory. All of these are crucial for understanding his rhetorical theories, and virtually all have been overlooked by rhetorical critics.¹

Weaver's view of rhetoric must be reincorporated into our field because, as I explained in the first chapter, rhetorical scholarship has lost its cosmological bearings. When ideological criticism is allowed to exercise intellectual hegemony over rhetorical scholarship, and when the

stance of scholars becomes one of “permanent critique,” then we have abandoned our faith in language as a vehicle of order. When our only task is to undermine, expose, interrogate, and “problematize,” then we are no longer using rhetoric or symbols to build communities—we are only myopically harming what rhetoric has created. Rhetorical power structures are not always evil things to be viewed with suspicion: they are often the very things that allow expansion of rights, democratic participation, and a flourishing arena of ideas.

A proper understanding of Weaver’s view of the role of rhetoric absolutely requires an understanding of what he saw rhetoric combating. To Weaver, rhetoric was a moral force that could strike back against the dialectic- and *techné*-obsessed society and offer us a way to reintroduce the *ought* into a world of pure *how*. Given that Weaver dated the fundamental flaw of the Western world to the fourteenth century, it is astonishing how few rhetorical scholars have bothered to examine the historical background of Weaver’s ideas. His views on history, tradition, myth, and memory—all the elements that make up our notions of practice—each deserves more intellectual depth and nuance than they have been given.

To be sure, rhetorical scholars have long cared about forms of knowledge and how they might affect judgment in a pluralistic culture. Robert Rowland and Deanna Womack wrote in 1985 that Aristotle’s view of rhetoric, which “commands attention to both the emotional and rational faculties,” is the mode of rhetoric that is “well adapted to the needs of a democratic society.”² Technical knowledge alone—or dialectic alone, in the case of persuasion—is insufficient for determining moral truths and forming political judgments. Rhetoric, in the sense of persuasion, is both an art and the object produced by the art. Rowland and Womack argue that “As an art, rhetoric is amoral; as a product, rhetoric is either moral or immoral.”³ This is because successful rhetoric, like practical knowledge, must draw on more than the means of persuasion

alone: it must incorporate the audience, unvoiced assumptions, and the community of mind that forms around the rhetorical situation.

Lois Self likewise finds Aristotelian *phronesis* to be ideally suited for our own culture's rhetoric, writing that, in persuasion, "The man of practical wisdom continuously balances the good and the expedient, the ideal and the possible."⁴ The rhetorical scholar Steven Mailloux traces the idea of rhetoric as "practical wisdom" back to Aristotle and Pericles to show how "the best rhetors possess a practical wisdom that can discern the most effective means of persuasion in any specific situation," which makes those rhetors, as Aristotle himself put it, those who "possess a faculty of discerning what things are good for themselves and for mankind."⁵

More recently, the political scientist Bryan Garsten has defended rhetoric rooted in practical knowledge as a key tool in political judgment. Aristotelian rhetoric-as-art "showed how public speech might draw private judgment into the activity of public deliberation and thereby take advantage of judgment's insight without capitulating to its independence."⁶ In other words, we use rhetoric to apprehend moral truths (to use Weaver's proposal) by incorporating the knowledge and judgment of the ordinary citizen in a democratic society—hence, combining the wisdom of the community of mind to form larger public truths. In this scheme, rhetoric rooted in both the emotional and rational faculties becomes the crucial tool for transforming private practical knowledge into larger cultural guidelines, and for moving away from pure dialectic or technical knowledge as cultural foundations.

As I have previously noted, too much scholarship in rhetorical criticism has attempted to isolate Weaver's rhetorical theories—usually abstracted from the rest of *ER* and treated as standalone content—and consider them as forms of *techné*, mere argumentative strategies to be deployed rationally. But Weaver never intended his theories to be abstracted from their

surrounding content because he was an agrarian thinker: the forms of land-based *practice* that guided his writings insisted that ideas be considered cosmologically and holistically as part of a broader structure. Rhetorical scholarship on Weaver has been “aim[ing] at abstracting some arbitrary essence from the whole,” as Ransom wrote of science.⁷ We must understand the full context of Weaver’s ideas about and goals for rhetoric, including the Agrarian education that shaped him.

The goal of this chapter is to illustrate how Weaver and the Agrarians viewed knowledge, time, memory, history, and myth—all components of the entry point term of *practice*. This concept is important because it dictates how we view the role of rhetoric and symbol structures in culture. If judgment is made to be scientific and logical and dialectical, then, argued Weaver, the role of rhetoric is diminished and culture suffers. But if rhetoric and myth and memory are incorporated into judgment and culture formation, then we can have a flourishing community. Before I survey the Agrarian roots of Weaver’s views of practice, I will briefly explain the types of knowledge that form the core of this ontological and epistemological conflict.

Contrasting Types of Knowledge

Broadly speaking, the sailing example above illustrates the two types of knowledge in the Aristotelian tradition. The example of the captain with plenty of book knowledge represents *techné*, or the kind of technical knowledge used in making crafts; in late modernity, *techné* translates to technical, rule-based, rational knowledge. The example of the captain with experience represents *phronesis*, or the kind of practical knowledge used in everyday social interactions and in judgment and deliberation. Though the second captain lacks the *techné*-expertise of sailing, her steady accumulation of *phronesis* over the past two decades illustrates her depth of knowledge and would surely make most of us choose to join her crew.

The split between *techné* and *phronesis* dates back millennia. The crucial point for agrarianism is that cyclical and traditional work with the land relies upon the latter, and thus compels the individual to immerse himself in tangible pursuits rather than abstract ones. It is just this direct connection to tangibility that is sought by the idea of practice. Modern life has largely separated *thinking* from *doing*, turning collections of knowledge into specialized expertise that is separate from the physical work once devoted to land and craft.⁸ Where premodern work was largely based on accumulated knowledge, modern work usually relies upon rules, laws, and formulae—promoting technical reason and instrumentality over practical wisdom.⁹ This set of abstract rules keeps us from being connected to both our labor and its ensuing fruits; agrarianism advocates a return to tangible work instead of the abstract work of modernity. This tangible work is practice, or an activity whose internal goods fulfill a final purpose.¹⁰ The agrarian stance prizes this sort of work because it depends upon accumulated knowledge and accrued goods, rather than the reductionist and abstract rules of modern knowledge.

But it is not just farming that has value and internal goods—agricultural work should subsequently become the basis for other pursuits. Recall from the first chapter the statement of principles from *ITMS*: “Technically, perhaps, an agrarian society is one in which agriculture is the leading vocation, whether for wealth, for pleasure, or for prestige—a form of labor that is pursued with intelligence and leisure, and that *becomes the model to which the other forms approach* as well as they may.”¹¹ Agrarian pursuits, in other words, contain innate value because of their relation to land and reliance on practical knowledge, and thus become the form to which other human pursuits should aspire. Contrast this with contemporary bureaucracy, with its Weberian notions of rationality, or with contemporary industrial managerialism, with its total lack of teleology or internal goods. Weaver and the Agrarians began every philosophical and

rhetorical endeavor from this standpoint; questions of ends must always come before questions of means. Agrarianism, with its cyclical nature and accommodation to nature, always prioritizes the former.¹²

When Weaver, following his Agrarian forebears, criticized industrialism and the “tools of applied science,” he meant exactly this split between realms of knowledge. The scientific mindset is overly dialectical, Weaver thought, attempting to reduce all knowledge to what can be gathered through empiricism and method. Other scholars have found this split to affect our very notions of public life. In governance, practical knowledge contains the accumulated wisdom of the ages, dependent upon pragmatic testing and acceptance by people over time. Compare this with technical knowledge, which attempts to “reformulate systems of knowledge in order to bracket out uncertainty and thereby permit the kind of logical deductive rigor possessed by Euclidean geometry.”¹³ Such an effort reserves no room for lessons learned, wisdom accumulated, or reasons refined; it only allows for scientific reasoning applied in all cases. “Techniques were devised to isolate and domesticate those aspects of key variables that might be expressed in numbers,” with the importance of other types of knowledge diminished.¹⁴ When we rely solely upon technical knowledge, as agrarianism condemns, we have no space for the “particular, situated, and contextual attributes” that help form a community and shape virtuous citizens.¹⁵

This idea, of a split between the tangibility of practical knowledge and the abstraction of technical knowledge, is fundamental to understanding the Agrarians and thus to understanding Weaver’s intellectual lineage. “Techné,” writes Joseph Dunne, “provides the kind of knowledge possessed by an expert in one of the specialized crafts, a person who understands the principles (*logoi, aitia*) underlying the production of an object or state of affairs... Phronesis, on the other

hand, characterizes a person who knows how to live well (*eu zen*). It is acquired not in the making of any product separate from oneself but rather in one's actions with one's fellows. It is personal knowledge in that, in the living of one's life, *it characterizes and expresses the kind of person that one is.*"¹⁶ That is: the society rooted in *phronesis* is one at home in the realm of rhetoric, because it can deal comfortably in the symbolic and can grasp that notion that our discourse and modes of living are expressive of the sorts of people we are.¹⁷

The political philosopher Hannah Arendt offered a similar distinction between "action" and "making," also discussed by Dunne. Making "connotes activity which establishes a durable world of artifacts and utilities—and thereby rises out of the cycles of *labor* which are tied to the sheer necessity of biological survival. 'Action,' on the other hand, brings into being a higher freedom in which persons realize and reveal themselves as distinct, and indeed unique, persons."¹⁸ When a society relies too much on making (the counterpart of *techné*), it results in "a society whose affairs are increasingly administered according to the standard of technocratic efficiency"—exactly the sort of economically ordered, progress-obsessed society condemned by Weaver and the Agrarians.¹⁹ By contrast, "It is through action"—the counterpart of *phronesis*—"that a person discloses 'who'—rather than 'what'—she is."²⁰

Recall that the Southern Agrarians, and subsequently Weaver, saw the fundamental conflict as industrialism versus agrarianism. The former is, according to *ITMS*, "the *economic* organization of the collective American society. It means the decision of society to invest its economic resources in the applied sciences... [it assumes] that labor is an evil, that only the end of labor or the material product is good."²¹ Society is therefore defined according to material ends and the consumption of same. Hence, the technician who can maximize production is imbued with sacerdotal power.²² This has inevitable consequences for our view of the human. If

society is merely the maximization of material growth based upon *techné*, with little concern for the powers of *phronesis* that accumulate over time and exist in tradition, then the individual must be measured only in terms of economic output. This, according to Weaver, is at the heart of our broken Western culture: “Man created in the divine image, the protagonist of a great drama in which his soul was at stake, was replaced by man the wealth-seeking and -consuming animal.”²³

The key for Weaver, and for other devotees of practical knowledge throughout history, is that the two types of knowledge must be confined to their own realms so they might work *together*. When one strays beyond its borders to colonize another, neither individual nor community nor society can achieve *practical philosophy*—that which allows us to coexist with some degree of harmony and meaning. As Hans Georg Gadamer argued, “Practical philosophy is determined by the line drawn between the practical knowledge of the person who chooses freely and the acquired skill of the expert that Aristotle names *techné*. Practical philosophy, then, has to do not with the learnable crafts and skills, however essential this dimension of human ability too is for the communal life of humanity. Rather it has to do with what is each individual’s due as a citizen and what constitutes his *arête* or excellence.”²⁴ Since, according to Weaver, man is created in the divine image, each life must have some kind of meaning—but *techné* brackets out all non-expert knowledge and defines the good only in terms of the material. This cannot be the basis for a functioning culture.

The peril of the *techné*-dominated worldview is that it lacks any *telos* outside of materialistic growth. There is therefore nothing aimed at or aspired to—there is only relentless trampling of all things that stand in the way of growth. Expansion of technical knowledge and its offspring technology becomes society’s primary concern because it is deemed a salvific force, and technology thus becomes an end rather than a means:

“If we have no directing faculty outside of technology, then future technological advancement can only be guided by the expansion and refinement of the technical means to quantify and control the world and ourselves directed toward no end in particular, whether happiness or healthiness. In turn, the manipulation of the natural world and human nature may very well transform our minds, our bodies, and the planet into something unrecognizable.”²⁵

As I will discuss further below, this was precisely the fear of Weaver and the Agrarians: that the ascension of technical knowledge simply makes forward progress the indefinable and unreachable goal of human endeavors. “The [modern] ideal is not merely some set form of industrialism,” *ITMS* claims, “with so many stable industries, but industrial progress, or an incessant extension of industrialization. It never proposes a specific goal; it initiates the infinite series.”²⁶ Gadamer puts it quite clearly: “One has to ask whether progress, as it is at home in the special field of scientific research, is at all consonant with the conditions of human existence in general.”²⁷ Progress may work in the realm of *techné*, but it cannot tell us which way we *should* go. To the oldest question in philosophy—how should we live?—it only answers “More!”

This is exactly the cultural malaise diagnosed by Weaver in *IHC* and expanded upon in his other works: an anti-humanistic culture that gleefully occludes anything that is not reducible to technical knowledge and material comfort. The Agrarian writer Ralph Borsodi skewered that culture in 1929: “This is an ugly civilization. It is a civilization of noise, smoke, smells, and crowds—of people content to live amongst the throbbing of its machines; the smoke and smells of its factories... For America is a respecter of things only, and time—why time is something to be killed, or butchered into things which can be bought and sold.”²⁸ This is what happens when a society sanctions “the invasion of every department of intellectual activity by the doctrine of the sovereignty of technique,” as Michael Oakeshott put it.²⁹ It becomes a society no longer focused on asking how we might live. Instead, it becomes a society that asks only how we might grow

the fastest and consume the most. It becomes, in other words, a society that has forgotten rhetoric.

The Agrarian View of Knowledge

In the agrarian mindset, knowledge extends beyond what we can be told by the tools of applied science and through dialectic reason. Knowledge is not a formal structure to be condensed into rules and formulae, but rather a malleable and evolving tradition to be cultivated and acquired instead of devised and taught. It relies upon tradition, history, and memory and readily calls upon all three in order to persuade and define. Most importantly, knowledge unashamedly relies upon myth in addition to science. John Crowe Ransom's *God Without Thunder*, which was significant in shaping Weaver's thinking, is the defining text for this section.

The book's subtitle—*An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy*—reveals Ransom's entire project. Ransom, the leading mind among the Southern Agrarians, had grown wary of the influence of scientific perception and reason and yearned for a way of expressing knowledge that was not constrained by them. Science is ascendant, Ransom wrote, and its forms have become the God of modern man. Modernity's "recipe," Ransom said, is "simply to 'produce,' to 'get results,' to apply science, and then more science."³⁰ But this process is incapable of producing positive knowledge, whose light "is directed only backwards," and it must always be descriptive rather than prescriptive.³¹ Contrasting this kind of knowledge, which Ransom terms the "Second Moment" because it allows reflection on the experience of phenomena (the "First Moment"), is myth. Because it "*resorts to the supernatural in order to represent the fullness of the natural*," myth provides more than just descriptions of events—it provides guides for living, which all people and societies need to function successfully.³² Ransom, in order to take advantage of the

utility of myth in society, looked for a “Third Moment”—“a way of recapturing the suppressed wholes of immediate experience,” which can underlie whole civilizations and faiths.³³

Since we as humans are always trying to recover the experience of the First Moment, the key point for Ransom is that “Logic, science, [and] ordinary philosophy are not sufficient to the task of the Third Moment. One can recover the First Moment only through contrived images, by use of the imagination and not by a logical act. Imagination, dipping into the storeroom, can bring up the lost aspects of the First Moment and allow an appropriate joy.”³⁴ Science attempts to bracket out all things intangible and unquantifiable, but Ransom argues it is just those things that make life worth living. Just as importantly, those very unscientific ideas are how we learn about the true nature of the world—they therefore contain the highest forms of knowledge. Against the tide of the scientific “ascendancy,” as Ransom put it, the Agrarian view offers knowledge in the form of myth and tradition: nonscientific, nonrational, and deeply rooted in the stories we tell ourselves. The doctrines of faith and myth and the presentational creations of art allow us to connect the finite and the infinite just as the farmer connects a solitary plant to the larger cycles of nature.

The crucial point here is not that agrarianism is inhospitable to scientific knowledge. If that were true, farmers would still be using horse-drawn plows. Instead, as Weaver brilliantly synthesized the two sides later, science must become more hospitable to forms of knowledge that lie beyond scientific understanding, just as dialectic must make room for rhetoric in public life.³⁵ Allen Tate believed this to be true as well. In “Humanism and Naturalism,” Tate wrote that “The religious unity of intellect and emotion, of reason and instinct, is the sole technique for the realization of values.”³⁶ But until science and rationalism can clear some room for myth and the stories we tell ourselves to explain our history, its knowledge will always be circumscribed by

narrowness of sight: as Ransom wrote, “What [science] knows, it knows hard, but it cannot afford to know much. Its knowledge is ruthless and exclusive, while aesthetic knowledge, aiming at the fullness of the object, is inclusive.”³⁷

That phrase—*the fullness of the object*—is a good starting point for an exploration of Weaver’s theory of knowledge, which derives directly from his Southern Agrarian forebears. Weaver was a Platonist, and he was therefore committed to the notion of universal and transcendental ideals that underlie the perceivable objects of this world. For centuries, this dominant view provided a unifying mytho-poetic view of the world: each human and each object was part of a cosmological order. But according to Weaver, in the late fourteenth century William of Occam was responsible for Western man’s “evil decision, which has become the efficient and final cause of other evil decisions.”³⁸ That decision was the embrace of “the fateful doctrine of nominalism, which denies that universals have a real existence... With the denial of objective truth there is no escape from the relativism of ‘man the measure of all things’... Thus began the ‘abomination of desolation’ appearing today as a feeling of alienation from all fixed truth.”³⁹

The essential part of Weaver’s argument here, and in Ransom’s argument above, is that there are very important elements of knowledge that we do not and cannot understand—and *those are the more important parts*. Science, for all its heat and light, can never tell people how they might live; its knowledge is limited to mere description and eventual speculation. Universals and transcendentals, even though they were part and parcel of a world of inequality, oppression, and a host of other ills, at the very least provided us with a teleological view of the world. And without any universal ideals, people have no idea where to turn for guidance; as Weaver says, once there is no objective truth, every man is “his own priest [and] his own

professor of ethics.”⁴⁰ People lack any unifying foundations and have separated themselves from the most common foundation of all: nature.

Nature is an essential component of this kind of knowledge because it demonstrates that there are things beyond human comprehension and, more importantly, human control. As Weaver wrote in *IHC*, “Whereas nature had formerly been regarded as imitating a transcendent model and as constituting an imperfect reality, it was henceforth looked upon as containing the principles of its own constitution and behavior.”⁴¹ In sharp contrast to the Enlightenment view, which treats nature as something to be dominated and regulated—part of the Cartesian separation of thinking from doing—the agrarian view of knowledge takes a myth-based position of harmony with an unintelligible natural world. “Nature is something which is given and which is finally inscrutable,” Weaver wrote in *SE*. “What man should seek in regard to nature is not a complete dominion but a *modus vivendi*—that is, a manner of living together, a coming together with something that was here before our time and will be here after it.”⁴² Indeed, true knowledge comes from that very unintelligibility and requires myth to tell us what science cannot: as Ransom said, it resorts to the supernatural to explain the fullness of the natural. And myth cannot exist without transcendental ideals, which subsequently bind us together through common foundations.

The influence of this line of thinking on Weaver’s rhetorical theories is quite clear. We cannot use words and symbols to shape society unless we agree on the foundations of those words and symbols. Once we sever them from their foundations, around what points can we rally? “Here begins the assault upon definition,” Weaver wrote in *IHC*. “If words no longer correspond to objective realities, it seems no great wrong to take liberties with words. From this point on, faith in language *as a means of arriving at truth weakens*.”⁴³ This is a theme to which

Weaver would return in *ER*, lamenting the decline of what he then called “the homogeneity of belief” in contemporary discourse.⁴⁴ But as Richard L. Johannesen et al. argue, this required both dialectic and rhetoric: “Knowledge of universals comes through dialectic, the ability to differentiate existents into categories, and through intuition, the ability to grasp ‘essential correspondences.’”⁴⁵ Thus spaciousness of rhetoric and “homogeneity of belief” require for existence both universals that underlie concepts *and* work on the part of the individual to understand how those concepts are differentiated.

Can such forms of knowledge derive purely from the scientific view? Weaver and the Agrarians say no, and it is this stance that places them firmly in the *phronesis* camp and in opposition to that of *techné*. Myth, faith, art: these are the things that form our powers of judgment and cultivation of experience, rather than simply the ability to eventually internalize the lessons of rational knowledge. Recall that Oakeshott’s criticism of *techné* is that it allows little room for flexibility and adjustment and improvisation, but instead simply asks us to follow certain rules in certain situations. This form of knowledge is an ill fit for a philosophy that seeks to make land-based thinking the basis for all forms of human activity, because to work with the land—and thus to learn the lessons of stewardship, sustainability, and cyclicity—is to build upon knowledge over time and see the fruits of that knowledge perennially produced.

For Weaver and the Agrarians, knowledge is at some irreducible level intuitive—that is, there are some things we simply *know* and can agree upon, and those things provide the basis for culture. While not quite a dogmatic Christian outlook, the view accepts the tenets of fallen man, the inscrutability of nature, and the permanence of human limits in a cosmological order. Ransom called this Agrarian outlook a “theological homebrew,” and his student Weaver gave it fuller description in his writings on the “older religiousness” of the South.⁴⁶ The first element of

this “older religiousness” is piety: “Piety comes to us as a warning voice that we must think as mortals, that it is not for us either to know all or to control all. It is a recognition of our own limitations and a cheerful acceptance of the contingency of nature, which gives us the protective virtue of humility.”⁴⁷ This attitude stands in contrast to the attitude of science, whose rules and formulae convinces us we can know all and master all.

What the believer of the older religiousness “desired above all else in religion was a fine set of ideas to contemplate... [he] looked upon religion as a great conservative agent and a bulwark of those institutions which served him.”⁴⁸ The “set of ideas” here can be read as Weaver’s Platonic assertion that universals underlie all things and provide unity; religion as a “conservative agent” echoes the advocates of *phronesis* who argue that practical knowledge conserves and forms the basis of functioning social institutions. Even more importantly, mytho-religious knowledge—rooted in narrative, unifying in content, and more catholic than sectarian—allows us to stay on ontological *terra firma* via the ensuing sense of permanence. “Men cannot live under a settled dispensation if the postulates of his existence must be continually revised in accordance with knowledge furnished by a nature filled with contingencies... It is therefore imperative in the eyes of the older religionists that man have for guidance in this life a body of knowledge to which the ‘facts’ of natural discovery are either subordinate or irrelevant.”⁴⁹

We can see here the direct connection between the age-old knowledge debates and Weaver’s more contemporary thinking. He is arguing that if our worldview is only shaped by scientific knowledge (*techné*), then we lose any semblance of the permanence that arises from a “body of knowledge” (*phronesis*) functioning as a guide for living. This is why the South, as the central American repository of the older religiousness, “recognized in science a fascinating

technology [but] refused to become absorbed in it to the extent of making it either a philosophy of life or a religion.”⁵⁰ Instead, the older religionists embraced “a natural piety, expressing itself in uncritical belief and in the experience of conversion, not in an ambition to perfect a system, or to tidy up a world doomed to remain forever deceptive, changeful, and evil.”⁵¹ *Techné*, then, is the tool of progress: its rational laws and steps are the mechanism for understanding the world and improving our condition in it. *Phronesis*, meanwhile, is the body of practical knowledge that helps provide a fixed foundation from which to work and compels us to see the world as ultimately unknowable. This is the agrarian, land-based ethic of knowledge: humble before nature, content with humankind’s limits, and secure in the feeling that good judgment requires a heartfelt embrace of myth and universals.

History, Tradition, and Memory in Agrarian Thought

The Southern Agrarians, as individuals, saw history in varied ways. Tate thought history might lead to a renewal of Christendom; Davidson believed submission to the past and to Southern tradition was self-validating for values; Ransom felt history offered superior examples of the power of religion and myth; others, like Andrew Lytle and Frank Owsley, thought the Southern history of small farming offered the best model for life.⁵² The Agrarians never had one capital-h History to fall back on in their critiques of modern life. Like all writing on history, theirs was contingent upon the world they faced. Some critics have even argued the Agrarian version of history was mythic in itself, embodying a mythologized and romanticized fusion of the values of integrity, family, and religious morality.⁵³ *ITMS* recognized that “the preservation of the South’s cultural legacy might first of all require a battle for its economic soul,” and that soul was dependent on what form of knowledge society chose to utilize.⁵⁴ And—forcefully,

indisputably—the Agrarians came down on the side of the evolving practical knowledge of history and tradition.

So we have this body of evolving practical knowledge—whence does it come, and how do we use it? For Weaver as for the Agrarians, rhetoric was always a force informed and produced by memory. “The rhetorician always speaks out of historical consciousness,” Weaver wrote, “because his problems are existential ones.”⁵⁵ If we are to move people toward noble goals, then the task of rhetoric must always take into account the full history and context of a given situation. This means that rhetoric, as a contextual and prescriptive force, must have behind it the weight that comes with a solid grounding in tradition and all that it implies. “‘Tradition’ is... an embodiment of ‘givens’ that must constantly be fought for, recovered in each generation, and adjusted to new conditions.”⁵⁶ It cannot be simply asserted.

Despite their critics’ claims, the Southern Agrarians who influenced Weaver were never content with vague invocations of “tradition” in order to justify their vision. Instead, tradition was a force that must be reckoned with and integrated. T.S. Eliot, whose views often overlapped with the Agrarians, argued this very thing: “[Tradition] involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence... This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.”⁵⁷ Similarly, Weaver believed that human actions must “seek transcendental help” in order to be “measured, pointed up, directed by some superior validating ideal.”⁵⁸ We cannot understand the ideal without understanding the whole of tradition, and the “transcendental help” can only come from incorporation of the past. Eliot is talking about poetry and Weaver is talking about rhetoric in the face of scientific ascendance, but each point is the

same: if we are to aim toward something higher then we must understand the entire historical context which guides our sights.

But if we want to incorporate tradition, we have to find a way to preserve it—no easy task when, as Weaver put it in *VO*, “The slogan today is to forget and live in the future. Wherever we look in the ‘progressive’ world we find encouragements not to remember. Increasingly the past is looked upon as a burden... for no man exists really except through that mysterious storehouse of his remembered acts and his formed personality. His very reality depends upon his carrying the past into the present through the power of memory.”⁵⁹ When we successfully preserve memory, we can move beyond mere scientific knowledge and embrace the contemplative life: “Religion, morality, and art would again enable men to experience the drama of life and to feel the transformative power that accompanied the struggle between good and evil.”⁶⁰ The world of science and industry has instead created a world in which problems are easy to leave behind and personalities are easy to invent anew. When people are free from the burden of memory, they need not reckon with the serious things. This, in turn, prevents them from living meaningful lives and moving toward noble goals. The stance of Weaver and the Agrarians with regard to memory set them apart from other American conservatives. Whereas other conservatives focused on economic issues and personal liberty, this group was, according to one scholar, “Interested in social and spiritual values [and] they followed the moral-cultural tradition of Coleridge, Goethe, and T.S. Eliot rather than that of Greek rationalism... [they were] traditionalist[s] rooted in the history of accustomed forms and habits. Continuity, order, and inequality were the earmarks of their good society.”⁶¹

Ransom and the Southern Agrarians had “a passionate desire to restore myth to its proper place,” in both art and society.⁶² This desire greatly influenced Weaver, who thought myth could

and should be an expression of absolute truth just as much as scientific knowledge was. But what forces constituted this overarching myth that provided the basis for society? And what intrinsic goods in society does the power of myth create? And how, as Weaver wanted, could it help the world “regain order and stability [by returning] to the kind of poetic-religious vision of life which dominated the Middle Ages”?⁶³

The answers come from Weaver’s promotion of several concepts, all of which were deeply influenced by the Agrarians and by the tenets of agrarianism. The latter compels us to think in a land-based way, internalizing the cyclical nature of an inscrutable nature and modeling our lives on the cultivation of an evolving body of knowledge. Once we separate ourselves philosophically from nature and its minimization of the human ego, we enter a dangerous realm of ontological hubris: convinced by our scientific prowess that technique can conquer all, we diminish the importance of the non-rational thinking displayed in art, aesthetics, myth, rhetoric, and literature. The Southern Agrarians built upon this fundamental agrarian concept by arguing that a society should follow the agrarian model in its social, cultural, and economic relations. According to one historian, Weaver’s accomplishment was to take the Agrarian model and reinterpret it as “a non-particularist conservatism fundamentally concerned with issues of value... [Weaver] defined Agrarianism in terms of philosophical positions and the defense of absolutes.”⁶⁴ These absolutes constituted Weaver’s outline of this chapter’s heading: the *practice* of the good life and the good society.

History, tradition, and memory were essential ingredients of the Southern Agrarians’ efforts. The three central figures—Ransom, Tate, and Davidson—all embraced a view of the South as a distinct and special kind of society within a society, heir to the aristocratic and enlightened tradition of Europe. This would later become Weaver’s view as well. The core of

this view is that the South had its claims to history snatched away at Appomattox, and had lost a sense of itself as a great civilization that carried on the traditions of Western culture and the unified ontological structure of Christendom. Tate's famous poem "Ode to the Confederate Dead" illustrates what Tate saw as the modern citizen's "spiritual exile from his or her own heritage."⁶⁵ Tate wrote: "What shall we say who have knowledge/Carried to the heart? Shall we take the act/To the grave? Shall we, more hopeful, set up the grave/In the house? The ravenous grave?"⁶⁶ Here is a clear meditation on the legacy of those who fought at the landmark battles of the war, and even more importantly, a pondering of what the South ought do with that legacy. Should a society discard what was defeated? The North, via occupation and Reconstruction, had attempted just that: an extinguishing of the central tenets of Southern society.

But the Agrarians shared Eliot's view that history and tradition are not so easily cast aside. If a people are to truly know who they *are*, they must know who they *were*. This idea would resurface in Weaver's writing on the "spaciousness" of the old rhetoric, when speakers would regularly draw upon not just the events of the past but the common assumptions that a population made about those events. Reconstruction proved that the North wanted a clean break between past and future, but Tate and the others knew there could be no future without a firm grasp of the past—for only a firm grasp could allow people to learn how they might live.

Davidson made a similar point with his poem *The Tall Men*, where he wrote "The dead young men whose flesh will not reflower/But in this single bloom which now I pluck,/Weaving it into my spirit as victors weave/A chaplet, gathered from the mould, for honor's sake?... The tall men, lie within the land they won./... Out of their death/Leaps now our life..."⁶⁷ This is another example of how history weighs heavily upon us, makes us question our own search for meaning, and provides ontological guidance if we would only listen. The point in each poem is that the

narrator is struggling to understand the role of history in shaping our lives, and to what extent we should draw on tradition, and which is the best way to preserve the memory of what has taken place.

This is not to say that the Agrarians simply violated Eliot's dictum and embraced Southern history whole cloth.⁶⁸ To do so would obviously mean supporting a system that relied, tragically, upon the forced labor of millions of slaves. But neither could Southerners ignore that history any more than, for example, Heidegger scholars could simply ignore his Nazi-era writings. To do either would be ethically spurious, because history does not allow us to whitewash our past. The lesson of the Agrarians was that the South should not throw out their entire history simply because of slavery. What is seen in the Tate and Davidson poems are honest attempts to reckon with, understand, and recover what good ideas are to be found in one region's past *despite* the injustices it contains. Doing so requires a solid hold on the lessons that come from history, the customs that come from tradition, and the active preservation that comes with memory.

All three forces help build the cultural myths that provide not just foundations for society, but a form of knowledge that is equal to that of scientific knowledge. This was Ransom's point in *God Without Thunder*: that when it comes to the shaping of people's lives, non-rational forces are far more important than the rule-based knowledge of industrialism's scientists and technicians. Scientists and philosophers, he wrote, "*elevate* science into metaphysics; but they *reduce* religion into metaphysics."⁶⁹ In other words, a force like religion already occupies a higher plane than science ever could—but the forces of rationality continually try to displace the authority of all forms of *phronesis*. The two dominant forms of knowledge are not necessarily incommensurable, but each needs to retain its provenance; once the forces of *techné* start their

attack on the epistemological criteria of history, tradition, and memory then the good things in life begin to suffer and utilitarian industrialism reigns.

Having established the basic philosophical elements of Weaver's Agrarian teachers, I turn now to what the man himself said about history, tradition, and memory—the keys to a superior form of knowledge, he believed. Important to bear in mind in this discussion is that a common accusation made of Weaver and the Agrarians is that they simply want to turn the clock back to a time they have romanticized as somehow being better. Weaver addresses this in *IHC*, saying that such an accusation “reveals the philosophic position of modernism” and that “the things of highest value are not affected by the passage of time... In declaring that we wish to recover lost ideals and values, we are looking toward an ontological realm which is timeless... the return which the idealists propose is not a voyage backward through time *but a return to center.*”⁷⁰

Weaver on the Elements of Practice

One scholar wrote that for Weaver, “the term ‘knowledge’ can only be applied to that which is essential, permanent, and unchanging”; indeed, “reality is ultimately noetic. Permanent reality, the realm of being, lies beyond the particulars of sensation and can be apprehended only through the intellect.”⁷¹ This is the entire thrust of *IHC*: that modern life is in decline because nominalism elevated sensation-knowledge over noetic knowledge—a direct link to Ransom's ideas. Noetic knowledge—that based on the intellect and perception rather than scientific observation—is instilled through and kept alive in history and memory: the forces that must be cultivated to create the agrarian notion of practice

“Between myth and status and memory there is a necessary connection,” Weaver wrote. “Every individual's desire is that he will be seen for what he is, and what he is depends upon

some present knowledge of his past. The same principle holds for societies and nations. They *are* their history... Cultural life depends upon the remembrance of acknowledged values.”⁷² This is especially true with regard to rhetoric, because to move people with language depends upon shared associations of words and symbols. Writes a Weaver scholar, “The link between knowledge and language is memory... Language is the record of memory, *a result of the collective process of recognition.*”⁷³ Indeed, Weaver argued that language “appears as a great storehouse of universal memory... aiding us to get at a meaning beyond present meaning through the very fact that it embodies’ others’ experiences.”⁷⁴

The emphasis in both quotes is necessarily on the collective rather than the individual. This is because agrarian practice insists on knowledge and meaning that lie below—or perhaps beyond—the sensation-perception knowledge of scientific rationality, which can only be verified by the autonomous individual. If people are to truly have a foundation for social knowledge, it must consist of the things they somehow *know* but cannot *enumerate*. Words like universal, collective, storehouse: these indicate that Weaver and those who have accurately understood him recognize the need for something beyond the mere individual. If all people have is an agglomeration of individual sensations that they call knowledge because they are rationally verified, then they are inevitably left with not just cultural but *linguistic* relativism. By contrast, if they correctly order our collective knowledge of myth, memory, and the like, then, as he put it in *IHC*, “Finding the meaning of the *definiendum* is finding what emerges naturally if our present concepts are put together in the right relation.”⁷⁵

Like his Agrarian teachers, Weaver believed that scientific industrialism and its tools were waging a war on memory by tolerating only that knowledge that can be abstracted from the whole and ordered rationally. (Think again of their assertion that Reconstruction attempted to

systematically eradicate all traces of the antebellum South in order to create something anew, while ignoring any virtue that old world contained.) But for Weaver, memory also “supplies material for the faculty of reason and it provides the necessary condition of conscience... [it is thus] essential to intelligence and to soul.”⁷⁶ Hence Weaver’s argument that rhetoric (based on *phronesis*) and dialectic (based on *techné*) must be counterparts, not opponents. Dialectic offers us the means, but only rhetoric can help us understand and aim toward the ideal. And without knowledge of the ideal, rhetoric cannot recommend one thing over another—linguistic relativism therefore breeds cultural relativism.

Part of the problem, according to Weaver, is that the modern world encourages a sense of “presentism,” or “the belief that only existence in the present can give significance to a thing. The passage of time not only retires things from temporal existence but also deprives them of value and meaning.”⁷⁷ We tend to devalue, in other words, elements of life that have faded away—assuming that they faded away for good reason. In his Southern writings, Weaver often lamented the disappearance of the gentleman and the code of chivalry. Modern citizens tend to assume that the “gentleman” faded because it was antiquated or was no longer relevant to life. But Weaver’s point is that losing the memory of the gentleman’s code also means losing the good that it produced. Building up the value of present things tends to degrade the value of past things.

The threat to memory, according to Weaver and the Agrarians, is that in an age of scientific knowledge the value of other forms of past knowledge is lost. Scientific knowledge gives us clear tools that, we are told, enrich our lives. But forms of practice and non-rational knowledge are foundational forces, running beneath the surface of institutions, social relations, and indeed the whole of civilization. Since they do not offer benefits that can be quantified or

explained in a soundbite, and since they are easy to dismiss as relics of a distant and deservedly forgotten past, people tend to discount both their importance and their role in their lives.

Presentism is therefore not just a threat to forms of knowledge, but to an entire ontological orientation. Without memory people are rootless, cast adrift without a philosophical anchor.

Scientific knowledge, which is prized by industrialism and finance-capitalism for its benefit to acquisitiveness and profit, cannot give people an accurate sense of history. Science, according to Weaver, is the study “of what is presently true because uniformly true, of what is abstractly true because generally true. History on the other hand is the memory of all the past with its uniquenesses... scientific judgments are rational whereas historical judgments are intuitive.”⁷⁸ Here again we see Weaver’s firm belief in things that are simply *known*, because they can be grasped through collective memory and the lessons of history. This echoes the views above of thinkers like Oakeshott, who argued that practical knowledge must be acquired and imparted rather than simply taught and learned. This has direct implications for rhetoric. When President Obama, for example, speaks of America’s “long season of war,” the words will ring truer with adults who have wearily lived through the last decade and a half of war. Their knowledge comes from history and collective memory. Consider by contrast how a group of schoolchildren, who have only been taught that there have been wars, will react to the words. One reaction will simply be recognition, but the other will be *felt*. That is the power of memory in Weaver’s rhetorical schema: it allows people to feel rhetoric rather than simply hear it. People are moved by it if they share a common metaphysical foundation created through collective experiences and stored in the vault of language.

Weaver thought this attack on memory was a bourgeois mentality and that it represented a philosophy of escape, a “habit of judging all things by their departure from the things of

yesterday.”⁷⁹ This mindset departed sharply from his heritage and his training. A political philosopher wrote that “As a Southerner, and particularly as an heir to the Agrarian tradition, Weaver was well-equipped to resort to the collective and individual memories of his own culture... The agrarian *knows* about the contingencies of life, because he must experience them day by day, through all the fickleness of weather and the seasons.”⁸⁰ In other words, the agrarian view embraces history and tradition because they are how we learn *in spite of* the unpleasant parts of life, while the scientific view strives to escape those unpleasant parts by ignoring history and tradition. This view is decidedly Thomistic, as Weaver argued: “The necessity of having some form of knowledge which will stand above the welter of earthly change and bear witness that God is superior to accident led Thomas Aquinas to establish his famous dichotomy... that whereas some things may be learned through investigation and the exercise of the reasoning powers, others must be given or ‘revealed’ by God.”⁸¹ Practice is superior to technique in the agrarian view because it traffics in the revealed things, the things that emerge over time and prove themselves true through the seasons—the things that are more felt than discovered. “It is therefore imperative,” Weaver wrote in *SE*, “that man have for guidance in this life a body of knowledge to which the ‘facts’ of natural discovery are either subordinate or irrelevant. This body is the ‘rock of ages,’ firm in the vast sea of human passion and error. Moral truth is not something which can be altered every time science widens its field of induction.”⁸²

The reason the Southern Agrarians, and thus Weaver, believed that the agrarian form can be a model for all forms of life is because rooting oneself in practical knowledge and felt moral truths provides a more direct link to virtue than scientific knowledge alone. It is not simply an “ism,” Weaver argued: agrarianism “presents a complete regime... [because it] began, as all philosophies should begin, by considering man in relation to the creation.”⁸³ This stands in

contrast to scientific worldviews like Marxism and technocracy, according to Weaver, because those views all see the human as ahistorical, fundamentally good, and free from the burdens of history thanks to scientific knowledge and the progress of industrialism. Weaver argued that this is why people from Aristotle to Horace to Xenophon have argued that “there is a relationship between the life of rural husbandry and political and civic virtue.”—because it is better to grapple with the contingencies of life than to flee them with sensation-knowledge alone.⁸⁴

Historical Tradition in Weaverian and Agrarian Thought

Scientific knowledge, I have argued throughout this section, aims to be decontextualized: divorced from history and setting, its rules and formulae can work in all settings at all times if applied correctly. But to Weaver, this form of knowledge is in the broader consideration rarely useful by itself because it cannot tell people what we should value, what is worth aiming for, or what a noble end can offer them. This is why rhetoric is so necessary, he wrote in *LWP*, and why it is “the most humanistic of the humanities”; it is a “means of making convictions compelling to others by showing them *in contexts of reality and of human values*.”⁸⁵ For without such context, there can be no true civilization. Therefore the agrarian tradition, which grounds all human activity in the perennial virtues of an inscrutable nature, should be society’s guiding structure. Agrarianism embraces the permanence of tradition and does not immediately bend to the whims of technical discoveries. “The real question,” Weaver wrote, “is the relation of different kinds of things to this flow of time. The idea that everything has only a temporal status and therefore must change with the passage of time is the idea to be examined... To believe in basic verities is to believe that some values are not grounded in time; they move neither against nor with the clock.”⁸⁶

These basic verities not grounded in time come to us from our own history and tradition, just as agrarian knowledge is refined and acquired over succeeding generations. This kind of historical knowledge is what must be the wellspring of rhetoric, as he wrote in *LS*:

Rhetoric is intended for historical man, or for man as conditioned by history. It is part of the *conditio humana* that we live at particular times and in particular places... Hence, just as man from the point of view of rhetoric is not purely a thinking machine, or a mere seat of rationality, so he is not a creature abstracted from time and place. If science deals with the abstract and the universal, rhetoric is near the other end, dealing in significant part with the particular and the concrete.”⁸⁷

But what is this tradition that opposes the abstract, and how might we find it in our time? It is a “recognizable pattern of belief and behavior transmitted from one generation to the next,” he wrote in *STB*.⁸⁸ Like *phronesis* above, tradition is difficult to teach in a classroom alone: it can only be fully acquired when accompanied by some immersion within it. Weaver himself provides a fine example of this. He made himself a Southern intellectual and the heir to the Agrarian legacy by fully immersing himself in the region’s art, literature, and social thought. That tradition shaped his rhetorical theories, and so his intellectual legacy and his rhetorical theory must be considered together. Weaver was “always, first and foremost, a conscious participant in the Southern heritage,” according to Nierman, and his work must be viewed in that light.⁸⁹ As Weaver himself said, the Southern Agrarian tradition presents a complete regime; to consider work from that regime in a vacuum is misguided.

The elements of that regime focus heavily on history and tradition. Importantly, total agreement on everything is not needed for a civilization. Weaver stressed that people need “community of mind,” which will at least provide a basis for common ground on the truly important parts of life.⁹⁰ However, this can only be found through a study of the first and final things—the things that lead people to some understanding of the whole human.⁹¹ This

community of mind—which Weaver also sometimes called a culture’s “metaphysical dream,” to express the underlying unity of a coherent culture—is a fundamental concept of Weaver’s, for it allows people to gain some consensus on cultural, social, and political matters while still providing sufficient freedom for each person. Without it, rhetoric cannot accomplish what Weaver labeled its central task: “to move men’s feelings in the direction of a goal,” or at least to move feelings “into closer line with the truth that dialectic pursues.”⁹²

The threat to community of mind, which is based on a particular culture’s history and tradition, comes from an undue reliance upon dialectic and its partners, logic and social science discourse. This “patter of modern shibboleths,” as Weaver called it, “emphasizes logic and fact and engages in sensationalism, without stimulating the imagination of the audience or orienting it toward an ethical good.”⁹³ Worse, social scientists claim to avoid value judgments while frequently and implicitly making such judgments, and strive for an unattainable objectivity: this makes them, according to Weaver, “tendentious dialectician[s].”⁹⁴ The community of mind can be neither created nor maintained by such figures. Instead, rhetoric—which by definition expresses the subjectivity of the speaker, just as ethics expresses the goal of an action—is needed to provide foundations. This is why Weaver believed, according to two scholars, that the “authority to interpret social life” should have remained with “theologians, philosophers, ethicists, and orators” instead of shifting to specialists “whose factual prose pales in comparison to the unctuous eloquence of such nineteenth-century luminaries as Emerson, Thoreau, or Webster.”⁹⁵

The larger critique that Weaver and the Agrarians leveled at the modern Western world echoes this smaller one. As the Industrial Revolution and its ensuing products—the railroad, the factory, the regimented life of the office—made the world resemble mechanical processes,

humans shifted more toward scientific metaphors of phenomena because those explanations reflected the world we now knew. If the cell and the brain are just machines, for example, then surely the universe can be understood on those terms rather than by the mysteries of Biblical creation stories. Weaver and the Agrarians, in this case, professed arguments similar to the philosopher and historian Lewis Mumford, whose influential 1934 book *Technics and Civilization* argued that it was the moral choices we make about technology, not the technology itself, that dictates our experience and our preferred form of knowledge.⁹⁶ Too often, all parties to this argument agreed, society rejects history and tradition in the name of some ostensibly emancipatory new technology that promises to leave old conflicts behind. Thus the tools of progress and applied science, which spring from scientific explanations, ignore the power of memory and insist upon the irrelevance of history by promising a brighter and more materially abundant future.

Instead of attempting to leave history behind, Weaver and the Agrarians wanted to create a community of mind around shared belief, which requires spacious and ethical rhetoric. The rhetorician is the agent of history, according to Goodnight, because the rhetorician “recognizes that only when a people agree that a common problem exists can there be an impetus towards its solution... and, that only when a people agree upon the definition of a problem can there be a satisfactory solution for all. The rhetorician *relies upon the experience of history to establish consensus on a temporal problem.*”⁹⁷ Here one sees Weaver’s two key elements of historical, practical knowledge: it must help people form a community of mind, and it is dependent upon the definition of the word. Since speech is the vehicle of order and definition must depend on some kind of analogical relationship of a thing with other things, people can only form a community of mind and therefore a functioning society if they agree on the relationship between

words and the concepts for which they stand. And to achieve such agreement, first, the dialectician must know where the boundaries of logic lie; and second, the rhetorician must draw upon memory, tradition, and the historical consciousness of shared experiences to move people toward noble goals.

Perhaps this sounds merely idealistic or aspirational—the way Marxian theories routinely describe a workers’ paradise that is always right around the corner. But for Weaver and the Agrarians, this was no mere theory. “The Power of the Word,” perhaps the strongest and most philosophically sophisticated chapter in *IHC*, warns quite specifically what happens when rhetoric declines. Weaver believed that when faith in language as a vehicle of order is lost, and when trust in language as the bearer of absolute meaning between word and concept is lost, then cultural forms and thus human civilizations disintegrate. The question of language use is one of survival, not just one of abstruse academic debate. Corrupt words betray corrupt thoughts, Weaver believed. If there is no strong rhetoric that avails itself of memory in order to direct people toward noble goals, then people have lost their way in the cosmological order. When the community of mind is lost—as, for example, the Agrarians thought it had been in the postwar South—then a civilization is destroyed. The postmodern view of language as slippery, subjective, contingent, constructed—this, to Weaver and the Agrarians, is nihilism.

But it is not just postmodernism that threatens the foundations of language. Any culture that prizes the technological over the contemplative, the material over the transcendental, and the logical over the rhetorical is doomed, Weaver believed, because it has moved away from the practical knowledge of agrarianism. Goodnight, in a key insight, even suggests that the two forms of public life in Weaver’s thought could be only technocracy or agrarianism: in other words, either a society that relies upon technical knowledge or a society that relies upon practical

knowledge.⁹⁸ This is why it is so essential to understand the view of knowledge held by the Agrarians and by Weaver. They saw such debates as key to the formation and perpetuation of a civilization; the sort of knowledge people prioritize ends up dictating what sort of world they create. If people want an agrarian society—one based upon stewardship, tradition, and limits on human endeavors by the inscrutability of nature—then they cannot emphasize only instrumental knowledge. They must instead value the intangibles, the myths, and the historical memories.

Myth-knowledge, just as Weaver's teacher Ransom argued, holds great innate value for society. Myths, Weaver wrote in *VO*, "are great symbolic structures which hold together the imaginations of a people and provide bases for harmonious thought and action. They posit a supersensible world of meaning and value from which the least member of a culture can borrow something to dignify and give coherence to his life."⁹⁹ The use of "supersensible" tells us that Weaver is here elevating knowledge from myth to a plane higher than that of knowledge from science, which can only tell us what can be learned from sensations. And again, Weaver in *VO* critiques scientific knowledge as never being capable of enumerating goals: myth "cannot be dealt with or destroyed by the method of analysis" because it "expresses some idea of value" and "expresses a reality which is subjective but which is nevertheless part of the totality."¹⁰⁰

The notion of totality is a central one for the Agrarian school. The propensity to specialize—to focus intensely on one thing at the expense of mastering a broad range of knowledge—is evident in both our work lives and our forms of knowledge, and reflects the ascendancy of scientific knowledge that abstracts parts from the whole. Weaver's ideal person, the philosophic doctor who is a sort of hybrid of gentleman-farmer and philosopher-king figures, should instead pursue knowledge of a wide range of things. "Science is therefore not a pursuit for [the philosophic doctor]," he wrote in *IHC*. "Because it demands an ever more minute

inspection of the physical world, it makes an ideal of specialism... The position of the philosophic doctor and his heir, the gentleman, was thus correct. For them the highest knowledge concerned, respectively, the relation of men to God and the relation of men to men.”¹⁰¹

Perhaps no concept in Weaver’s entire corpus shows more direct influence of the agrarian form of life and his Agrarian teachers. The small farmer, that admittedly romanticized icon of Agrarian thought, must be master of all kinds of knowledge. He must be able to, in short order, plant a crop, milk a cow, slaughter a pig, preserve a harvest, repair a machine, and complete a sale—not to mention the ability and willingness to contemplate his relation to God and to other men. Nothing in this scheme allows for specialization, which often avails itself only of *techné*; the small farmer’s ontological orientation must rely upon *phronesis* in order to ensure the survival of his clan.

Now expand this one farmer out to an entire society of such figures, each of whom is reliant upon the practical knowledge inherited through memory and tradition, and we will see how the Agrarian theory of knowledge forms the foundation for a society. Each farm family will contribute not just to preservation of history and tradition but will inculcate virtue in the society, because they are connected to a holistic view of the world—a view they *live* each day on their land. The ideal figure of this society, Weaver wrote, is “an agrarian, living on the soil; a primary producer creating things, not trafficking in the things that other men made.”¹⁰² A whole society of such figures would show “wholesomeness, its rhythms in unison with nature, and its rooted strength.”¹⁰³ That society would be better for continuation and distillation of virtue, because its figures use practical knowledge that connects them to the permanent foundations of life—the stuff of myth and tradition, not technique and rationality.

This society would be made up of those who know there is a community of mind underlying the physical community itself, unified by certain beliefs about culture and the nature of things. It would grasp intuitively the deeper sources of its existence and coherence, which always run beneath the surface. Only a barbarian, Weaver wrote, insists upon seeing a thing as it is.¹⁰⁴ But a culture will form itself when each person possesses three aligned levels of reflection, according to *IHC*. First “are the thoughts he employs in the activity of daily living,” which “constitute his worldliness.” Above this is “his body of beliefs,” which “he will have acquired in the ordinary course of his reflection.” Third and “surmounting all is an intuitive feeling about the immanent nature of reality, and this is the sanction to which both ideas and beliefs are ultimately referred for verification.”¹⁰⁵ These three levels are necessary and can only flourish within a society based upon agrarian forms of knowledge and life. Without the metaphysical dream these levels form, said Weaver, “it is impossible to think of men living together harmoniously over an extent of time. The dream carries with it an evaluation, which is the bond of spiritual community.”¹⁰⁶

The final conclusion for Weaver is that “sentiment is anterior to reason,” a perfect echo of his biggest influence, Ransom’s *GWT*.¹⁰⁷ “We do not undertake to reason about anything until we have been drawn to it by an affective interest,” he wrote in *IHC*. “It appears, then, that *culture is originally a matter of yea-saying*.”¹⁰⁸ One could hardly find a better encapsulation of Weaver’s thought: a culture forms when people communally say yes not just to underlying myths and sentiments, but to the history and tradition that provide their upkeep. A culture cannot form from reason alone, nor can it thrive when knowledge based purely on reason is the dominant mode of public life. According to Weaver, people need the myth because the myth forms and sustains them. Just as dialectic cannot offer a full picture of ends, reason could never provide full

explanation of the world nor full guidance for living in it. For that people need myth and rhetoric, both of which contain and are based upon practical knowledge.

Final Thoughts

I have argued in this chapter that Weaver and the Agrarians possessed a distinctive view of knowledge. Under the broad term of *practice*, or a philosophical “cultivation” that is inherently normative, I have drawn a line from the ancient Greek concepts of *phronesis* and *techné* through the Agrarians, who believed modern life had corrupted knowledge by emphasizing the rational and scientific kind, to Weaver, who argued that rhetoric can only succeed when the history and tradition that underlies practice can form a community of mind. Philosophers have long debated the divide between *phronesis* and *techné*, but one of Weaver’s key insights was to see that both were needed for a fully functioning society, in the form of dialectic and rhetoric. His quarrel was with a society that had severed the link between a word and its concepts, and thus between rhetoric and its metaphysical foundations and functional spaciousness. By viewing all language as subjective and all scientific facts as pure truth, the modern world has come close to destroying any community of mind based on noble ends.

Scientific knowledge, Weaver and the Agrarians argued, certainly has an important place in culture. But too often it stresses only means and rules out ends as beyond its purview. This poses a grave danger, argued Goodnight: “It is a dangerous thing to develop means without reference to rational ends, because if you do, the means may condition the ends. A great flowering of means may even be a cover-up for a failure of purpose.”¹⁰⁹ Consider the atomic bomb, the event that so shocked Weaver and other thinkers like Kenneth Burke: Weaver considered this development the ultimate expression of scientific knowledge rooted in technique—how do we do this?—and without any expression or consideration of ends. To lose

purpose, Weaver suggests, is to veer wildly off the course that a culture's metaphysical dream has set us on; this is why rhetoric must avail itself of history, memory, and tradition in order to move people toward noble ends.

The Agrarians, like their heir Weaver, were not academics as we now know the term, and the homiletic tone of their writing can often obscure its philosophical power. They were intellectuals, essayists, polemicists—and, frequently, farmers. This is because they believed they were arguing for a superior form of knowledge and superior mode of living, and the best way to understand it was to live it. One could even argue that Weaver, ensconced though he was in his Chicago rooms, maintained an agrarian outlook. He pondered history and tradition; he drew upon memory to defend noble rhetoric for noble ends; he journeyed back to the land of his people each summer and thus maintained his connection to the Southern metaphysical dream; and he always valued practical, tangible knowledge over technical, abstract knowledge. He was not a farmer, but he found his community of mind and he remained a part of it throughout his life. This was exactly what the Agrarians thought best for society: to stay connected to the underlying myths that provide more knowledge and power than scientific reasoning based on sensations. The agrarian form of knowledge is a *felt* one—people grasp things intuitively and test ideas perennially because they share the same broad outlook as those with whom they share a culture. In the next chapter, I examine just how—and *where*—a culture arises.

¹ Throughout this chapter, I will use “*technē*” in the Platonic sense (“technical knowledge”), not the Aristotelian sense (more like “art”). Many scholars have (rightly) argued that rhetoric is rooted in Aristotle’s notion of *techné*, as I will discuss momentarily, but they usually mean it is an art and not merely rational, technical knowledge—which is closer to Weaver’s view of rhetoric.

² Robert C. Rowland and Deanna F. Womack, “Aristotle’s View of Ethical Rhetoric,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, v. 15, no. 1/2, (1985) 13.

³ Rowland and Womack (1985), 13.

⁴ Lois S. Self, “Rhetoric and *Phronesis*: The Aristotelian Ideal,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, v. 12, no. 2 (Spring 1979), 133.

⁵ Steven Mailloux, “Rhetorical Hermeneutics Still Again,” in Walter Jost & Wendy Olmstead (eds.), *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 458. The Aristotle quote is from *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140b.

⁶ Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 117.

⁷ *GWT*, 140.

⁸ Matthew Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry Into the Value of Work* (U.S.A.: Penguin Press, 2009), 37-39.

⁹ On this point, see in particular Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964). Ellul argues that since the Enlightenment, technique has become the dominant structure of all social relations and has subsumed all other questions—political, social, moral—within itself. The “technique” I write about in this dissertation is this sort of mindset: the one that asserts the innate superiority of the *how* and marginalizes the enduring relevance of the *why*.

¹⁰ Crawford (2009), 69.

¹¹ *ITMS*, xlvii, emphasis added.

¹² This means that despite his dedicated Platonism, Weaver rejected Plato’s indictment of rhetoric as excessively instrumental and instead insisted that rhetoric must be more Aristotelian—that it must incorporate history and tradition and rely more upon *phronesis* than on *techné*, which appears in the form of dialectic. A longer discussion of this clash appears later in this chapter.

¹³ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (U.S.A.: Yale University Press, 1999), 321.

¹⁴ Scott (1999), 322.

¹⁵ Scott (1999), 346.

¹⁶ Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 244, emphasis added.

¹⁷ The English political theorist Michael Oakeshott echoed this theme when he said that whereas technique will tell a man “*what* to do, it is practice which tells him *how* to do it... practical knowledge can neither be taught nor learned, but only imparted and acquired.” This is precisely Weaver’s diagnosis: rhetoric is needed because it allows people to draw upon history and tradition in order to inform the purely deductive conclusions of dialectic. See Michael Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1962), 4. Similarly, Alasdair MacIntyre argued that “judgment has an indispensable role in the life of the virtuous man... excellence of character and intelligence cannot be separated.” Technical knowledge and expertise are not enough to form and perpetuate a coherent and

virtuous culture; practical wisdom and judgment are far more important. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 154.

¹⁸ Dunne (1993), 89. The work in question is Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

¹⁹ Dunne (1993), 89.

²⁰ Dunne (1993), 90.

²¹ *ITMS*, xxxix, xl. I add the emphasis on “economic” to indicate what a striking charge this is: it means we must measure all things, including human relationships, according to how well personal utility is maximized—with little thought given to virtue, transcendentals, or anything beyond the present concerns.

²² If you doubt this assertion, simply pay close attention to the justification for virtually every contemporary government action. If it creates “growth,” however hazily defined that might be, it is good; if not, then it is not. In a society based on permanent growth, the technician who can create it—whether economist, entrepreneur, or policymaker—becomes a secular shaman.

²³ *IHC*, 6.

²⁴ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1981), 92.

²⁵ David Edward Tabachnick, *The Great Reversal: How We Let Technology Take Control of the Planet* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 7.

²⁶ *ITMS*, xliv-xlv. We contemporary readers can recognize this tendency in the discourse of techno-utopians, whose favored term—“disruption”—has become the unwittingly bleak buzzword of our time. The point of the Agrarians and of Weaver is not that progress is necessarily bad—it’s that progress toward nothing but more progress is bad. If we are not progressing *toward* something, then anything and everything becomes rationalized in the name of technical knowledge. Think about discussions of the “national economy” (as if anything so unfathomably complex can be reduced to a single, static idea). The stated goal of virtually every politician and policymaker is to “grow the economy”—but for what end? For full employment, so that we might have more money, which creates still more employment, which will drive still more growth... &c., &c., *ad* literally *infinitum*. It’s actually an *anti*-teleological view; there is no goal outside of the means. To Weaver, infinite progress was almost a nihilistic force that requires nothing but its own perpetuation. And since, as you can read above, he remained committed to the idea of “man created in the divine image,” the idea of a nihilistic and growth-obsessed society that measured people in purely materialistic terms was deeply disturbing to him.

²⁷ Gadamer (1981), 105.

²⁸ Ralph Borsodi, *The Ugly Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1929), 1, 4.

²⁹ Oakeshott (1962), 17.

³⁰ John Crowe Ransom, *God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy* (New York: Archon Books, 1965), 37. Hereafter *GWT*.

³¹ *GWT*, 77, 70.

³² *GWT*, 67.

³³ Paul A. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 40.

³⁴ Conkin (1988), 40.

³⁵ Note that I say *beyond* scientific understanding rather than *outside of* same. The mytho-poetic worldview, praised in later years by Weaver, held that the world's unexplainable phenomena were too complex for the scientific mind. This would be more than a little offensive to today's crusading scientists, who generally hold that such phenomena are irrelevant because they cannot be explained by science. See, for example, Alex Rosenberg's *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life Without Illusions* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2011), which Leon Wieseltier, writing in *The New Republic*, rather accurately called a "shabby little book."

³⁶ Allen Tate, "Humanism and Naturalism," in *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), 139.

³⁷ *GWT*, 140.

³⁸ *IHC*, 2.

³⁹ *IHC*, 3-4.

⁴⁰ *IHC*, 2. Often overlooked in analyses of Weaver's thinking is that, earlier in his career, he blamed this development on Protagoras. See Richard M. Weaver, "The Revolt Against Humanism: A Study of the New Critical Temper," MA thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1934.

⁴¹ *IHC*, 4.

⁴² *SE*, 221.

⁴³ *IHC*, 7-8, emphasis added.

⁴⁴ *ER*, 167.

⁴⁵ Richard L. Johannesen, Rennard Strickland, & Ralph T. Eubanks, "Richard M. Weaver on the Nature of Rhetoric: An Interpretation," foreword to *LS* (1970), 13. The quoted portion is from *ER*.

⁴⁶ *GWT*, 112.

⁴⁷ *STB*, 32. It is worth noting that Weaver dedicated *STB* to Ransom, so it should not surprise us that the book develops further many of the latter's ideas.

⁴⁸ *SE*, 141.

⁴⁹ *SE*, 142.

⁵⁰ *SE*, 145. The implication here is that the North, in thrall to the doctrine of scientific progress, did the exact opposite.

⁵¹ *SE*, 146.

⁵² Paul V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 7.

⁵³ C. Hugh Holman, "Summary: The Utility of Myth," *Georgia Review*, no. 11 (Summer 1957), 161-163.

⁵⁴ Murphy (2001), 61.

⁵⁵ *SE*, 89.

⁵⁶ Eugene Genovese, *The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 4-5.

⁵⁷ T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964), 4. I first encountered this excerpt in Genovese (1994). In Eliot's "pastness of the past" and "of its presence," we are easily reminded of William Faulkner's famous remark that "the past is never dead; it's not even past." Faulkner was a favorite of Weaver, and of course many other Southerners.

⁵⁸ "Humanism in an Age of Science," in *IDT*, 71.

⁵⁹ *VO*, 41.

⁶⁰ Mark G. Malvasi, *The Unregenerate South: The Agrarian Thought of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 230.

⁶¹ Ronald Lora, *Conservative Minds in America* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1971), 177. Note here that “inequality” does not mean an oppressive society. What this group means by the term is a society where people know they have a specific role, and where they also know it is foolish to insist upon some demonstrably false doctrine of universal equality. For example, I myself lack the insight and vision of, say, the literary critic James Wood. Therefore I do not insist we are equal; we simply occupy different roles.

⁶² Genovese (1994), 2.

⁶³ Ted J. Smith III, “How *Ideas Have Consequences* Came to be Written,” in Ted J. Smith III (ed.), *Steps Toward Restoration: The Consequences of Richard Weaver’s Ideas* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1998), 17. Smith is quoting a letter Weaver wrote to his friend John Randolph.

⁶⁴ Murphy (2001), 168.

⁶⁵ Murphy (2001), 38.

⁶⁶ Allen Tate, *Collected Poems: 1919-1976* (New York: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1977), 20-23.

⁶⁷ Donald Davidson, *Poems: 1922-1961* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966), 117-125.

⁶⁸ Davidson came close to doing this by never dropping his support for segregation.

⁶⁹ *GWT*, 80, emphases in original.

⁷⁰ *IHC*, 52, emphasis added. I will add here, though, that perhaps romanticizing the past or some wayward ideal is not such a bad thing. We often attack arguments that we perceive as romanticizing this or that, but it might be worth bearing in mind that remembering the best parts of a thing, and subsequently minimizing the worst parts of that thing, can help guide us toward a better life today. As Weaver said of the antebellum South, the key is not to replicate it but to recover the best parts of it to suggest how we might live.

⁷¹ Charles M. Kauffman, “The Platonic Tradition and the Theory of Rhetoric,” (unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1980), 176, 172.

⁷² *VO*, 40, emphasis in original.

⁷³ Kauffman (1980), 174, emphasis added.

⁷⁴ *IHC*, 158.

⁷⁵ *IHC*, 158.

⁷⁶ *IHC*, 42.

⁷⁷ *VO*, 48.

⁷⁸ *VO*, 52.

⁷⁹ *IHC*, 105.

⁸⁰ Brennan R. Nierman, “The Rhetoric of History and Definition: The Political Thought of Richard M. Weaver,” unpublished Ph.D. diss. (Georgetown University, 1993), 75, 79, emphasis in original.

⁸¹ *SE*, 142.

⁸² *SE*, 142.

⁸³ *SE*, 23-24.

⁸⁴ *SE*, 25.

⁸⁵ *LWP*, 116, emphasis added.

⁸⁶ *LWP*, 119.

⁸⁷ *LS*, 206.

⁸⁸ *STB*, 13.

⁸⁹ Nierman (1993), 357-358.

⁹⁰ *ER*, 220-221.

⁹¹ G. Thomas Goodnight, "Rhetoric and Culture: A Critical Edition of Richard M. Weaver's Unpublished Works," unpublished Ph.D. diss. (University of Kansas, 1978), 32.

⁹² *VO*, 63, 17.

⁹³ *LS*, 151; Bernard K. Duffy and Martin Jacobi, "The Politics of Rhetoric: Richard M. Weaver and the Conservative Tradition," (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 160,

⁹⁴ *ER*, 195.

⁹⁵ Duffy and Jacobi (1993), 147.

⁹⁶ Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962). See especially Chapter 7, "Assimilation of the Machine." Mumford, by nice historical alignment, had agrarian leanings of a sort. He advocated the same kind of decentralization championed by the Agrarians, but he thought it was more of a philosophical effort than an agricultural one, and believed the city was just as good a spot as the country for such modes of living. See for example his letter in *Free America*, vol. III, no. 10 (October 1939), p. 16.

⁹⁷ Goodnight (1978), 44, emphasis added.

⁹⁸ Goodnight (1978), 61.

⁹⁹ *VO*, 34.

¹⁰⁰ *VO*, 34.

¹⁰¹ *IHC*, 57.

¹⁰² Weaver, "The Pattern of a Life," in Goodnight (1978), 482.

¹⁰³ "The Pattern of a Life," 481.

¹⁰⁴ *IHC*, 24.

¹⁰⁵ *IHC*, 18.

¹⁰⁶ *IHC*, 18.

¹⁰⁷ *IHC*, 19.

¹⁰⁸ *IHC*, 19.

¹⁰⁹ "Making the Most of Two Worlds," in Goodnight (1978), 514.

Chapter 3: Rhetoric, Culture, and Place

We are provincials. We have our name on the land.
-- Richard Weaver

Each blade of grass has its spot on earth whence it draws its life, its strength; and so is man rooted to the land from which he draws his faith together with his life.
-- Joseph Conrad

A fairly significant amount of scholarship in rhetorical studies in the last decade has focused on rhetoric of *place*: how spaces, areas, and regions constitute and enact symbols. A special 2012 issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, for example, focused on “regional rhetorics”: the “rhetorical processes by which particular spaces accrue particular meanings,” as Dave Tell put it in an article in that issue.¹ But less attention has been paid to how a place immanently *creates* meaning—how and why rhetoric as a cohesive cultural force *must* emerge from a specific place and is often *limited* to that specific place’s culture. This was the opinion of Weaver, who thought rhetoric, as a form of knowledge that draws upon the past and on community of mind, must be connected to a specific culture in a specific place. His status as a Southerner, his insistence on the importance of memory, and, most importantly, his Southern Agrarian training all provided the foundation for his belief that the agrarian concept of *place*—that sense of belonging and coherence in a specific location—must precede spacious rhetoric.

This view insists that place must precede symbol: that meanings and symbols do not accrue, as Tell put it, but rather that place is always already invested with symbols that subsequently bind citizens to that place. Further, place *qua* place shapes and reflects the community of mind that arises there. Personal and cultural memory is inextricably bound up with place, and the place is likewise inseparable from symbolic structures. For Weaver, place offers permanence and cultural coherence, and eventually becomes indistinguishable from philosophy.

This was a common attitude among the Agrarians, and indeed perhaps throughout the South more than in any other part of the country. The Agrarians were regionalists, believing that a true community could only develop where people felt a sense of permanence. Weaver took the next step by arguing that spacious rhetoric, which must draw upon collective memory in order to move people toward noble goals, can only truly exist where physical permanence underlies and maintains metaphysical permanence. T.S. Eliot, who was extraordinarily influential to the Agrarians, wrote that “It is important that a man should feel himself to be, not merely a citizen of a particular nation, but a citizen of a particular part of his country, with local loyalties.”²

To the Agrarians, a person was not truly *of* a place unless she could see and live the traditions, customs, and habits enacted on a daily basis.³ There must be a physical presence for belonging; allegiance to abstract propositions is not enough. Donald Davidson believed that thanks to the country’s legendary mobility and Westward expansion, most Americans lived only as citizens of an “Americanized nowhere,” and that particular social memory of a place was reliant upon a “folk-chain” that tells people “*who we are, where we are, where we belong, what we live by, what we live for.*”⁴ Asking people to merely support vague ideas of “liberty” or “equality” was useless; a person must have some deep sense of belonging that can only come with long exposure in a place full of people with similar tenure.

One motivation for this chapter is to join other scholars in reclaiming *placed* rhetoric as a key concept in the discipline, and what it means for a culture and for a people when a kind of symbol emerges from a specific place. If we take Weaver seriously and understand spacious rhetoric as a kind of metaphysically shared symbol-creation, then we must also take seriously his ideas on what might help create the conditions for that creation and where the metaphysical boundaries lie. Weaver believed that such boundaries matter deeply, both for preservation of

culture and for the conditions that allow creation of spacious symbols and ideas. My goal in this chapter is to elucidate exactly what Weaver thought about place, and how we might use that to renew a focus on place in rhetorical studies.

Weaver would no doubt have been intrigued by the work of philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, who has written extensively on identity and culture. For Appiah, collective identities (e.g., “black” or “female”) “provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their projects and in telling their life stories.”⁵ Appiah’s stance is a refreshing one, since he acknowledges that agency is not a force of limitless power—as the American gospel of self-creation and our long-treasured bootstrap myth would have it—but is shaped and limited by social forces. Appiah also dislikes the idea of “global citizens” who are without allegiance to a particular place. And perhaps his notion of “scripts” can be reconciled with Weaver’s notion of “spacious” ideas that bind us together in some kind of shared pursuit.

But where Appiah and Weaver would diverge is in the notion of Appiah’s “rooted cosmopolitanism”: the idea that we should stay connected to our roots but aspire toward a greater global order of philosophical liberalism. Weaver would say the opposite: that truly spacious ideas can only emerge when we retrench, dig down, and go deeper. Only by getting closer and closer to the sources and consequences of our own place, he believed, do we truly understand the shared symbols of a culture. Weaver saw great value in geographic and cultural *distinction*: by preserving what makes a culture distinct and cohesive, a place serves a crucial function. Better to flourish in a narrow and cohesive script, Weaver might reply to Appiah, than to lose yourself in a perpetually expanding one. And such a narrow script can only thrive when a sense of place is maintained.

Place is an essential component of culture, according to the Agrarians, and Weaver wrote that rhetoric can only emerge from and function in a particular culture. This chapter, therefore, will focus on the guiding concept of *place*: how a physical setting helps form culture, and how rhetoric must draw from and contribute to the spirit of that place-based culture. This chapter more than any other will focus on the American South, since it was the formative home of the Agrarians and of Weaver, and since Weaver used the South as his example in nearly every argument. Scholars have not paid much attention to Weaver's discussions of the South, but its status as a region and as a collective memory must play a role in any examination of his ideas. Weaver's rhetorical theories emerge directly from his Southern cultural experience; his rhetorical ideas are inseparable from his ideas of Southern history and culture. In this chapter I shall begin by examining how the South was treated by the Agrarians and subsequently by Weaver, and how Weaver's ideas expanded on the Agrarian notion of the South. I shall then show how the agrarian idea of *place*, particularly the South, played a key role in Weaver's rhetorical theories.

The Concept of Place in Agrarianism

It is surely not surprising that a belief system devoted to the land would place great ontological emphasis on place and its relation to the human community that can flourish in a particular place. The contemporary writer Wendell Berry, whom I will quote extensively here because he has taken up the Agrarian mantle of *place*, argues that "If the word *community* is to mean or amount to anything, it must refer to a place (in its natural integrity) and its people. It must refer to a placed people... 'community' must mean a people locally placed and a people, moreover, not too numerous to have a common knowledge of themselves and of their place."⁶

In such a place and such a community, a distinctive culture arises: one whose store of collective knowledge can be created and maintained by its members. Echoing chapter two's

topic, scholars believe that the “placed people” concept reflects a faith in culture versus a faith in tools. In other words, when a community is geographically coherent, it is to some extent isolated from cultures that exist beyond its borders. This means a particular face-to-face community, rooted in its place, is not merely at the whims of experts and their tools. Only after “we have good culture in place,” to use one scholar’s phrase, can a community draw on its store of knowledge to maintain itself.⁷

This agrarian framework argues that a land and its people are irrevocably connected, and that a culture can only flourish when there is a *tangible* connection. In other words, we must interact with the elements of the place as frequently as possible, know and feel its past through our culture, and imagine its future with us as stewards. According to Berry, “To have a place, to live and belong in a place, to live from a place without destroying it, we must imagine it. By imagination we see it illuminated by its own unique character and by our love for it. By imagination we recognize with sympathy the fellow members, human and nonhuman, with whom we share our place.”⁸ A true *community*, then, in the old-fashioned sense of the word, can only succeed when people work and plan together, gain sympathy for each other, and recognize their common mission. If these elements sound familiar, it is because they align with Weaver’s requirements for spacious rhetoric and the “community of mind” that enables movement as a group toward noble goals. If rhetoric can only thrive in a cohesive culture sharing the same values, and that culture can only thrive with geographic limitations and devotion to a place-based enterprise, then successful and noble rhetoric is dependent upon place. For Weaver, the fate of the people is dependent upon the place’s community of mind and the power of the word; in agrarianism, “there is in fact no distinction between the fate of the land and the fate of the people,” as Berry put it.⁹

The idea of land and place is also deeply intertwined with the Agrarian skepticism of and opposition to ideas of progress. Whereas the industrial doctrines of progress compel us to envision ever upward, to always dream of more and bigger and better, the smaller scale of the place-based view can “force us to remember things, cause us to hope for second chances, and provide an incentive to keep the scale small,” as Bill Vitek and Wes Jackson put it.¹⁰ This is because “placed people” are inevitably bound up in the history of their place; one cannot simply remove the past when the storehouse of cultural memory envelops all. Recall the Agrarians’ complaint that Reconstruction attempted to simply erase the memories of the Old South—it was misguided and unsuccessful, because the past lives in the memories of the very distinctive Southern culture.

The doctrine of progress prizes “mobility,” which puts into verb form the idea of forgetting the past and pushing ever forward through barriers and across frontiers. But the Agrarians thought that “mobility” also severs us from our ontological sources, reshaping us as cogs in an economic machine that only knows how to expand insatiably. We are told that progress and mobility have given us improved quality of life and a sophisticated cosmopolitanism based on global culture, but we actually have, according to Berry, “an ever-worsening unsettlement of our people, and the extinction or near-extinction of traditional and necessary communal structures.”¹¹ When the next generation can no longer reach back to the past for any knowledge due to communal failure, or when its only knowledge of the world comes from homogenized consumer culture, the community of mind is harmed—perhaps extinguished. This, according to Weaver, will always prevent rhetoric from succeeding. If there is no common past there can be no common goals, and there is no common past if there are no longer any

common people. This echoes Davidson's assertion that social harmony must emerge from strong foundations, and cannot be "poured in from the top."¹²

The Southern Agrarians and the Place of the South

Donald Davidson wrote that "The good life is not to be found at too great a distance from the land, or apart from the intimate fellowship of kinfolks and friends, the mutual graciousness of family life, the solace of a steadfast religious faith, and above all, the sense of belonging somewhere in a world which at best is changeable and insecure."¹³ This is a perfect encapsulation of how the Agrarians viewed the South and the importance of place. For that group, a place was more than just an accumulation of resources in the manner viewed by modern industrialism. A place is imbued with a spirit that arises from the people it contains and the ways those people interact with it. A place creates culture just as surely as people do.

The belief that place has metaphysical value emerges from a dedicated opposition to attachment based on abstraction—that, according to the intellectual historian Wilfred McClay, "human beings have a profound need for 'thereness,' for visible and tangible things that persist and endure, and thereby serve to anchor our memories in something more substantial than our thoughts and emotions."¹⁴ For the Agrarians, there was no better place of "thereness" than the South, and particularly the idea of the Old South. Tate believed that the idea of place in the South created its distinctive mode of imagination, because the myth of the place itself had such power.¹⁵ The Agrarians did not see this idea as merely romantic or nostalgic, however (though there is no denying the occasional moonlight-and-magnolia gloss in their depictions); for them, the idea of the place itself embodied attachment to a common governing idea and the balance between individual freedom and social hierarchy.¹⁶

When Southerners saw their way of life—rooted in honor, chivalry, and tradition, according to Weaver—enacted all around them on a daily basis, it fostered the sense that such codes can only exist in such a place. This echoes Edmund Burke’s argument that “public affections” can only arise through daily repetition, and that a place must thus feature “daily small acts of loyalty and reciprocity, in order to prepare us to love well and moderately something too large to experience directly,” as another historian put it.¹⁷ The Agrarians believed these small acts were the currency of social life in the South, where customs and manners (whose disappearance, we might recall, was lamented by Ransom in *ITMS*) helped preserve tradition. This in turn helped create rooted Southern citizens, since, according to Simone Weil, a person has roots “by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future.”¹⁸ By participating in the small customs and habits of the South, even in a geographically limited social world, the Southerner was participating in the life of the South.

The Agrarians and Weaver saw the South as heir to the European legacy of civilized life. Indeed, Davidson wrote “The cause of the South was and is the cause of Western civilization,” while Weaver called the Old South the “*last non-materialist civilization in the Western World.*”¹⁹ These men believed that the South was the true heir to the aristocracies of Old Europe, and that it was the North, with its slavish devotion to materialism and industrialism, that represented the historical aberration.²⁰ The rootless cosmopolitanism of the North particularly irked the Agrarians, for they did not see cosmopolitanism as suited to actual human scale or capable of inculcating long-term commitments to others around you.

But was the Agrarian idea of the South as a land of customs and traditions a real entity, or merely an elaborate metaphor? Scholars have disagreed on this question. There is no disputing

the Southern Agrarian literary achievement of making the South “a symbolic marker of both traditional society and Western civilization,” or that they persuaded other Southerners to see the South as a “conservative cultural center,” as a historian phrased it.²¹ But an obvious problem arises: elsewhere, such as Ransom’s essay “Happy Farmers” or Troy Cauley’s *Agrarianism: A Program for Farmers*—or, for that matter, in several of the *ITMS* essays—the Agrarians go to great lengths to make agrarianism an economic program with specific agricultural tenets. Could they have it both ways—an economic program that was rooted in a place *and* an idealized metaphor, like Jefferson’s yeoman farmer, rooted less in place than in concept?

Answers varied among the Agrarians and their intellectual heirs. For Tate, the South was the bastion of Christian humanism; for Davidson, it was the sole remaining repository of the good life; for Ransom, it was the place where myth still reigned; for Warren, it was the “potential source of spiritual revitalization”; for Weaver, it was less “a concrete way of life” and more “a set of values.”²² The unifying element in each view is still *the South as a particular place*. Rhetorical critics of all people should recognize and appreciate the power of a symbol—or, perhaps, of the South as a Burkean representative anecdote. If a symbol has the power to compel certain behavior and instill certain beliefs, then its origin in pure fact or pure myth is secondary. The Agrarian Stark Young believed the aristocratic ideal of the South was “superficial in some ways... but it was founded on a profound sense of self and deep social commitments.”²³ It doesn’t matter, in other words, whether the perceived aristocratic ideal was total malarkey—it only matters that it was a powerful symbol that shaped Southern behavior. And there is no disputing just how powerful a symbol the *place* of the South came to be: when General Lee said he could not draw his sword against his beloved Virginia, he was making an astonishing statement of devotion to place.

For Lee as for the Agrarians and Weaver, what the place represented was more important than what the place was, because a community of mind (and thus successful rhetoric) could only thrive in a place that had “association on some non-material level and common attachment to some non-material ends.”²⁴ Virginia represented that for Lee; the Union did not. The Agrarians were provincials in the way Weaver defined it: “Provincialism is one of the chief supports of character. To be of a place, to reflect it in your speech and action and general bearing, to offer it as a kind of warranty that you will remain true to yourself—this is what it means to have character and personality.”²⁵ Even if his choice was misguided, Lee remained true to himself as a Virginian because of his provincialism; the Agrarians remained true to themselves as conscientious objectors to modern life because of theirs.

I dwell on this point because I believe the historians’ debates are beside the point. It matters not if the Agrarian idea of the South was imperfect. What matters is that there *exists* an idea of the South that embodies certain ideals *because* it is of a place, just as there is an idea of the Midwest that embodies hard work and stoicism, of the West as the land of freedom and wildness, and of the Northeast as puritanical and harried. There have been ideas of regions since virtually the founding of the republic, and those ideas matter because they function as symbols acted upon by real people in real places. Regional boundaries are famously nebulous, but there is no denying people feel them and act on them: thus “Southern hospitality” and “Midwestern kindness” emerge as part of regional cultures. The ideas of the South help form Southern culture, and that culture can only exist in the place itself. These writers believed that without exposure to tradition and the small acts of Southern-ness that make up a particular culture, a community of mind cannot form. Common culture needs a rooted place, and noble rhetoric needs common culture.

The Agrarians, like Weaver after them, were social and cultural critics—both in form and in attitude. This means it is sometimes easier to see the ideas they deemed praiseworthy by examining what they criticize most fiercely. The reason they yearned for and perhaps romanticized an antebellum vision of the South was because they believed the Civil War represented an imperial aggression by the North, whose values were and are anathema to the agrarian, contemplative life. This is why the central mission of his poetry, according to Davidson, should be to defend “spiritual values against the fiery gnawing of industrialism.”²⁶

The “Statement of Principles” in *ITMS*, which was written by Ransom and approved by the group, gets to the very heart of the Agrarians’ complaints about the North and its imperial vision of a homogenized industrial culture. The culture of the North, Ransom writes, expects “the evils to disappear when we have bigger and better machines, and more of them.”²⁷ But “this is to assume that labor is an evil, that only the end of labor or the material product is good,” and “on this assumption labor becomes mercenary and servile, and it is no wonder if many forms of modern labor are accepted without resentment though they are evidently brutalizing. The act of labor as one of the happy functions of human life has been in effect abandoned, and is practiced solely for its rewards.”²⁸

The North, in other words, had chosen exchange value over use value by embracing only a good produced, and now that idea was infecting the South—which had always, thanks to its agrarian roots, seen the *process* of labor as equally rewarding as the *output*. The modern society of the North, according to Ransom, had “called upon its members to become always more professional, more abstract, in their functions,” and now “they have persuaded the farmers too.”²⁹ The danger is that with greater abstraction in labor comes greater abstraction from place. When we are attached to work in a specific place, and especially specific property, it allows,

according to the Agrarian Herbert Agar, “for enterprise, for family responsibility, and in general for institutions that fit man’s nature and that give a chance for a desirable life.”³⁰ This idea would resurface in Weaver’s contention, discussed below, that property was the last metaphysical right of humans.

Elsewhere, Ransom wrote—in a sentiment later directly repeated by Weaver in *IHC*—that attachment to a place helps create piety. This “piety is directed first towards the physical region, the nature who has always given [the community] sustenance... It is also directed towards the historic community which has dwelt in this region all these generations and developed these patterns.”³¹ But the industrial North corrupted this idea by instead insisting on attachment to abstract ideas like profit and progress—notably, ideas that have no outer boundaries and place no limits on human behavior. After the War, Reconstruction forced these latter ideas on the South and divorced the Southerner’s devotion to a specific place that created a specific attitude toward work and civic life. Being rooted in place, said the Agrarians, forged a metaphysical connection between self and environment. The farmer and conservationist Aldo Leopold wrote in 1939 that “The landscape of any farm is the owner’s portrait of himself.”³² The Southerner looked at the fields and saw that the place supported his community, and he in turn became supportive of that place. The Northerner looked at the frenzied cities that supported profit and progress, and in turn became dedicated to those abstract propositions. The Agrarians’ arguments generalize and reduce, no question about it—but they also reveal the fierce devotion to the place they loved that animated their writing and social criticism, and how forcefully they loathed what they saw as corruption of that place by the imperial forces of the North.

History may have written the history of the War as emancipators versus slave owners, but this is not how the Agrarians—or indeed much of the South—saw the matter. For them,

according to one historian, the War “reflected primarily a competition between two economic systems and ideals—on the one hand an independent yeomanry of farmers and small shopkeepers, on the other a commercial, financial, large manufacturing oligarchy which already dominated the Northeast.”³³ The key element in this broad if simplistic rendering (clearly and shamefully overlooked is the role of slavery, both social and economic) is that the world of the South is depicted as people who are by necessity rooted to place. Farming is rooted and tangible, not abstract; small shopkeepers are limited in commerce to their communities (at least at the time). But in the Agrarian view the cultural forces of the North were rootless and unattached to either place or history: they paid no heed to the history or tradition that come with devotion to place. What the Agrarians lamented and the South feared was the loss of their *place*, which helped dictate their way of life.

Davidson, whose attachment to the place and culture of the old South was most in line with Weaver’s eventual views, led the Agrarians in resurrecting antebellum theories of regions—that “the United States was not really a nation, but a congeries of very distinct regions, each with a holistic and, short of outside intervention, a healthy culture”; distinct regions were “threatened by an imposed, uniform national culture. Large, centralized firms had tried to push such a culture upon the vulnerable, exploited, outlying regions” like the South.³⁴ Since Weaver’s rhetorical “community of mind” arises from particular cultures in particular places, homogenized culture forced on a placed people from the outside corrupts both community spirit and the ends of a people. For the Agrarians, what started with Reconstruction culminated in the New Deal and its economic experts reshaping Southern people who were not given the chance to dictate the future of their own places and thus of their own communities.³⁵ The solution was not cultural homogenization but instead a return “not only toward more subsistence farming, but to stronger,

less dependent, more regional marketing systems, to the type of rural economy that prevailed in the late nineteenth century” as the scholar of the Agrarians Louis Rubin put it.³⁶ A return, in other words, to regionalism: attachment to the people and products of a particular place.

This is, perhaps, a large amount of space to devote to the Agrarians’ views of the South as a place. But I dwell on this for two reasons. First, one of my goals in this project is to examine how Weaver’s ideas are direct descendants of, and in fact personified, the Southern Agrarians’ ideas. The connection will become clear in the following section. Second, Weaver repeatedly contended that rhetoric as an art, a discipline, and the “most humanistic of the humanities” could only thrive when based upon a cohesive ontological foundation—the “community of mind” and “metaphysical dream” to which he returned again and again. If we are to appreciate Weaver as a scholar then we must have a firm understanding of those notions’ origins—and their origins lie directly in the formative writings of the Southern Agrarians. We cannot have rhetoric without community, Weaver believed, and we cannot have community without place.

It is place, for the Agrarians, that forms individuals who are free to take up their social obligations, rather than the individuals “torn loose from family, community, and civic responsibility—an individualism that has metamorphosed into egocentrism, personal irresponsibility, and a loss of civic discipline,” as one historian of the South put it.³⁷ It is no surprise that Weaver based his theories upon the idea of community since that “was the a priori ideal” of the Agrarians, according to the neo-Agrarian M.E. Bradford: a world of “families, pre- or non-capitalist *because* familial, located, pious, and ‘brotherly’; agrarian in order not to produce the alienated, atomistic individual.”³⁸ Place creates communities, and thus provides fertile ground for production of noble rhetoric for noble ends. Ransom, in his *ITMS* essay, provides the classic statement of why place is so essential in the Agrarian framework:

“[The farmer] identifies himself with a spot of ground, and this ground carries a good deal of meaning; it defines itself for him as nature. He would till it not too hurriedly and not too mechanically to observe in it the contingency and the infinitude of nature; and so his life acquires its philosophical and even its cosmic consciousness. A man can contemplate and explore, respect and love, an object as substantial as a farm or a native province. But he cannot contemplate nor explore, respect nor love, a mere turnover, such as an assemblage of ‘natural resources,’ a pile of money, a volume of produce, a market, or a credit system. It is into precisely these intangibles that industrialism would translate the farmer’s farm. It means the dehumanization of his life.”³⁹

This is the attitude that so influenced Weaver’s rhetorical theories. Now that I have established how forcefully his Agrarian mentors embraced the idea of place, I turn to how Weaver himself explored the concept.

The South in the Thought and Rhetoric of Weaver

“The South is the region that history happened to,” wrote Weaver, and I begin with his thoughts on the South because no region—and no regional idea of place—is more integral to understanding his rhetorical theories.⁴⁰ Weaver grew up in the South, was educated in the South, and returned to the South every chance he got even while living, if not in the Northeast, at least above the Mason-Dixon line in Chicago.

“The government of the United States was founded on abstract propositions,” Weaver bluntly declared in *STB*, whereas the South was based upon “something I shall insist is higher—an ethical claim which can be described only in terms of the mandate of civilization.”⁴¹ The South, in other words, was an early example of Weaver’s argument from definition. Whether this argument’s “nature of the thing” is “already recognized convention, or whether it is defined at the moment by the orator, or whether it is left to be inferred from the aggregate of its specificities, the argument has a single postulate”: “that there exist classes which are determinate and therefore predicable.”⁴² Weaver argued in *STB* that the South was based on such classes (which we must acknowledge are frustratingly broad generalizations): chivalry, the older

religiousness, the code of the gentleman, and the feudal theory of society. Without these classes, he thought, a culture cannot arise—just as a coherent and noble argument can arise only from definition. And, crucially, these classes are specific to the place of the South. Indeed, Weaver wrote that the North’s denial of the existence of such defined order “shocked Southern political thinkers.”⁴³

The community of mind emerges from a coherent culture that shares the same ontological and metaphysical foundations. The Southern plantation, wrote Weaver with a disturbingly selective memory, was a “little cosmos” in this regard, “in which things were arranged by a well understood principle giving coherence to the whole.”⁴⁴ This means a plantation owner or local leader could speak with the conviction that his audience shared his basic assumptions about their social world. He could do this because the beliefs were specific to a place—they were connected to a piece of land as surely as his name was. He and his audience could share a community of mind because they exemplified Southern provincialism, which according to Stark Young in *ITMS* is “a fine trait. It is akin to a man’s interest in his own center, which is the most deeply rooted consideration that he has, the source of his direction, health, and soul.”⁴⁵

Weaver argued that the little cosmos existed on that plantation because the Southerner had a “desire for a lasting identification of the family name with a piece of land. He had a profound conviction that *a family is not established until it belongs to a place*, that a local habitation and a name go together.”⁴⁶ Since the family unit could also be considered a little cosmos—structured as it is on hierarchy, order, and a shared culture—this reveals how integral place is to rhetoric in Weaver’s formulation. Recall that Weaver saw rhetoric as the vehicle of order, and believed that a foundational culture was required prior to any successful rhetoric. If

one of the best ways to achieve a foundational culture in a little cosmos is to attach it to a place over successive generations, then surely place becomes a key ingredient in the realm of rhetoric.

When Weaver praised *ITMS*, he did so because he believed it captured the spirit of the *place* of the South—meaning that it embodied the characteristics that comprised the Southern community of mind. The Agrarians, he wrote, stood for “a way of life that exalts leisure and contemplation over money-making and success; for a culture of manners and distinction. Everything that materialism and philistinism appeared to have routed from the scene is [in *ITMS*] reaffirmed in a reasoned case, and without a trace of that mawkish apology which often attends the presenting of an unpopular view.”⁴⁷ Weaver appreciated that the Agrarians were unwilling to apologize for the place that made the Southern community of mind possible, and this subsequently informed his view that realists need not apologize for their opposition to the doctrine of nominalism—provided the realist tenets informed a particular community’s metaphysical dream.

The goal of the South and the goal of rhetoric were, for Weaver, one in the same: the quest was for wholeness, for a view that did not create discrete elements but instead formed a cohesive unit. He wrote that the South was “a world of place and time, but it is also a world which includes the mystery of the timeless. It is a place in which the transcendental is apprehended in the actual, and the actual is never without some link to the transcendental. The real and the ideal, the act and the idea, man as he is and man as he ought to be, nature and super-nature are presented in their inextricable involvement.”⁴⁸ While the phrases themselves may strike us as a flight of literary fancy, these lines contain the core of Weaver’s rhetorical theories. We can read “the real” and “the actual” as dialectic—trafficking in facts and logic, charged with presenting the world-as-it-is. “The ideal” and “the transcendental,” meanwhile, make up rhetoric:

the world-as-it-could-be that connects us to history and tradition and links us to those who share our cultural assumptions and foundations. Perhaps the South, then, appeals to Weaver as a civilization because in it he sees the requirements of his “power of the word”; the South, to him, is proof that his vision of a rhetoric-dialectic alignment is the best chance we have for moving a culture toward noble goals.

As I suggested above, it is here that Weaver breaks most forcefully with Platonism. Though he is a dedicated Platonist in philosophy—believing that real forms underlie ideas, and that those forms are unvarying and transcendental—he does not agree with Plato’s dismissal of rhetoric as a set of tools for manipulation. Rhetoric for Weaver is not a set of tools: it is a way of seeing and a way of moving other people, and must be used and considered in light of history, tradition, and the customs of a particular community.⁴⁹

The ideas of the Old South are ideas we can recover for our own time, Weaver believed. Indeed, this was the stated purpose of his doctoral dissertation: “There cannot be a return to the Middle Ages or the Old South under slogans identified with them. The principles must be studied and used, but in such presentation that mankind will feel the march is forward... The Old South may indeed be a hall hung with splendid tapestries in which no one would care to live; but from them we can learn something of how to live.”⁵⁰ We can learn something about the place-culture of the South because the Old South, for Weaver, was a “regime”: a “complex of law, custom, and idiomatic social behavior [which] fills all the interstices of life... a system of sustaining forms, and everyone who has been in contact with a regime recognizes its capacity to give every man, the high and the low, some sense of *being at home*.”⁵¹ The Old South was a *place* in the sense that it offered its inhabitants a complete ontological system and a sense of belonging to a common mission: two necessary ingredients for successful and spacious rhetoric. “The very fact

that we speak of ‘place,’” wrote Weaver, “means that we envision a social whole, in reference to which there are locations and directions.”⁵²

The example Weaver uses is the household: “The principle of the ordering may be more intuited than reasoned out. Yet this sense of inclusive ordering makes the individual feel that his presence is acknowledged in more than a perfunctory way. A regime is thus a powerful check against *the sense of lostness, the restlessness, and the aimless competition* which plague the modern masses and provoke the fantastic social eruptions of our era.”⁵³ Place, therefore, is not just a certain region that can help foster a community of mind. It is in fact an ontological touchstone and philosophical bulwark against all the modern forces that would tear us loose from our foundations. Recall that Weaver labeled agrarianism a “complete regime”: he meant that connection to the land forms a *place* that serves as a metaphysical center, one that fills “all the interstices of life” and guarantees a corrective to the rootlessness of non-placed events. It is both land and the feeling created on that land. It is, to borrow a famous line from Robert Frost, the place that has to take you in.

And, by extension, it is the place that must keep some out—and this is part of the exclusionary nature of Agrarian theory that irks some rhetorical critics. Weaver argued that a regime must also function on “a principle of exclusion. It is a way of rejecting what is inimical or foreign to the group’s nature and of retaining what can be assimilated. Social and cultural groups, like organisms, must be able to fend off what they cannot accept without ceasing to live. To say that this is a law of life is almost superficial; it is rather a law of existence. Intolerance of what would be fatal is a necessity for survival.”⁵⁴ In our age of tolerance for seemingly all things save slights against democracy, this position can seem very odd—if not even a tad fascistic. After all, doesn’t this attitude squash dissent and compel conformity?

Perhaps. But it is hard to believe those are Weaver's true intentions. Recall the "older religiousness" of the South that Weaver and the Agrarians examined in their writings. One of the tenets of this quasi-faith for Weaver was that "a certain portion of life must remain inscrutable, and that religion offers the only means of meeting it, since reason cannot here be a standard of interpretation."⁵⁵ If, then, a citizen of the Old South were to suddenly announce to her community that she was now convinced of the explanatory power of science and would subsequently reject any idea requiring mere faith, surely her fellow citizens would consider her no longer part of its community of mind. The point is not to ostracize or exile someone—Weaver's claim is that that person can no longer share the same spacious rhetoric, because she no longer subscribes to the same metaphysical foundation.

Consider the current case of same-sex marriage and mainline Protestant religions. The Methodist Church is facing a near-schism as of this writing because some of its parishes have sanctioned such unions. The Methodist hierarchy is now asking: are those parishes still Methodist? Can they coexist with parishes that reject these unions? Can they all share the same symbolic structure if they do not agree on the foundations? This is what Weaver was after: not a pretext for ejecting nonbelievers, but a claim that a true metaphysical foundation can only be shared by people who truly believe in aligned dogma. Rhetoric cannot move us toward noble goals if our community of mind is torn on what those goals are.

The Methodist Church is not a *place*, of course, but I mention this example because, in a fragmented world in which most people do not live in small towns, sites of faith are often the closest many will come to a metaphysical community of mind. Such institutions' understandings of dogma and uniformity, then, are of clear interest to scholars. It's also notable that the split in the Methodist Church often breaks down along geographic lines: the churches of the northeast

have been faster to embrace evolving social norms than their regional Protestant counterparts. Perhaps even an otherwise unified religious dogma can be harmed by regional differences and the power of place.

We should consider dissent from the community of mind not as an immediate cause for dismissal but as something closer to a process of mediation. Social norms change; cultural attitudes evolve; previously unacceptable ideas sometimes become palatable. If the history of democracy is in part the history of mediating the lines between individual rights and collective sacrifice, then in a similar way the history of culture is in part the history of negotiating mutually agreed upon social goods. Ideally, a well-argued dissent from the community of mind does not result in expulsion. Instead, it is a process for determining whether something shall remain prized by the group or whether the dissenter's point shall spark a change.

The ideal regime for Weaver was the South, and it is to his treatment of the South that rhetorical critics should look if they wish to understand his vision of a world steeped in rhetoric. His "Southern way of life" was a distinct attitude and set of assumptions *because* it was localized in a region; it was nonsense, to Weaver, to speak of an "American way of life"—the nation was too diverse, too abstract, and insufficiently committed to the same ideas. But the South "has a society more unified by imponderables, more conscious of self-definition, more homogeneous in outlook than any other region," as he argued in *IDOT*, thanks to its tripartite philosophy of societal structure, devotion to transcendence, and preservation of history.⁵⁶ In contrast to the utilitarian North, where scientific reasoning reigned and each day made anew, the South was to Weaver "a cohesive social ordering... an independent, self-directing social order, with a set of values proper to itself."⁵⁷

Place, Rhetoric, and the Good Life

For Weaver, a community of mind must be localized in a geographic location to facilitate ease of contact between members; the geographic location itself, however, is not enough to comprise a “place.” When Davidson spoke of regionalism and sectionalism, he did not mean that everyone in, say, the Upper Midwest shared the philosophical foundation required to form a community of mind and a distinct people in a distinct place. Rather, he and Weaver knew that “people existing together in one geographical spot do not necessarily comprise a community.”⁵⁸

Weaver lived for many years in the thick of what he called “the Megalopolis,” a few blocks from the campus of the University of Chicago, but for him such urban density precluded any possibility of a true community of mind from forming. For that, we need the open spaces and contemplative living of the rural life. “The spoiling of man always seems to begin when urban living predominates over rural,” he wrote in *IHC*. “After man has left the countryside to shut himself up in vast piles of stone... he becomes forgetful of the overriding mystery of creation.”⁵⁹ Because life in the city allows us to be abstracted from sources and consequences—not just of food, as agrarianism would emphasize, but also in social relations and history—it makes our lives too easy and prevents us from grappling with the inscrutable forces of nature.

The connection to rhetoric stems from Weaver’s devotion to place. Since rhetoric deals with the world-as-it-could-be, it is dependent on our exposure to and knowledge of the “inscrutable forces of nature” that the city-dweller is missing. If we are not faced with the “overriding mysteries of creation” and forced to grapple with our own mortality as revealed by the cyclical nature of nature, then we lose our capacity for envisioning things larger than ourselves—the realm of rhetoric, in other words. The city to Weaver represents dialectic, dealing in brute facts and the logic of progress. The rural life, in his conception, offers space for imagination.

Recall Davidson's claim that we become what we contemplate; for Weaver, when we contemplate the "vast piles of stone" in the city we start to reflect their fragmentation. The city-dweller has "abandon[ed] the concept of the fixed cycle," he wrote in *STB*, and thinks himself above and insulated from the forces larger than himself.⁶⁰ This is no doubt simplistic and overly neat analysis of social attitudes stemming from geography, but it is a key element in understanding Weaver's theory of rhetoric-in-place.

Weaver's mentor Ransom emphasized above all other things the generalized existence of the agrarian. His realm of expertise must occupy parts of many different issues; he cannot live a life solely devoted to specialization, and cannot dedicate himself solely to one pursuit. This argument influenced Weaver, who wrote that urban life leads to such fragmentation amid industrialism's cult of "specialization" in all things. "Specialization develops only part of a man; a man partially developed is deformed; and one deformed is the last person to be thought of as a ruler."⁶¹ The city-dweller loses contact with the varied pursuits of life and is regimented, both practically and philosophically, by the grids and corners and buildings of the city—he thus loses the capacity to think beyond immediate needs and to envision the world as it could be based on his community of mind. To explore rhetoric, for Weaver, is to require the space of rural life.

One can raise several objections here, not least among them the fact that rhetoric first flourished in the city-state of Athens. One could also point out that exploration and imagination have long been present and healthy in many of the world's great cities, from Amsterdam to Venice to New York—cities that are often composed of proud neighborhood regionalism. Surely those cities represent the capacity to imagine a world of noble ends. But I don't believe Weaver's critique is wholly without merit: urban life for many is often anonymous, lonely, and indeed highly fragmented, and anyone who has ever stood on a crowded sidewalk in a large city can

testify to that. Weaver might argue that there is no opportunity to put one's name on the land when the land is but a tiny slice of a vast concrete metropolis.

Where we can take heart in Weaver's argument, I think, is in neo-agrarian movements like urban farming and local food consumption. While not fully rural, such pursuits do indeed move us closer to sources and consequences of food, at least—which the Agrarians said should be the form for our other modes of life. Perhaps as city-dwellers embrace these movements, it will put even them in the rhythm of the “inscrutable forces” they are missing. Once we see that only the stunning reach of the applied tools of science allows us to get a fresh tomato in New York in January, we can begin to imagine the world as it might yet be: smaller in scale, closer together, moving in unison toward noble ends. We can start, in other words, with the noble end of consuming food closer to our *place*; from that, per the Agrarian claim of extrapolation, we might reshape our social relations to reflect that form of life.

Perhaps, then, it is not geography that matters so much for a rhetorical community of mind as much as attitude. Weaver looked around Chicago and did not see contemplation of the good life: he saw frenzied people driven by the profit motive above all else. It's difficult to envision—let alone act upon—noble ends when we live such fragmented lives. But if a different attitude can pervade the city and lead people to form a community of mind based on, say, the localism of neighborhood affiliation, then perhaps an ounce of rural contemplation and connection to the frailty of life can infiltrate the harried urban attitude. In that scenario, rhetoric could flourish as a full partner with dialectic.⁶²

One last factor relating to geography must be examined in any exploration of Weaver, agrarianism, and place. If a place must be in part defined by a geographic area, then why, the cynic might ask, did so many of the Agrarians—and Weaver, for that matter—leave their

beloved South? Many of the original twelve went to Northern universities; only a few, like Davidson and Andrew Nelson Lytle, truly committed to the rural, Southern, agrarian life. Weaver spent most of his career in Chicago, though he returned to the family plot near Weaverville, NC, each summer. Is it not the least bit hypocritical that a group that largely fled the South should lecture everyone else on committing to a place?

Weaver addresses this issue head-on in his essay “Agrarianism in Exile,” where he contends that since agrarianism is a way of living, trouble arises when we make it a solid doctrine with boundaries and dogma. Because the Agrarians attempted such a thing, their withdrawal to the North only “completed an alienation long in progress.”⁶³ He wrote in *SE* that as soon as the agrarian “anywhere adds, or allows to be added, the *ism*, he is preparing the way for his own exile... Every *ism* is an intellectual manufacture; it has, in all its sobriety, little relation to the people who till the soil for a living. These do not understand the language of such abstraction. Whatever it is they have, they arrive at by a different route.”⁶⁴

This is an interesting claim, and seems to raise a fairly serious objection to the claims of Ransom, Cauley, and others who argued that agrarianism could be both an economic program and a cohesive philosophy. Weaver embraced such views in other works, which makes his elegiac tone in this essay all the more strange. What’s happening here, I believe, is that Weaver is making an essentially Heideggerian argument: he is saying that since agrarianism is rooted in being-in-the-world and bound up in history, tradition, memory, myth, and place, it loses its power once it enters the realm of intellectual artifice. Jefferson’s yeoman farmer did not choose that path from many because it offered the best connection to an inscrutable nature; he *inherited* it in a place and a community. If we attempt to professionalize and intellectualize that, Weaver appears to be saying, then agrarianism as mode-of-living loses some of its power. “The Agrarian

intellectualized himself enough to make a case for agrarian living. In doing so, *he was ceasing to be native.*⁶⁵ It's almost as if they had tried to take practical, contextual knowledge and transform it into a rule-based system: by extending agrarianism beyond its quotidian confines, they had weakened their own power and become something different.⁶⁶

But this, paradoxically, did not weaken the power of the argument. As discussed above, the “flight of the Agrarians” was actually “a strategic withdrawal to positions where the contest can be better carried on”; after all, argued Weaver, “In the battle against anti-humanist forces one does not desert by changing his locale for the plain reason that the battle is worldwide.”⁶⁷ Trying to formulate a coherent philosophy may have cost the Agrarians their status as being-in-the-world agrarians, but it extended the contemplation of such issues and took the battle to the front lines of industrialism. Through it all, the Agrarians were attempting to defend their *place* against the incursions of modern life because only in such a place could rhetoric and memory flourish. The *place* of the South meant something to the Agrarians, even after they left it. Their goal was to defend the place-based structure that made the good life possible. Weaver wrote that they celebrated “a free and unmeasured sort of life, rich in social intercourse, with its attendant manners and irrepressible conversation; it revolves around little poles of distinction (none great enough to excite those lusting after abstract power); it recognizes the fireside, the old custom, the traditional pieties.”⁶⁸ However—and here is the crucial point I believe Weaver is making about exile—it is a life that is fundamentally rooted in experience: “The most important thing to say of it is that this kind of life must be appreciated in its physiognomic character or *not at all*. It is completely foreign to the statistical, bureaucratic, reformistic temperament which has come to dominate metropolitan America. The census taker can never get at this form of life.”⁶⁹

For Weaver, what really matters about the agrarian life of tradition, place, and practical knowledge cannot be captured in a book or a census. It can only be *felt* and *experienced* whole cloth; it cannot be reduced to rules or systems. Further, its capacity to inspire spacious rhetoric cannot be applied discretely in non-contextual settings. It requires wholeness, not fragmentation. The Agrarians, because they believed it should be the dominant form of life, attempted to capture it in a programmatic way—and this, Weaver says, cost some of them their sense of permanence in the place of the South. Explaining what makes a Mozart opera great is not the same as listening to it; knowing the full anatomy of the peregrine falcon does not substitute for seeing one in flight; following a program for farmers is not an exact path to the good life. For that we need a history, a tradition, and a place—and then noble ends will follow.

Property, Metaphysics, and Rhetoric

“That there is a world of ought, that the apparent does not exhaust the real—these are so essential to the very conception of improvement that it should be superfluous to mention them,” Weaver wrote.⁷⁰ This statement could be the nucleus of Weaver’s thought; small wonder, then, that he followed this with “Upon this rock of metaphysical right we shall build our house”—an unintentionally direct way of equating the normative world with the concept of place.⁷¹

Place, in the form of private property, offers for Weaver a firm encampment for “those made seasick by the truth-denying doctrines of the relativists,” for “When we survey the scene to find something which the rancorous leveling wind of utilitarianism has not brought down, we discover one institution, shaken somewhat, but still strong and perfectly clear in its implications. This is the right of private property, which is, in fact, *the last metaphysical right remaining to us.*”⁷² According to Weaver, all the other metaphysical rights—religion, vocation, roles of men and women—have been swept away by the forces of modernity, which with perpetually

increasing force transform us into purely economic and utilitarian creatures. But property offers us a chance to once again live as permanent beings steeped in history and memory.

Property is metaphysical “because it does not depend on any test of social usefulness,” writes Weaver: “Property rests upon the idea of the *hisness* of *his*... In the *hisness* of property we have dogma; there discussion ends.”⁷³ By equating a *place* with a *person*—and all the history, tradition, customs, and foundations that accompany a person—the concept of property provides a sense of permanence in a transient world. “The property which we defend as an anchorage *keeps its identity with the individual*... By some mystery of imprint and assimilation man becomes identified with his things, so that a forcible separation of the two seems like a breach of nature.”⁷⁴

This idea comes directly from the Southern Agrarians, and the fact that Weaver makes it the subject of an entire chapter in *IHC* demonstrates just how influenced he was by his teachers. Tate believed that property ownership was the fundamental concept of liberty, and that the two could not exist without each other: “The effective ownership of property entails personal responsibility for the action of a given portion of the means of production. A true property system will be composed of a large proportion of owners whose property is not to be expressed solely in terms of exchange-value, but retains, for the owner, the possibility of use-value.”⁷⁵ The Marxian terms reflect the idea that some parts of life, like labor in Marx’s scheme, contain value beyond what can be measured in economic terms. For Tate, property meant something more than the resources contained therein—it was the foundation of liberty and the source of agriculture, which is “the most stable basis of society because it is relatively less dependent upon the market than any other kind of production.”⁷⁶ This form of life then becomes the basis for those beyond it. Ransom echoed this sentiment when he wrote that “*The religion of a people is that*

background of metaphysical doctrine which dictates its political economy.”⁷⁷ In the South, for example, the doctrine of property is the metaphysical basis—thus agrarianism becomes the political economy. This is precisely the example Weaver went on to use in his work on property and place.

Further, Weaver claims property is deeply intertwined with virtue: “[Property] also provides an indispensable opportunity for training in virtue. Because virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, it flourishes only in the area of volition”—in other words, in the area where each person has the liberty to flourish.⁷⁸ Specifically, property instills in us a sense of providence, according to Weaver:

“Providence requires just that awareness of past and future that our provincial in time, eager to limit everything to present sensory experience, is seeking to destroy. *It is precisely because providence takes into account the nonpresent that it calls for the exercise of reason and imagination.* That I reap now the reward of my past industry or sloth, that what I do today will be felt in that future now potential—these require a play of mind... The ability to cultivate providence, which I would interpret literally as foresight, is an opportunity to develop personal worth.”⁷⁹

If this sounds familiar, it is because Weaver is also defining the criteria for noble and spacious rhetoric in a community of mind. Weaver’s theory of property is therefore dramatically similar to his theory of rhetoric, which is another legacy of his influence by Agrarian thought. Both require the preservation of the past; both are inextricable from virtue and nobility of ends; both fight against the mode of knowledge that prizes only the present and the sensory; and both foster a development of the person. Most importantly, both are ineluctably combined with the idea of place. Property provides a place for the individual person: it forces reckoning with past and future, and roots a person to something permanent. Rhetoric, by being based upon a community of mind, also provides a place: it helps community values cohere and helps form a metaphysical regime built upon shared foundations of a placed people.

Permanence, the product of property, is at the heart of Weaver's argument from definition, that there is a world of oughts. Transience, on the other hand, is at the heart of the argument from circumstance—sharply criticized by Weaver in *ER* for its perpetually adapting foundations. In fact, Weaver thought his pursuits in rhetoric were in direct line with his pursuits in Southern history and philosophy; the South contained the people of the word, who were rooted to place and to definition. This devotion in the South made “Private property [a] substance; in fact, it is something very much like the philosophic concept of substance.”⁸⁰ The place of property is at the core of our being, said Weaver, irreducible and ontologically normative, offering us a usable past and a foundation for a community of mind.

This devotion to place and property helps explain Weaver's promotion of the feudal theory of society, which he cites as one of the major advantages of Southern culture. When most of us hear “feudal” today, we think of a medieval system of landowners and serfs—an inherently unjust system, in other words. But for Weaver the feudal system represented something more: connection to the land across generations.⁸¹ The feudal system in the South, he wrote in *STB*, “possessed stability, an indispensable condition for positive values: it maintained society in the only true sense of the term, for it had structure and articulation, and it made possible a personal world in which people were known by their names and their histories. It was a rooted culture which viewed with dismay the anonymity and the social indifference of urban man.”⁸² Property-as-place is permanent, and thus required for true rhetoric.

Dialectic only offers logical facts, according to the Agrarians, and cannot tell us by itself which path we ought choose. For that we need rhetoric, which draws upon history and tradition to offer a community of mind a set of noble ends. Similarly, he wrote in *IHC*, “private property is essential in any scheme which assumes that man has a choice between better and worse...

Unless something exists from which we can start with moral certitude, we cannot depend on those deductions which are the framework of coherent behavior.”⁸³ History provides the foundation for spacious rhetoric, just as property provides a foundation for the human life and training in virtue. Rhetoric cannot operate outside of place, and both draw upon the continuity of permanence in order to promote noble ends.

Further, since one becomes a complete person only by participating in the rhetorical realm of the world as it could be, attachment to property thus becomes a prerequisite for successful rhetoric. Without attachment to—and, ideally, ownership of and control over—a place that enables piety and development of the person, rhetoric cannot flourish. Notably, property must be tangible in this scheme: stocks, bonds, and other tools of finance do not move us closer to sources and consequences. Weaver wrote that “the last metaphysical right offers nothing in defense of that kind of property brought into being by finance capitalism. Such property is, on the contrary, a violation of the very notion of *proprietas*... For the abstract property of stocks and bonds, the legal ownership of enterprises never seen, actually destroy the connection between man and his substance without the metaphysical right becomes meaningless.”⁸⁴ His point is that if the property does not offer something *tangible*—work with the land, interaction with a fellow community member, exposure to sources and consequences—then it is not real property and is not a step on the road to noble rhetoric. Only with *placed* property, something that anchors us to place and to people and to permanence, can we fully develop ourselves and our community of mind. The noble ends of rhetoric require such a place.

Final Thoughts

In the last chapter I spent a great deal of time examining the Agrarian emphasis on myth, and Weaver’s subsequent arguments for the primacy of myth and myth’s role as a sort of

cohesive agent in society. Myth is, to Ransom and to Weaver and all those who stress the value of the intangibilities of social life, intertwined with the history and tradition of a people. Rhetoric, therefore, is highly dependent on a given culture's relative embrace of myth. Religious communities, for example, place high value on myth; scientific communities in academia may place very low emphasis on myth due to its lack of empirical foundation. The scientific emphasis in modern forms of knowledge meant, in the Agrarian framework, a consequent loss of myth.

For Weaver, the twin declines of rhetoric and myth were deeply related. "The decline of myth in modern societies and the ensuing decay of status are related also to the disappearance of 'place'... There is something protective about 'place'; it means isolation, privacy, and finally identity. We cannot rationally wish to be nowhere or everywhere at once. To be somewhere is necessary to our standing—to our status."⁸⁵ The same forces were responsible for the decline in the status of myth. "For essentially the same reason, this terrible mobility is fatal to mythical constructs. Myths have always developed among a people occupying one region for a long period of time and developing a strong provincial consciousness... To take away place is to take away the locus of myth."⁸⁶

This is Weaver's clearest statement on the innate connection between myth and place, and I mean "innate" here in its etymologically original sense: emerging from the mind rather than from sensory experience. The connection is *felt* more than it can be *known*: it emerges from one's experience in a place and its history, rather than from a lesson taught or knowledge consumed. Rhetoric is to Weaver a *mythical* force—it is bound up and inextricable from a culture's beliefs about itself, and can only function if there is a comparatively uniform metaphysical structure underpinning that society. And, as he explains above, such a metaphysic can only arise within a place. Weaver the anti-logician would not like this, but if we were to

formulate it syllogistically, we might say that rhetoric depends upon myth, and myth depends upon place, and thus rhetoric depends upon place.

Modern life has given us plenty of “empirical communities,” according to Weaver, but fewer examples of the “metaphysical community, suffused with a common feeling about the world which enables all vocations to meet without embarrassment to enjoy the strength that comes of common tendency.”⁸⁷ The best metaphysical communities in our time were to be found in the antebellum South, according to Weaver. Rhetorical critics have tended to ignore Weaver’s writings on the South, perhaps because they are made uncomfortable by his failure to condemn the peculiar institution. But it is in his Southern writings that we find the most fully developed theories of the myth-based place, which is his starting point for thriving rhetoric.

The advantage of the Southern myth-based places was that they had unity of belief, a force whose disappearance Weaver laments. “Men cannot live in harmony unless there is an overriding sense of unity. In the absence of a unity of belief, attempts are made to impose a unity by force through politics.”⁸⁸ The South had communities made up, as Weaver wrote, of “the local neighborhood, the village or perhaps the county, in which men have relationships other than that of cash exchange... We have long memories, and it is against our instinct to build for a day.”⁸⁹ This is a deeply revealing quote. Weaver describes and praises the sense of place in the South, demonstrates just how local that sense was, stresses the deeper meaning of relations between citizens, and indicates just how important history and memory are to people who thrive in a placed community. His requirements for place are strikingly similar to his requirements for rhetoric, because both thrive on the community of mind and strive toward noble ends. Place is at the very heart of Weaver’s rhetorical theories.

Critics may have no use for Weaver's ideas, nor for his emphasis on communal good over individual good. Where Weaver saw the bonds of community, others may see fascistic tendencies. But Weaver, like the scholar Danielle Allen in more recent years, sees sacrifice for the common good not just as good but as worth the tradeoff: in order for a community to thrive in a place, or in order to have a functioning democratic republic, we must abandon the hope of getting everything we want all the time. Unlimited personal autonomy is incompatible with social, political, and communal life.

Allen writes that “[Citizens’] sacrifice makes collective democratic action possible... The hard truth of democracy is that some citizens are always giving things up for others. Only vigorous forms of citizenship can give a polity the resources to deal with the inevitable problem of sacrifice.”⁹⁰ Weaver would add that only a vigorous form of *place* can equip a people to deal with sacrifice for the common good, because only a vigorous form of place can provide culture and shared metaphysical spaciousness.

“All of the world’s cultures have been *regional*,” Weaver wrote, because “Culture always develops in a region... It expresses the feelings of the people in that place and time, and it is always conscious of itself; that is to say, it can quickly recognize what is foreign to it. A culture, to use a word which has unfortunate connotations today, operates on a principle of exclusiveness and can operate on no other.”⁹¹ This echoes Weaver’s sentiment that a place, in order to form a foundation for the metaphysical dream, must be defined in some limiting way. Recall the example earlier of the dispute within the Methodist Church. Not only can the Church as a universal body have some degree of metaphysical coherence, but the place itself—the individual parish on a Sunday morning—must also, for the faith celebration loses at least some of its meaning if the attendees do not buy into the myth underpinning the proceedings. Weaver uses

the example of the ancient Greeks, whose word *barbaroi* gave us our modern term barbarians. The word in Greek means “those speaking a different language”—literally, those from outside this place. This is how a culture preserves the community of mind within a place, which is the first step toward a thriving rhetoric.

Place, as a guiding term in this chapter, can cover a lot of ground. It encompasses a physical location, yes, but also the attitude that can only thrive within a physical location and the rhetoric that emerges from a people who possess philosophical coherence and unity of belief within a specific location. Think of Weaver’s central lament in *ER*: rhetoric is no longer *spacious*—the term itself suggests location-based concerns. He argued that in order to have spacious rhetoric, we must have unity of belief in a place: “[The orator] was comfortably circumstanced with reference to things he could ‘know’ and presume everyone else to know in the same way... Disagreements over the most fundamental subjects leave us *puzzled as to ‘where we are’* if not as to ‘what we are.’”⁹² Place, in other words, helps determine philosophy—and disputes over that philosophy, according to Weaver, can disorient our very sense of “where we are.” Our physical and philosophical surroundings are a key ingredient in noble rhetoric; indeed, “Man is free in proportion as his surroundings have a determinate nature, and he can plan his course with perfect reliance upon that determinateness.”⁹³

These geographic terms are not mere metaphors for Weaver. *Place*, as a concept spanning geographic location and the community of mind that springs from unity of belief in that location, must precede noble rhetoric. If rhetoric’s goal is to draw upon history and tradition in order to accompany dialectic in moving us to a world of oughts, then it must be connected to a place. We must be close to sources and consequences, close to the land, and close to those who join us in a community of mind. The place *of* rhetoric, for Weaver, is very similar to the place *for*

rhetoric. We depend upon metaphysical anchors in our rhetoric, and those can only come from the land itself.

¹ Dave Tell, “The Meanings of Kansas: Rhetoric, Regions, and Counter Regions,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, v. 42, no. 3 (2012), 215.

² T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1972), 52.

³ This makes “place” similar to the concept evoked by the French word *terroir*, which, though it technically means “local,” truly means something closer to “sense of place.” This includes the land, its climate, its flora and fauna, and the human relationship with it.

⁴ Donald Davidson, “The Center That Holds,” in Oran P. Smith (ed.), *So Good a Cause: A Decade of Southern Partisan* (Columbia, SC: Foundation for American Education, 1993), 220, emphasis in original.

⁵ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 22.

⁶ Berry, “Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community,” in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (U.S.A.: Counterpoint Press, 2002), 178, emphasis in original.

⁷ Eric T. Freyfogle, *Agrarianism and the Good Society: Land, Culture, Conflict, and Hope* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 81. Think, for example, of a farmer trying to decide between two types of seed. The expert from, say, Monsanto will come in and offer all sorts of technical reasons for choosing one seed over another: better crop yield, greater insect resistance, &c. But the farmer of the land next door may offer simply wisdom accumulated through the years: after such a wet winter, you want the first kind of seed. The first farmer can certainly still listen to the expert, but without the culture that allows the two farmers to trust one another’s knowledge, application of tools is useless.

⁸ Wendell Berry, “Wendell E. Berry Lecture: National Endowment for the Humanities,” (2012), 3.

⁹ Berry (2012), 5.

¹⁰ Bill Vitek & Wes Jackson, “Introduction: Taking Ignorance Seriously,” in Bill Vitek & Wes Jackson (eds.), *The Virtues of Ignorance: Complexity, Sustainability, and the Limits of Knowledge* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 7.

¹¹ Berry (2012), 10-11.

¹² Donald Davidson, “An Agrarian Looks at the New Deal,” *Free America*, no. 2 (1938), 14. Davidson is here echoing a statement originally included in the *ITMS* “Statement of Principles.”

¹³ Paul V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 99.

¹⁴ Wilfred M. McClay, “Introduction: Why Place Matters,” in Wilfred M. McClay & Ted V. McAllister (eds.), *Why Place Matters: Geography, Identity, and Civic Life in Modern America* (New York: New Atlantis Books/Encounter Books, 2014), 2.

¹⁵ Eugene Genovese, *The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 3.

¹⁶ Genovese (1994), 73, 87.

¹⁷ Ted V. McAllister, “Making American Places: Civic Engagement Rightly Understood,” in Wilfred M. McClay & Ted V. McAllister (eds.), *Why Place Matters: Geography, Identity, and Civic Life in Modern America* (New York: New Atlantis Books/Encounter Books, 2014), 193.

¹⁸ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind*, trans. A.F. Wills (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1952), 41.

¹⁹ Davidson quoted in Murphy (2001), 114; Weaver, *STB*, 391, emphasis in original.

²⁰ It may strike some as ironic that a group of Southerners would condemn the North for their “slavish” adherence to anything. But to the Agrarians, the modern worker was a slave to capitalist forces just as surely as the cotton picker was to his master. Hilaire Belloc’s *The Servile State*, for example, which makes this very claim, was extremely influential on Tate, Herbert Agar, and other Agrarians. See Conkin (1988), 112.

²¹ Murphy (2001), 5, 6.

²² These different views come from a variety of sources, but all are nicely collected in Murphy (2001), 9, 158.

²³ Murphy (2001), 28.

²⁴ Weaver, “Address of Dr. Richard M. Weaver, Chicago University (*sic*),” in G. Thomas Goodnight, “Rhetoric and Culture: A Critical Edition of Richard M. Weaver’s Unpublished Works,” unpublished Ph.D. diss. (University of Kansas, 1978), 470.

²⁵ Weaver, “Address,” in Goodnight (1978), 471.

²⁶ Paul K. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 37.

²⁷ *ITMS*, xli.

²⁸ *ITMS*, xl-xli.

²⁹ John Crowe Ransom, “Happy Farmers,” *American Review*, v. 1, no. 5 (October 1933), 528.

³⁰ Herbert Agar, “The Task for Conservatism,” *American Review*, v. 3, no. 1 (April 1934), 5.

³¹ John Crowe Ransom, “The Aesthetic of Regionalism,” from Thomas Daniel Young (ed.), *Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), in Edwin C. Hagenstein, Sara M. Gregg, & Brian Donahue (eds.), *American Georgics: Writings on Farming, Culture, and the Land* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

³² Aldo Leopold, “The Farmer as a Conservationist,” in Susan L. Flader & J. Baird Callicott (eds.), *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991). In Hagenstein, Gregg, & Donahue (2011), 309.

³³ Conkin (1988), 85.

³⁴ Conkin (1988), 96.

³⁵ The worst example for this group was the Tennessee Valley Authority, which completely reshaped a beloved Southern waterway and, in an especially painful twist, used the new product to bring industrial power to the area. Davidson wrote a two-volume book attacking the TVA, which was influential in shaping Weaver’s views of centralized power.

³⁶ Louis D. Rubin Jr., *The Wary Fugitives: Four Poets and the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 103.

³⁷ Genovese (1994), 14.

³⁸ M.E. Bradford, “The Agrarian Tradition: An Affirmation,” in M.E. Bradford, *Remembering Who We Are: Observations of a Southern Conservative* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1985), 86, emphasis in original.

³⁹ *ITMS*, 19-20.

⁴⁰ Genovese (1994), ix.

⁴¹ *STB*, 29.

⁴² *ER*, 86.

⁴³ *STB*, 38.

⁴⁴ *STB*, 50. Obviously, this “little cosmos” of the Old South often included slaves. Many contemporary rhetorical scholars have rejected Weaver outright for his praise of a system that

sanctioned and perpetuated slavery. And yes, his candor can easily make us uncomfortable. But as I wrote above, it is foolish to completely dismiss him simply because of that view.

As I write this, same-sex marriage is becoming increasingly accepted across the United States. Many supporters of President Obama praise his support for same-sex marriage. But those same supporters do not simply reject everything Obama said before his recent (and politically beneficial) change of opinion in 2012. Instead, they view his pre-2012 views as flawed in one key area.

So it should be with critics' treatment of Weaver. We should follow the advice of the philosopher Bernard Williams, who argued that applying our current conception of ethics to past eras is foolish because people in those eras often could not even have understood the ontological foundation of our views. The two sets of ethics are incommensurable, and it is therefore a colossal waste of time to denounce, say, St. Thomas Aquinas for tacitly supporting a medieval system that denied property rights to the *hoi polloi*. As much as we like to think ourselves enlightened, there are no doubt many things we consider unassailably true that future generations will denounce as unfair or atavistic (our brutal factory farm system comes to mind). Trying to reconcile the ethical worldview of the modern liberal academic with all other worldviews, as so many critics have tried to do, is a fool's errand. Better to accept that different people at different times support different ideas, and attempt to recover any and all good things from the past while staying true to our own values.

⁴⁵ *ITMS*, 343-344. Weaver cites this quote approvingly in *SE*.

⁴⁶ *STB*, 57, emphasis added.

⁴⁷ *SE*, 18.

⁴⁸ *SE*, 57.

⁴⁹ This makes Weaver's views of rhetoric fall somewhere between those of Aristotle and Isocrates.

⁵⁰ *STB*, 395-396.

⁵¹ *IDOT*, 714, emphasis added.

⁵² *IDOT*, 714.

⁵³ *IDOT*, 714, emphasis added.

⁵⁴ *IDOT*, 714.

⁵⁵ *STB*, 102.

⁵⁶ *IDOT*, 717.

⁵⁷ *IDOT*, 718.

⁵⁸ *IDOT*, 9.

⁵⁹ *IHC*, 115.

⁶⁰ *STB*, 229.

⁶¹ *IHC*, 56.

⁶² What Weaver probably wouldn't like is that this attitude in today's cities is best exemplified by the wealthy bourgeoisie, whose members have the time and money to devote to such pursuits. As a dedicated opponent of bourgeois elitism, Weaver likely wouldn't find much to like in today's urban obsession with all things artisanal—though, once he got past the aspect of bourgeois affectation, he might like the consequences.

⁶³ *SE*, 40.

⁶⁴ *SE*, 40.

⁶⁵ *SE*, 40, emphasis added.

⁶⁶ For comparison, imagine the principle of decentralization—or, better still, the Catholic principle of subsidiarity: that all things should be done on as local a level as possible. (For example, a poor family in Lawrence, KS, should be helped first not by a local or state government, but by the parishioners of the family’s church.) It’s a decentralized philosophy, in other words. To have a centralized authority overseeing the system of subsidiarity would, at least in part, be contrary to the principle’s goals. Weaver is making a similar claim about Agrarianism here: since it’s a *felt* system based on inherited knowledge and the customs of place, to make it a unified system would be, again at least in part, to defeat the goals.

I believe Weaver is being a bit too hard on his mentors in this case, and it’s worth noting that this almost dismissive attitude toward their work appears nowhere besides this essay. We might also bear in mind that at the time this essay was written (1950), two decades had passed since the publication of *ITMS* and many of the original twelve had moved on to different pursuits: Tate and Davidson to poetry, Warren to fiction, Ransom to literary criticism. It’s a tad unseemly for Weaver to criticize the Agrarians like this when their setbacks came at the hands of the very industrialism and “New Dealism” that Weaver himself decried.

Weaver’s complaints about the Agrarians and exile also affirm the view of many historians that Weaver saw “Agrarianism” less as a social and economic program, as most of the original twelve did, and more as a sort of broad Southern philosophy. In this he followed the Christian humanism emphasis of Tate and Davidson more than anyone else, and less so Ransom and Lytle and Owsley, who tended to focus more on the practical side of the ledger. There is little doubt, however—as I hope I am proving here—that most of Weaver’s ideas can still be traced to the thought of the Agrarians.

⁶⁷ *SE*, 44.

⁶⁸ *SE*, 46.

⁶⁹ *SE*, 47, emphasis in original.

⁷⁰ *IHC*, 130.

⁷¹ *IHC*, 130.

⁷² *IHC*, 131.

⁷³ *IHC*, 132, emphasis in original.

⁷⁴ *IHC*, 133, 134, emphasis added.

⁷⁵ Allen Tate, “Notes on Liberty and Property,” in Herbert Agar & Allen Tate (eds.), *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999), 113-114. This book, originally published in 1936, was billed as the follow-up to *ITMS* but was much broader in scope and focused on opposition to the fusion of state and corporate power. Only a few of the original *ITMS* contributors participated in the volume.

⁷⁶ Tate (1999), 115. Clearly Tate is talking about subsistence agriculture plus local markets—not the globalized agriculture market we know today.

⁷⁷ *GWT* 118.

⁷⁸ *IHC*, 137. “Liberty” has become a slightly corrupted term, thanks to rights absolutists who insist a right to do something is always pristine, unassailable, and wholly decontextualized from any other concern. (See the so-called Tea Party for a disturbing example of this.) But Weaver and the Agrarians used the term in a different way. For them, liberty was the foundation of each community and culture. It was the freedom to begin building something, not a void into which social obligations disappear. Weaver once dismissed the idea of freedom as an end in itself as “vacuous,” and wrote near the end of *IHC*, “Do you see the necessity of accepting duties before

you begin to talk of freedom?” (186-187) Perhaps this example is just further evidence of how bastardized the very term “conservative” has become in our time, and how Weaver and the Agrarians would feel quite left out in a gathering of today’s alleged conservatives. Nothing about the modern Republican Party, for example, is conservative—for what exactly are they trying to conserve? Not nature, nor institutions, nor civil society, nor public goods like education and art; today’s so-called conservatives are participants in an incoherent philosophy, they should be ashamed to cloak themselves in the mantle of Edmund Burke.

⁷⁹ *IHC*, 138, emphasis added.

⁸⁰ *IHC*, 146.

⁸¹ Obviously this does not eliminate the continued serfdom. We should remember that Weaver’s goal in virtually all writings was to recover what good ideas he could from older times. No, feudalism was not perfect—but perhaps there is still something we can salvage from it, and in this case Weaver argues that is rootedness.

⁸² *STB*, 50.

⁸³ *IHC*, 146-147.

⁸⁴ *IHC*, 132-133. One can only wonder what Weaver would have made of the credit default swap and the synthetic collateralized debt obligation.

⁸⁵ *VO*, 37.

⁸⁶ *VO*, 37-38.

⁸⁷ *IHC*, 32-33. An example of an “empirical community” would be Chicago, which we might recall he described as having the trappings of community, but no real feeling of coherence.

⁸⁸ Weaver, “The Division of Churches Over Slavery [General],” in *Goodnight* (1978), 341.

⁸⁹ Weaver, “Address,” in *Goodnight* (1978), 474.

⁹⁰ Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 29.

⁹¹ *LWP*, 110.

⁹² *ER*, 169, 171, emphasis added.

⁹³ *ER*, 173.

Chapter 4: Solidarity and Rhetoric

Freedom as an end in itself is simply vacuous.

-- Richard Weaver

I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence;/ I project myself—also I return—I am with you, and know how it is—Walt Whitman

In chapters two and three, I examined two key concepts of Weaver's: what sort of knowledge is required for a culture to have successful and spacious rhetoric, and what kind of place is required for that culture and its rhetoric to thrive. The subject of this chapter is the logical conclusion of that exploration. Now that I have explored the metaphysical and tangible foundations of a culture, one must ask: how exactly does this culture arise, and how does it maintain the cohesive community of mind required for rhetoric?

The broad term I will use in this chapter is *solidarity*, which refers to the sense of shared purpose and mission a culture's members share and which will overlie such concepts as community, common pursuit, common valuation of symbols, and shared experiences.¹ While the second chapter focused on Weaver's writings on forms of knowledge for rhetoric and the third chapter focused on his Southern place-based writings, this chapter will largely focus on perhaps Weaver's central concept: *order*. Weaver has been called the "philosopher of order," and his ideas on how a culture is and stays formed are essential to any understanding of his rhetorical theories.² The creation of "solidarity," and its use as a critical term here, might be considered akin to Kenneth Burke's dictum that we identify with each other in order to overcome division. Similarly, Weaver wanted cultures to find spacious metaphysical ideas that would allow us to move forward together toward noble ends. Finding ways to do that is essential to the task of rhetoric.

This chapter is perhaps the most important in this project in terms of offering an alternative to the ideological approach that has a strong presence in our discipline. In it and especially in the conclusion that follows, I hope to sketch a different path for rhetorical studies—one based not on critique but on construction. In his landmark 1989 article, rhetorical scholar Raymie McKerrow argued that the chief function of the rhetorical critic is to “unmask or demystify the discourse of power. The aim is to understand the integration of power/knowledge in society—what possibilities for change the integration invites or inhibits and what intervention strategies might be considered appropriate to effect social change.”³ In this scheme of critical rhetoric, power—and thus those institutions and persons possessing power—is always something to be viewed with suspicion, as if power were always a way station on the path to oppression and agency-deprivation. Perhaps in theory, this stance is only slightly objectionable; however, it is difficult to see how, when played out over years and instilled as a default stance of rhetorical studies, it is a road to anything but the kind of relativism that makes solidarity difficult.

If a central stance of academic rhetorical criticism and rhetorical education is critique of power in the name of personal agency, then rhetoric can quickly become a field without a core. If there can be no power then there can be no order, and surely without order there can be no real social or communal possibilities.⁴ One potential consequence of ideological criticism and critical rhetoric could be *social atomization*: by perpetually separating us into discrete, autonomous units compelled to oppose discourses of power, critical rhetoric can harm social solidarity. If society is to be more than a collection of individuals, then surely such an amalgamation would constitute a discourse of power—and thus would need to be opposed. Weaverian rhetoric is inherently incompatible with such a stance, since Weaver’s goal was to use rhetoric to build ethical

societies, develop good citizens, and pursue noble ends—all of which eventually require some semblance of power.

One useful way to think about a connection between Weaver's ideas and contemporary rhetorical criticism is through the theory of constitutive rhetoric. This theory, most clearly expounded by Michael McGee and Maurice Charland, holds that a symbol or text creates an audience, or a people, through an interpellation or Althusserian "hailing." In other words, according to Charland, a symbol or text first constitutes a collective subject by transforming a group of individuals into a people. It then posits the existence of a transhistorical subject: it tells the audience that they, this *people*, have always and will always exist in relation to that particular symbol in that particular way. Finally, the symbol must offer the illusion of freedom by telling the audience it has embraced the symbol willingly.⁵

There are obvious connections here to Weaver's work, even if the two do not quite align perfectly. Like Charland and McGee, Weaver argued that a symbol or text or narrative could call people into being and form them into a culture. The idea of an audience always existing in relation to a particular symbol in a particular way has echoes of Weaver's subject-object unity, in which a term always has a transcendent form underlying it—though Charland's formulation focuses on audience effect and Weaver's on the symbol itself.

Most relevant for this discussion is what McGee says is the crucial step in constitutive rhetoric's formation of an audience: the people must be prepared by the symbol for social action in the material world.⁶ In other words, it is not enough for us to say, in effect, "Look, we are a rhetorically constituted audience." Rather, what matters is what the audience—Weaver would call it a community of mind—does from that point forward, and how the symbol in question exerts influence in its members' lives. Once the community of mind is constituted through

rhetoric, a culture can begin to take shape. Since solidarity should be a central feature of democratic life, rhetorical critics should be extraordinarily interested in the symbols and texts that have the capacity to unite, to shape, and to cohere. What should concern our field is not just what symbols constitute a people, but what the people do after that constitution.

This chapter is aimed at outlining exactly how the notion of cultural and rhetorical solidarity contributes to those goals. In this chapter I will first survey the Agrarian ideas on social cohesion, which, like most of the Agrarians' ideas, strongly influenced Weaver. I will then turn to Weaver's writings themselves in order to see how we might recover old ideas of cultural solidarity in order to advance a thriving, spacious rhetoric in our own time.

Cultural Solidarity in Agrarianism

The idea of agrarianism has long been intertwined with ideas of wholesomeness and simplicity in the culture and the people. For this reason, generations of writers and philosophers from ancient Greece to the present have deemed farmers to be the most virtuous people and hence a model for culture. "Cultivators of the earth," Thomas Jefferson wrote to John Jay, "are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and its interests by the most lasting bonds."⁷ Jefferson's famous vision was a yeoman republic, or a culture of rural citizens possessed of the same solidity and cultural integrity that the individual farmer so routinely exhibited.

It is clear to all that there is more than a little romance and nostalgia in this idea.⁸ But what has made people cling to this idea that the rural and agricultural population is the font of all that is good in society? One frequent theme in cultural depictions is the inherent appeal of the close-knit culture and cohesive community. The classic small farming town in the typical

American depiction is filled with simple people who do simple work together—people who know that there is more to life than the frenzied rush of big cities.⁹ There is at the heart of this depiction an *order* to the agrarian life, a reassuring sameness and sense of permanence, which counteracts the other key American impulse: restless expansion and westward movement.

The agrarian life of order and stability is also routinely invoked as the center of American *community*, with all the sense of shared purpose and mission that term connotes. Where urban life is frequently seen as the sphere of the lone striver, agrarian life is one of working together—a feeling created by “consideration for the nature of a place; by consideration for the needs and feelings of neighbors; by kindness to strangers; by respect for the privacy, dignity, and propriety of individual lives; by affection for a place, its people, and its nonhuman creatures; and by the duty to teach the young,” as Wendell Berry put it.¹⁰ In other words, agrarians see their life as *whole*: in its embrace of the life cycle and deep connection to the earth, it represents a holistic life that opposes modern fragmentation. This gives it the aforementioned sense of order that many find ontologically and practically satisfying.

It is this characteristic of order that the Southern Agrarians found so valuable in traditional and rural life, and it is also what spurred Weaver to extend his ideas on rhetoric to his ideas on culture. The Agrarian view of an ordered culture was premised on the cosmological idea that a society has distinct roles and hierarchies, and that this structure is right and just because it is based on the myths shared by a community and its metaphysical dream. Indeed, one scholar argues that the Agrarians embraced myth not because they believed in it but because they recognized its value in providing a foundation for “order and objective standards.”¹¹ This order and structure subsequently provided the basis for community and social relations, which are best developed, according to the Agrarians, when each member of a society knows his or her role and

accepts the roles of others.¹² Myth, then, provides the basis for order and that order provides the basis for social relations. The latter-day Agrarian M.E. Bradford wrote that “All our social myths presupposed some version of the corporate life—that man is a social being, fulfilled only in the natural associations built upon common experience, upon the ties of blood and friendship, common enterprises, resistance to common enemies, and a common faith.”¹³

The Agrarians saw their project as a defense of this order—derived from the long tradition of Western civilization and inherited from aristocratic Europe—against, as Davidson put it, “the new barbarism of science and technology controlled and directed by the modern power state.”¹⁴ These latter forces they believed to be corrosive to community, because they imported—or compelled, in the Agrarian view—homogenization and monoculture into philosophically distinct regions. Community was the “a priori ideal” of the Southern Agrarians, wrote Bradford, calling it “an informally hierarchical social organism in which all Southerners... had a sense of investment and participation.”¹⁵ There was inequality in this informal hierarchy, no question—but inequality was a natural outcome in diverse societies, they argued. What they disputed was the modern “cult” of equality, or an insistence upon the total equality of all people and the abolition of distinctions between persons. “Equality as a moral or political imperative, pursued as an end in itself—Equality, with the capital ‘E’—is the antonym of every legitimate conservative principle,” wrote Bradford.¹⁶ True order based upon myth contains inequality, they believed, because it is honest about the various social roles people occupy.

The Agrarians saw modern life’s dis-ordered reality in a harshly negative light, as an “international economy of morally indifferent affluence for many and misery for those who cannot compete,” according to one historian.¹⁷ Against this they proposed order based on myth, rooted in the land. This structure of society was an essential part of agrarian life, and it is hard to

separate the social arrangement from the agrarian economy. This is because in the agrarian society, wrote Bradford, “the measure of any economic or political system was its human product. Goods, services, and income are, to this way of thinking, subsidiary to the basic cultural consideration, the overall form of life produced.”¹⁸ Modern secular gods like gross domestic product play no role in the evaluation of the agrarian economy, and market factors therefore do not determine social relations. The problem, as the Agrarians saw it, is that ever since Appomattox the United States has been trying to “sustain traditional values without having the social relations necessary for their sustenance.”¹⁹ In other words, they believed we once had a republic of order and hierarchy that was generally accepted by most people in local economies and small-scale social relations. Now, in our globalized, utilitarian, “flattened” world, we find we cannot preserve the benefits of that society without the underlying order that allowed them.²⁰

That order helped foster cultural solidarity because the Southern Agrarian mode of imagination, according to Tate, was fundamentally rhetorical rather than dialectical.²¹ It was based on shared imagination drawn from history and tradition and contextual knowledge rather than discrete principles adopted for purposes of efficiency or logic. You cannot divorce the Southern mode of imagination from the South; you could not simply plunk it down in the middle of New England and expect it to help form a cohesive culture. For that, you would need the entire context of the Southern experience and the entire meaning of the Southern *place*. Cultural solidarity, the Agrarians believed, emerges from something intangible and rhetorical: myth, shared by community, revealed in social relations. All are necessary for the creation of order, but as one historian put it, the Agrarians believed such things had been replaced by the forces of “the modern, false religions of production, consumption, and progress.”²²

These forces, in fact, formed what the Southern Agrarians thought was an entirely different kind of cultural “solidarity”: one rooted purely in the solipsistic, acquisitive, individualism of mass consumer society.²³ Their critique was that these values inevitably formed within industrialism, which encompassed both “a mode of economic organization and the cultural values that supported it,” as the Southern historian Paul Conkin described it.²⁴ This is a distinctly Marxian or even Gramscian argument; virtually all that’s missing from this diagnosis are the labels “superstructure” and “hegemony.” In fact, Weaver and the Agrarians were unique among conservative critics who adopted the basic Marxist complaints about modern industrialism and finance-capitalism, which they saw as uprooting tradition and eroding community solidarity. Their focus on property as a corrective to modern capitalism was also unique; Conkin calls them “the last original group of critics in America, with anything close to a national audience, who took property and property rights seriously.”²⁵ This focus on property and opposition to the *culture* of material consumption helps explain both their devotion to the rhetorical mode of imagination and their focus on solidarity. Since an ordered culture can really only emerge in a tangible place, and since it must have the wellspring of imaginative rhetoric to draw from, it is natural that their focus on solidarity would involve property and the modern culture that separates us from attachment to it.

A key element of an ordered culture is a certain definition of individualism. Indeed, Bradford labeled the Southern Agrarians agrarian *because* they opposed “the alienated, atomistic individual to whom abstractly familial totalitarianism can appeal.”²⁶ As I will discuss below, Weaver devoted a sizable portion of his later writing to competing notions of individualism. The key to understanding the Agrarian view of individualism is an anti-Thoreauvian point: they believed that people can only define themselves *in relation* to their communities rather than *in*

opposition to them.²⁷ This is surely a legacy of the doctrine of Southern provincialism, in which people were attached to a piece of land by a sense of continuity and permanence. When such a society exists, we become ontologically whole when we can understand and explain how we fit into a communal structure based on continuity, not how we can be rebellious individuals breaking out of it. When we see ourselves within the context and culture of a community, we often see qualities in others that we aspire to possess. These qualities help determine how we evaluate actions, and in turn drive us to improve ourselves.²⁸ Individualism in the Agrarian scheme is not a fragmenting activity but a unifying one. It moves us upward toward the good that our community of mind defines.

When a culture is formed around only discrete, consuming individuals who maximize their utility—as the Agrarians saw the modern United States—then the very structure of the culture shifts to accommodate new visions of the good life, and contemplation and leisure are not among them. Instead, a culture begins to measure the good life based upon economic measures and utilitarian calculations—and upon this foundation there can be no cultural solidarity, because all that matters is ceaseless growth. Allen Tate lamented the fact that “We have been mere economists,” concerned only with “the study of wealth”; he argued we must now be “political economists as well [and] study human welfare.”²⁹ Without concern for the health of a culture based purely on materialism, in other words, we will never know noble ends. The latter-day agrarian and conservationist Aldo Leopold wrote that a healthy and cohesive culture will see the non-utility aspects of the natural world and of human relations, not merely that which can be exploited.³⁰

The point is not that the agrarian mindset is against growth in formation of a culture, or that it demands submission by humans in the face of, as A.E. Housman famously put it, “nature,

heartless, witless nature.” It asks, rather, that we measure our culture not in terms of GDP but in terms of lives well lived, because only when we focus on the health of connections between people can we form any kind of cultural solidarity. This point is essential to understanding the Agrarians view of solidarity, which was deeply influential to Weaver. If a society is simply the sum of individuals pursuing their interests—and this is standard macroeconomic doctrine today, to the point that economists often use “the economy” and “society” interchangeably—then there is no shared purpose, and thus no community of mind, and thus no noble ends: all of which are necessary for rhetoric to thrive, or even to exist. If we have a purely economic society, argued the Agrarians, then *how* becomes the guiding force in public life; *why*, meanwhile, is completely ignored. To take a more recent American cultural assumption: the World War II generation didn’t mobilize to fight Nazism by simply asking how we were to build a bomber, we tell ourselves—they did it by asking *why* the bomber was worth building. The myth holds that shared purpose pervaded the work, which created cultural solidarity if only for the duration of the war. Technical questions alone cannot tell us how to act: this was Weaver’s key point for rhetoric. For guidance, we must draw upon our shared histories and social connections in order to find a way toward noble ends.

This is what Ransom meant when he criticized modern society for calling “upon its members to become always more professional, more abstract, in their functions.”³¹ He and the other Agrarians believed that when we become more abstract from sources, consequences, and each other, then it becomes more difficult to find cultural rallying points. The Agrarian Herbert Agar wondered if modern life was “capable of desiring and defining a society based on principles rather than on opportunism, on a moral image of what it wishes the life of man to be rather than on a more or less regulated scramble for possessions?”³² Agar argued that when we

break culture into nothing more than competing economic units, then the citizen turns into “an ‘economic man,’ a sort of highest common denominator of human weaknesses; and a society composed chiefly of such units will have the minimum of moral will, of true freedom of choice. It will tend to obey ‘economic law.’”³³ That term, “moral will,” would be a direct inspiration to Weaver: he set for rhetoric the task of elucidating and illuminating the noble path that our true selves sought, and moving us toward it within a cohesive culture.

Almost needless to say is the fact that the Agrarians considered the South to possess far greater cultural solidarity than the North because the South was based upon transcendent principles and the idea of community. They saw the North as sickened by the pursuit of material greed and by purely economic measures of individual lives. The Agrarians were more committed to the South as a *region*, while Weaver saw it more as an *idea*, and, as Murphy put it, “talked less of the South as a concrete way of life than as a set of values, or ‘mind.’”³⁴ This was a premodern faith in values, which could provide cultural solidarity because they stood beneath all social relations. As early as *STB*, his first work, Weaver was praising the cultural solidarity of the Southerners who grew up with “one order, familiar with its assumptions and customs, and feeling that the rules of its collective life somehow emanate from themselves.”³⁵ The myths provide cultural solidarity and an agreeable way of life based in community of mind. Myths, in other words, provide social structure: this is a direct argumentative homage to Ransom’s *GWT*. When the myths are purely economic, however, or when they encourage us to always place faith in material gain—what we see from the doctrine of perpetual progress, for example—they cannot form cultural solidarity at all. They can only encourage us to view ourselves as discrete individuals participating in commerce, with the ignoble end of creating more of the same, *ad infinitum*.

The Agrarian view that so influenced Weaver, then, was rooted in the idea that a culture can only become cohesive when it is formed around a set of common values, is based in a commonly experienced place, and aspires toward a set of commonly held noble ends. It is a rhetorical mode of imagination, as Tate argued, because it draws upon history in order to envision a shared purpose for a *people*, not just a group of individuals. Cultural solidarity is based on values, preferably transcendent ones, that encourage us to see ourselves as part of a larger project that began before us and continues after us, and which has discernible and definable ends. Finally, it insists that *why* must share equal billing with *how* in matters of social and cultural activities. All of these forces combine to create order, which is the goal of societies based on enduring principles. In the next section, I will explore Weaver's ideas on solidarity, individualism, order, and the rhetoric required to achieve both.

Weaver, Rhetoric, and Individualism vs. Community

Exploring Weaver's ideas on culture and solidarity first requires establishing why rhetoric is so important. Rhetoric is a tool for building cultures, Weaver believed; indeed, he saw the decline of Western culture as aided by, if not even a partial consequence of, the decline of rhetoric. So what is culture, and how is it formed? For Weaver, "Culture is a delicate reconciliation of opposites": a harmony that can arise in spite of the sometimes conflicting impulses of the individual and the group.³⁶ The task of the rhetorician, one of Weaver's "prescriptionists of culture," "is to discern what changes are necessary to get [cultural] principles back into a proper relation."³⁷

A culture is characterized by movement toward goals, Weaver argued, and all cultures are moving toward something; stasis is impossible for a culture, though movement toward ignoble goals is certainly possible. Rhetoric is the power that shapes that movement since it "is

designed to move men's feelings in the direction of a goal," and as such is concerned "with men in being" rather than in the abstract.³⁸ Rhetoric is hence a key tool, if not *the* key tool, for constructing cultural solidarity—the force that arises when all members of a culture are on common ontological ground and have coalesced around a goal. Rhetoric is therefore the force that provides the bonds of community. As Goodnight put it about Weaver's views on cohesive rhetoric, "the community of sentiment provides the basic congruence of imagination which allows persons to participate in cultural reality."³⁹

The advantage of rhetoric is that it allows us, in the formation of culture, to access those forms of knowledge that lie beyond mere definition, which is the realm of dialectic. Rhetoric, Weaver argued in *LS*, deals with those "ideas, images, feelings, and intuitions which cannot be described and classified in the way of scientific phenomena but which have great effect upon our decisions."⁴⁰ This means that while the forces of dialectic, like definition and logic, can allow us to sketch the boundaries and rudimentary aspects of community and culture, it is rhetoric that allows us to draw on the past and on non-scientific knowledge to create shared purpose. "As humans use rhetoric they create community," writes Goodnight about Weaver's views, and as "humans are language users they participate in cultural creation."⁴¹

Weaver's vision for rhetoric was one of cultural centrality, in which people would avail themselves of the forces of history and tradition in order to move beyond what Weaver labels as mere dialectic: the *how* of a culture. Dialectic, according to Weaver, can only really get us to the process of defining a community according to its discrete individuals. But cultural solidarity can only arise and cohere when a culture defines itself organically as something greater than the sum of its parts. Dialectic gets us to think as individuals, but according to Goodnight's interpretation, rhetoric "moves these specific individuals with their own beliefs, desires and prejudices by

drawing their feelings together in a vision. The power of rhetoric, thus, is its ability to reach higher levels of mutual consent.”⁴² This is what makes Weaver’s vision of rhetoric a tool for solidarity, because we see “rhetorical force,” as he called it in *ER*, as a “power transmitted through the links of a chain that extends upward toward some ultimate source.”⁴³ To accomplish this, solidarity needs to be based on something more than an aggregation of individuals—it must be rooted in community.

Individualism was of great interest to Weaver and his Agrarian teachers, as it represented two of their chief philosophical concerns: a force that allows people to become fully realized individual humans within a mass-consumer society, and a force that corrodes traditional social ties and community foundations if taken to an extreme. For Weaver, these two opposite ends of individualism were exhibited by two key American historical figures: the essayist and philosopher Henry David Thoreau, and farmer and Virginia congressman John Randolph of Roanoke. Weaver’s treatment of these two subjects tells us a great deal about his views on cultural solidarity and the rhetoric we find therein.

According to Weaver, “A culture is born expressive of a place and a time, and a mood which says implicitly ‘We hold these values.’”⁴⁴ Those who form or are born into that culture therefore owe the culture something, since the culture instills in them the values subsequently needed to live a meaningful life. To turn our backs on that culture is to ignore those who have come before us and those whose absence would deprive us of contextual and historical meaning. Small wonder, then, that Weaver embraced as wholly virtuous and exemplary the example of John Randolph of Roanoke, who was a hero of sorts to midcentury traditional conservatives. Randolph was a staunch defender of states’ rights and a fierce critic of centralized power, and he was, Weaver tells us, “an ardent Jeffersonian” who spent his congressional career “in dogged

fighters against all nationalizing tendencies, especially the tariff and the national bank.”⁴⁵ What was important for Weaver is that “As a defender of the dignity and autonomy of the smaller unit, [Randolph] was constantly fighting the battle for local rights. But it was the essence of his position that the battle must be fought within the community, not outside the community and not through means that would in effect deny all political organization.”⁴⁶

In other words, Randolph loathed the “centripetal” tendencies of the federal government—the tendency to always direct power toward the center instead of outward toward the yeomen, of whom he was a robust advocate. But he did not let this stop him from working within the Congressional community he was given in order to effect change. He recognized that his temporary community in the Capitol required work within channels whose very existence he loathed, and he did that work in spite of that loathing. According to Weaver, he had secessionist tendencies but he “never lost sight of the truth expressed in Aristotle’s dictum that man is a political animal. His individualism is, therefore, what I am going to call ‘social bond’ individualism. It battles unremittingly for individual rights, *while recognizing that these have to be secured within the social context*... Randolph could not visualize men’s solving political questions through simple self-isolation.”⁴⁷

Individualism, in the Randolphian sense praised by Weaver and the Agrarians, is a scheme in which a person can realize herself and secure personal rights—but only when she recognizes the social context that allows such things and does not simply reject all obligations to others. Randolph did not like federal power, but he did not support the nullifiers in South Carolina: he thought, as Weaver did, that merely turning one’s back on the situation was a simplistic and arrogant solution. This is why he said that “If any of the parties to the [Constitution] are dissatisfied with their share of influence, it is an affair of amicable

discussion... but no cause for dissolving the confederacy.”⁴⁸ Weaver praised Randolph because his “theory of politics did not favor simple withdrawal as a solution... the fight should be waged within the whole and not outside it in some undefinable or ambiguous position.”⁴⁹

The opposite position was taken, according to Weaver, by Henry David Thoreau. That famous Transcendentalist, renowned for his chronicled adventures at Walden Pond and for a brief stint in jail (and the essay, “Civil Disobedience,” it produced), was to Weaver a helpless solipsist who refused to see himself as dependent in any way on his social context or community traditions. When Thoreau spent two years at Walden, or when he spent the night in prison for refusal to pay a poll tax, he was only seeing his own action devoid of all contextual meaning. He refused to consider implications of his actions; in his eyes, all that mattered were the actions he determined right based on an ideal of behavior.

What Weaver disliked in Thoreau’s behavior is the “premise still more dubious, which is that man is a kind of creature who should never be visited with coercion, either by a thing called an army or a thing called a government... we are again forced to conclude that Thoreau is not talking about real men in the real world.”⁵⁰ The Weaver biographer Joseph Scotchie says “Thoreau can be characterized as representing an extreme vision of libertarianism... To Weaver, this was an attitude that was both egotistical and irresponsible.”⁵¹ To argue, as Weaver believed Thoreau did, that you have no obligations to your community when the latter’s actions violate any of your beliefs, is to ignore the many benefits you have received from your community—indeed, it is to ignore the truth that we do not develop in isolation from our natural and human surroundings.

What has all this to do with rhetoric? To Weaver, a great deal indeed: the two men whose beliefs he sketches in his essay on Randolph and Thoreau represent the twin forces of dialectic

and rhetoric, and the solidarity of community they hinder and help, respectively. Thoreau represents the cold, calculating tendencies of dialectic, and history's veneration of him is deeply troubling to Weaver the rhetorician. In "Civil Disobedience," says Weaver, "by the operation of a dialectical movement both man and the state are refined out of existence; they are made into ideological constructs quite adapted to their author's play of fancy, but out of all relationship to history. It is simple to place man beyond the effect of such things as taxation and slavery if one de-incarnates him."⁵²

Weaver believed that Thoreau idealized both the things he loved, like unadulterated nature, and the things he loathed—namely, obligations to other members of his community. He stressed *individuality*, in other words, to too great a degree, while ignoring what Weaver called *personality*, which one Weaver biographer says stresses "selfhood *and* relationship with others."⁵³ Because Thoreau was a dialectician, he emphasized "freedom" as an abstract principle devoid of any rhetorical context; this made him fail to see, as the rhetorical mode of imagination might, that freedom must inevitably be subordinated to some greater good or nobler end. Thoreau's arguments, Weaver alleges, are merely "a dialectical progression toward the author's ideal, which is finally offered very winningly, but *in complete isolation from the facts of life*."⁵⁴

Contrast that view with Randolph's, who was always recognizing the truths that emerge from real people living real lives; "what Randolph saw as a last and a problematical choice, Thoreau was inclined to see as a first step."⁵⁵ Indeed, Randolph was "a classical instance of the rhetor, or the master of rhetoric, contending against his enemies," while Thoreau "becomes the mere abstract reasoner."⁵⁶ Randolph criticized his fellow states' rights advocates for committing too closely to principle in their pursuit of an idealized notion of self-government—recall his admonition that disagreeing with the Constitution need not require the dissolution of the compact

itself. This, to Weaver, was the dialectical position. But “rhetoric and history go hand in hand. The rhetorician always speaks out of historical consciousness because his problems are existential ones... Randolph’s style of thought and utterance was that of the statesman—rhetorician rather than dialectician... He did not rely upon drawn-out logic for his persuasiveness, but rather upon ‘the world’s body’ made real and impressive through concrete depiction.”⁵⁷ Randolph’s arguments were rooted always and forever in the context of history, tradition, memory—and, crucially, community.

The implication here is that Weaver followed the Agrarians in believing that while dialectic can help define the boundaries and exclusivity of a culture, rhetoric was needed to move people beyond the merely logical and toward an embrace of higher and more noble ends. If people only deal in dialectic when forming and perpetuating a culture, then all they can do is consider things in the abstract. In a property dispute, for example, the adjudicators of the community would only consider the letter of the law—even if the dispute is between a wealthy magnate and a starving widow clinging to her last piece of property. This would be the approach of dialectic, according to Weaver, and make no mistake: he believed it is essential. It is through dialectic that we determine what our principles are and how we might apply them as fairly as possible.

But this is not a *complete* view, he argued: for that, we need the equal counterpart to dialectic. If we consider the property dispute within the rhetorical mode of imagination, we allow ourselves to take external and contextual factors into account. The adjudicators wouldn’t just consider the status of those in dispute; they would consider it within the culture’s history and values and what they want themselves to be. Do they want to be a culture that favors magnates or widows? Do they prize strict definitions of fairness, or do they want to encourage harmony? To

what extent should a culture consider the rights of property, and to what extent will they relax their standards when they consider the consequences?

Weaver's point was that cultural solidarity can only be created when the rhetorical imagination is given equal billing with dialectic—which, when political and policy debates favor variously defined facts over emotion and appeals, we seem to rarely do. The reign of dialectic may create a technically fair and just society, but it will not create a good or cohesive one because it is unable to consider anything beyond what data and strict definitions tell us. Rhetoric moves us upward toward some higher ideal. Without context, how can people possibly know what that higher ideal might be? How can they possibly form a culture around it if they resolve all debates through application of discrete principles? Randolph would not forsake the higher ideal of peace and union for the abstract principle of states' rights; Thoreau forsook the ideal of community and clung to his idealized notion of autonomy regardless of the cost.⁵⁸ For Weaver, questions of individualism ineluctably boil down to questions of the dialectic-rhetoric divide. Move too closely toward Thoreauvian individualism, and we abandon rhetoric: we forfeit our community solidarity in the name of logical definitions.⁵⁹

Solidarity, Rhetoric, and Ethics

It's worth noting that the chapters on argumentation that most rhetorical scholars examine as standalone theories arrive in Weaver's most well-known book in our discipline: *The Ethics of Rhetoric*. Too easily has our discipline focused on the second noun in that title while ignoring the first. The deep connections between rhetoric and ethics have perhaps fallen by the wayside in the age of the discursive turn and social construction, but the connections remain nonetheless.

Weaver was deeply concerned with ethical issues, which were intertwined with his understanding of solidarity. Indeed, among his first and most incisive indictments in *IHC* is that

since the rise of nominalism, we have all become our own priests and ethics professors—in other words, that we all have taken to forming our own social codes of behavior and no longer give thought to how we form them or to what we owe those around us, all because we no longer agree on any underlying transcendentals. In many ways Weaver’s portrait of modern ethics resembles Alasdair MacIntyre’s famous introduction to *After Virtue*: the foundation has been destroyed by a variety of corrupting -isms, and we are left to assemble the remaining pieces as best we can. Our system of ethics is, according to these thinkers, *incoherent*: it simply does not stick together to form anything like a true, governing system of agreed-upon principles.

For Weaver, such a system of principles can only emerge from a distinct culture. This makes his arguments for particularism and regionalism in culture especially relevant, because he rejected the idea of a homogenizing culture. A uniform culture that is imposed from above, he believed, could only bring attempts to justify all manner of behaviors and beliefs in the name of inclusivity. An organic culture that emerges from below, by contrast, forms an order based on agreed-upon principles, and it is from that order we derive our sense of community solidarity. Solidarity and ethics, in the Weaverian and Agrarian scheme, go hand in hand; the two are counterparts in the same manner as dialectic and rhetoric.

Ethical standards come from a culture’s “tyrannizing image,” which, like the metaphysical dream and the community of mind, is one of Weaver’s terms for a sort of cultural North Star:

This image is the ideal of [a culture’s] excellence. The forms that it can take and the particular manifestations that it can find are various. In some instances it has been a religious ritual; in others a sacred scripture; in others a literature which everyone is expected to know; codes of conduct (and even of warfare) may be the highest embodied form. But examine them as we will, *we find this inward facing toward some high representation*. This is the sacred well of the culture from which inspiring waters like magnetic lines of force flow out and hold the various activities in a subservience of

acknowledgement. *Not to feel this magnetic pull toward identification and assimilation is to be outside the culture.*⁶⁰

In this explanation one can find Weaver's key concepts of culture. A culture rallies around something tangible; it aims upward toward something ethereal; it excludes those who do not embrace something culturally universal. This tripartite structure is the basis for its subsequent ethical codes.

Consider the United States as an example. Our "sacred scripture" might be the Declaration of Independence: a manifestation to which we routinely offer secular prayer. Our "high representation" might be life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness: the shared idea of what equally created people shall receive. And, most important, our culture rejects people who do not share an "identification and assimilation" with our tyrannizing image—this is why recent presidents speak of terrorists "hating our freedoms" and worldview. We may take ourselves to be a wholly inclusive country that welcomes all viewpoints, but we tend to not tolerate those who question the nation's basic founding precepts. In times of terrorism or other national trauma, for example, we retroactively ostracize those who differ with our ideals and give them outsider status, ascribing ideas to them "far inferior to the democratic ideal," as one rhetorical scholar put it.⁶¹ Taken together, these ideas form a rather bounded definition and picture of American culture. More importantly, from this definition emerges a set of nation-defining standards upon which most Americans agree, at least nominally: we do not violate others' rights to pursue happiness, we swear fealty to democracy, and so on.

These definitions help govern public life in the United States. However, they are still largely what Weaver would call dialectic-based definitions. All the above paragraph really does is sketch an idea of the defining boundaries of American culture. In order to move from the

tyrannizing image into actual practice of culture, people need something more than definitions: they need the rhetorical mode of imagination. This is where Weaver's writings on culture become very interesting and very relevant for both our contemporary culture and our scholarly pursuits. He believed the "collective consciousness of the group creates a mode of looking at the world or arrives at some imaginative visual bearing. It 'sees' the world metaphorically according to some felt need of the group, and this entails an ordering which denotes dissatisfaction with 'things as they are.'"⁶² To continue the example above, once the United States has defined its cultural boundaries, it still needs "some felt need" in order to pursue truly noble ends.

How does the "felt need" of a culture arise, and how does it inform a culture's rhetoric and system of ethical principles? The Agrarians and Weaver believed that part of the reason the antebellum South had such a coherent ethical system is because it was fundamentally a *local* and *tangible* society: it stressed the interactions and experiences of everyday life, and emphasized the importance of those you came in contact with on a regular basis. You were not asked to feel a vague sense of empathy or solidarity with a person half a world away; you were compelled to feel it for your neighbors and your friends and your family. The South "held that society, though of intelligible structure, is a product of organic growth, and that a tested *modus vivendi* is to be preferred to the most attractive experiment," as Weaver argued in *STB*.⁶³ Hence, the knowledge and experience you gained from local exposure and experience is what makes you a part of a solid and organic culture. The South's predominantly local ethical system preserved what Weaver called its "ideological unity, or its community of belief about certain ideas, certain institutions, and certain figures of history," because it compelled a certain kind of behavior toward those around you.⁶⁴ This is the basis of all coherent ethical systems, and it worked in the South because it was maintained through the customs, manners, and habits of daily life.

This matters for rhetoric because a local ethical system is centrally a *social* ethical system, contingent upon daily exposure and reminders about a culture's way of life rather than upon abstract principles. And since "Social man is to a considerable extent rhetorical man," we can only achieve a social ethical system through the rhetorical mode of imagination—which requires local exposure to history, tradition, and our social peers. Weaver praised John Stuart Mill for writing that "The worth of a State, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it," and Weaver thought that we needed to see the worth of our fellow individuals with some frequency in order to form a social ethical system that is more rhetorical than dialectical—that is, more rooted in aspiring upward toward a teleological ideal than in following clearly defined rules.⁶⁵

There is much for rhetorical scholars to explore here, and it is a shame that Weaver's writings on solidarity and ethics go largely overlooked. He was certainly not the first to argue that rhetoric is good for community, or that cultural solidarity arises through interaction and rhetorical practice. But he was nonetheless an important voice in arguing that we need to resurrect the idea of rhetoric as a force for good in the community and the *polis* and not merely a tool for individual self-expression, as the Agrarians and Weaver believed modern life has emphasized. Rhetorical scholars have long argued that classical thinkers like Aristotle envisioned the good life not just as the end of the individual but also of the state: as one rhetorical scholar argued, "the proper end of public deliberation must be to frame laws and social policies that will make such a life possible for members of the community. And the instrument of that deliberation is rhetoric."⁶⁶ But modern life has distanced individuals from the life of the community and the life of the *polis* as it stresses a more rational, self-centered, and technical form of public life. It

has elevated dialectic, Weaver believed, and demoted rhetoric: the very force needed to keep a community together.

The practice of rhetoric, however, requires the treatment of humans as absolute ends, gives us what James Herrick calls the “concept of choice as the outcome of deliberation guided by practical wisdom,” and leads us to exhibit “regard for people as givers and hearers of reasons, respect for argumentative context, and attending virtues such as rhetorical persistence.”⁶⁷ In other words, it is a practice that insists upon real people encountering other real people and struggling with the messy subjectivities of real human life while developing selves and maintaining communities. Because the practice of rhetoric is personal and tangible, it allows little room for abstraction; people are forced to encounter other members of the community and to internalize the community’s ethical system. Rhetoric is the means by which a community creates an ethical system, and the means by which it maintains its sense of solidarity.

In Weaver’s Agrarian scheme, community is the supreme concern—but the individual is still able to form herself within that community. Indeed, a sense of belonging to a community is the very thing that *allows* her to form herself; without it, she is ontologically and morally adrift. She must herself be what Weaver calls in *IDT* “the individual, the irreducible person [which is] the primary reality and the sole repository of virtue.”⁶⁸ Only when she becomes that entity can she be a full member of the community, and the community can subsequently draw upon her moral strength to sustain itself. This is not today’s solipsistic individualism, driven by narrow definitions of what Weaver described as “the establishment of a sophistical utility as the supreme sanction, [which] has ended with the setting up of the bitch-goddess Success, so that today it is an accepted excuse of any action to say that it ‘will pay.’”⁶⁹ Rather, it is a community-oriented

individualism: it knows that no person stands truly alone and that no person develops within a social and historical vacuum.

Weaver believed this type of individualism creates morality, and this creation of morality necessarily incorporates the concerns of the community, because as Christopher Johnstone put it, “the intelligent person chooses aims and conduct with a view both toward the satisfaction of immediate wants and toward the maintenance of conditions that will make future satisfactions the more likely and extensive.”⁷⁰ Johnstone argued that only concern for the community and stewardship of cultural life can make such conditions possible, and only direct encounters with “the human being as a living, experiencing creature that functions in and through relations with its environment” can make us look to others to help secure “moral selfhood.”⁷¹ To move beyond local encounters with fellow citizens is to enter the world of abstraction because we cannot directly grasp consequences; we fragment ourselves when we struggle with too many external realms of authority beyond the local. Weaver and the Agrarians therefore stress engagement and social life at as local a level as possible, as it was in the Old South, to help maintain the community and develop the self within the framework of “social bond” individualism.⁷²

Only when we are consistently exposed to the workings of our community, and subsequently gain a sense of our tyrannizing image and our community of mind, can we fully integrate ourselves into its ethical system. After all, only constant exposure to the concerns of others and daily reminders that we are not autonomous sovereigns can show us what it means to aim toward a noble communal end. This was the essence of Weaver’s misguided complaint about Thoreau: it’s easy to consider yourself a fully self-sufficient and self-formed individual when you live by yourself in the woods. But since we innately long for what Weaver called an “orientation toward something higher” than ourselves, something we did not create ourselves, we

must remain fixed members of a community.⁷³ We must integrate ourselves into the community in ways beyond dialectical definition; we must live as if there is something more that we cannot always fully understand. The goal, according to Weaver, is not uniform homogeneity such as that insisted upon by the North after the war. There is, he wrote in *LWP*, “a goal higher than unity. Unity means oneness. The goal is harmony. Harmony is the fruitful co-existence together of things diversified.”⁷⁴

This “harmony” has echoes of Danielle Allen’s concept of “wholeness,” which I explored briefly in the last chapter. Allen argues that true solidarity and community can only arise when we are able to envision something beyond the self: a body in which we fruitfully coexist. She writes that “Citizens who hold the conviction that politics is by, for, and of the people can assume a place in politics only by imagining ‘the people’ and a place for themselves in, or in relationship to, that body... citizens can explain their role in democracy only by expending significant conceptual and imaginative labor to make themselves part of an invisible whole.”⁷⁵ This “invisible whole” is not unity of belief but rather something closer to Weaver’s idea of harmony: people working together with common solidarity and sacrificing for each other and for the community of mind.

Weaver believed this harmony or wholeness is achieved through rhetoric, the ineffable but absolutely essential force that can move us beyond the definitions and boundaries proffered by dialectic. For Weaver, rhetoric wasn’t just an essential part of community and ethics: it was at the heart of formation of those created forces. Rhetoric, according to Johannesen et al., was for Weaver “axiological; it kneads values into our lives. Rhetoric is the cohesive force that molds persons into a community or culture... Rhetoric involves the making and presenting of choices among ‘goods’ and a striving toward some ultimate Good... it reflects choices and urges a

particular ‘ought.’”⁷⁶ Weaver believed that rhetoric *forms* an ethical system when we imagine a common enterprise in our community of mind—it leads us to a noble end because it is based on our repeated, local, human interactions. It is, furthermore, agrarian and holistic because it insists upon the de-fragmentation and reintegration of social life; it compels us to consider all things under the heading of an inscrutable nature and a cyclical pattern of human rises and falls.

If any thought in Weaver’s entire body of writings summarized his worldview, it is this one: “Rhetoric moves the soul with a movement which cannot be justified logically... It is impossible to talk about rhetoric as effective expression without having a term giving intelligibility to the whole discourse, the Good.”⁷⁷ We cannot consider rhetoric to be mere “effective expression,” which is the analytical approach most critics have taken when approaching Weaver’s work. Moreover, we cannot consider rhetoric of any kind without giving an intelligible term to rhetoric’s eventual purpose: since language is sermonic, as Weaver believed, it must instruct us and move us toward some noble end. That noble end, according to the Agrarians, is the cohesive community that shares a sense of solidarity. Rhetoric is what gets us to solidarity because it is rhetoric that tells us what is worth aiming for: not just *how* to get to a place or a feeling, but *why* we ought to get there.

Sermonic Language and Cultural Solidarity

The Southern Agrarians believed that at the heart of the derailment of Western civilization we would find one recurring theme: the collapse of standards of judgment, whether in art or in culture or in daily social life. As the Agrarians’ greatest disciple and expositor—one scholar of the South labeled Weaver the “Saint Paul” of Agrarianism—Weaver would take this indictment as his guiding assumption in all his cultural writings.⁷⁸ This is where Weaver derived one of his key ideas: “prejudice.” We tend to read this word today in an indisputably negative

sense; we equate it with “bias” and “discriminate” (though this latter word has also come unmoored from its meaning). When Weaver and the Agrarians used “prejudice,” they meant it in the original, Burkean sense: as a set of pre-judgments we bring to a given situation and which is formed by our history, our social contexts, and our particular traditions. A “prejudice,” one might say, is your set of moral and ethical assumptions that innately guide your behavior.

“Life without prejudice,” wrote Weaver, “were it ever to be tried, would soon reveal itself to be a life without principle. For prejudices, as we have seen earlier, are often built-in principles. They are the extract which the mind has made of experience.”⁷⁹ The problem, according to the Agrarians and later repeated by Weaver, is that modern life has increasingly compelled us to view all cultural things as wholly discrete and decontextualized: that we are to approach each item in culture free of our pre-judgments—that we are faced everywhere with the “erasing of those distinctions” that make us individuals and make cultures unique.⁸⁰ Only when we are allowed to retain such prejudices can we achieve cultural freedom, in the sense of freedom from homogenizing forces, which is the only way to achieve cultural solidarity.

Prejudices are expressed in language, and because words stand for ideas it is language itself that allows us to express our history and tradition in cultural and social matters. When we are asked by a homogenizing culture to erase distinctions between persons, Weaver believed, we are asked to reject the idea that words and ideas correspond. This was troubling to Weaver, of course, because he saw *definition* as one of the central tasks of both the teacher and the conservative—this is why the argument from definition was so prized by him as an ethical and beneficial argument. Weaver’s view is essentially one of Platonic logocentrism: he believed words corresponded to fixed realities, and that when we corrupt those words then we corrupt those realities. Hence: words, like ideas, have consequences.

At first blush this might not seem to have much to do with cultural solidarity and agrarianism. But to Weaver these concepts were, for good and ill, linked in the most fundamental of ways, and his theorizing here shows the strong influence of Ransom, Davidson, and other Agrarians. Recall that one of the tenets of agrarianism is that proximity to sources and consequences is ethically and socially beneficial, and that people must take a cosmological or ecological view of the world by seeing all things in relation to all other things. Doing so is the only path toward a cohesive culture, because if people start to view things as wholly discrete then they begin to fracture the oneness of organic culture. But in order to see things cosmologically, people need fixed points of reference—in culture no less than in astronomy.

The view of the Agrarians is that people once had such philosophical cosmology, and with it came linguistic cosmology. People could rely on terms meaning the same thing to them as to other members of their culture. Then, according to Weaver, came the pernicious doctrine of nominalism and its corresponding rupture of that term-concept link. This development confounded Weaver, who wrote that “a society cannot remain harmonious and healthy unless its use of language remains pure. ‘Pure’ in this sense means stable, because fixed with respect to semantic differences. More precisely, the feeling is that people cannot express the same idea or take the same attitude toward the same thing or agree on a policy which all will follow alike unless there is a certain minimal identity in the signification of the signs they employ, and the most common of these sins are linguistic.”⁸¹

This means that if people want a society to maintain any harmony at all, they should work to agree on basic definitions. If they lack basic agreement, Weaver wrote in *LS*, then “words have ceased to be a fixed medium of exchange, [and] each party that feels misunderstood because its meaning was not received in the form intended may react with passion, and this can

be the beginning of internecine strife.”⁸² Such strife disrupts cultural solidarity, which is the only way people can operate with a sense of shared purpose and common endeavor. The solution, according to Weaver, is for language to once again become sermonic. We think of “sermon” as meaning simply “preaching,” but the word’s etymology is actually a bit more complex. To sermonize is to preach or speak of something of moral value—to *instruct*, in other words, in the ways of a particular culture. To sermonize is to provide guidance based on fixed reference points.

Seen in this light, Weaver’s dictum that “language is sermonic” becomes a mantra of cultural solidarity. To use language properly is to form, reflect, and preserve a culture; rhetoric is therefore not just a corresponding feature but indeed the driving force of cultural solidarity. This is because while logic can provide definition and denotation, it is the *symbolic* and *spacious* meanings of terms that people must agree on if they are to form a cohesive culture, because those meanings reveal noble or ignoble ends. “Rhetoric has a relationship to the world which logic does not have and which forces the rhetorician to keep an eye upon reality,” Weaver wrote in *LS*, because the concerns of rhetoric are always the concerns of the world-as-it-could-be: the world people imagine together and create through language.⁸³ “With its forecast of the actual possibility, rhetoric passes from mere scientific demonstration of an idea to its relation to prudential conduct”: rhetoric is sermonic because it suggests the right path to choose, he wrote in *ER*.⁸⁴ Cohesive cultures will have their own way of speaking about things that prevents outsiders from final understanding, because the outsiders lack the history and tradition that guide prudential conduct. Language, tradition, context, and guidance all go together.

As Goodnight put it in an excellent interpretation of Weaver, “The goal of the rhetorician is to seek a consensus of belief. He recognizes that only when a people agree that a common

problem exists can there be an impetus towards its solution; that only when a people agree on the causes of a problem and the importance of the effects can there be hope of a reasoned solution; and, that only when a people agree upon the definition of a problem can there be a satisfactory solution at all.”⁸⁵ Without agreement on the situation facing a culture, its members cannot possibly be expected to form a community of mind and direct their efforts toward a noble end. When they use rhetoric and approach the situation symbolically, they inevitably form goals and use their historical and traditional contexts. “Men are such because they are born into history, with an endowment of passion and sense of the *ought*,” Weaver wrote in *LS*, and “life is therefore characterized by movement toward goals. It is largely the power of rhetoric which influences and governs that movement. For the same set of reasons, rhetoric is cognate with language.”⁸⁶ When people use language they deal in symbols, and when they use symbols they come to agreement on terms, and when they agree on terms we find cultural solidarity: rhetoric is to Weaver, therefore, the supreme cultural force. It is the unseen glue of a society that binds its members to each other and to their shared purpose.

Final Thoughts

Speech is a mirror of the soul, the aphorist Publilius Syrus famously observed, and as we speak, so are we. Surely this observation is at the heart of Weaver’s understanding of the cultural role of rhetoric. His analysis of rhetoric’s decline in culture was inspired by Ransom in *GWT* and other works of the Agrarians: the modern human had become captivated by scientific reasoning and the forces of dialectic, shunning myth and history and tradition in the name of unceasing progress and materialism. As Goodnight writes of Weaver’s diagnosis, “Twentieth century man had paradoxically become a proficient knower—making great advances in the areas of theoretical science and technology—but had simultaneously lost the ability of channeling that

knowledge toward a productive social order.”⁸⁷ Creating this “productive social order” is the purpose of the Agrarian notion of solidarity.

Noble ends and a higher purpose were Weaver’s goals for rhetoric. By “higher purpose” I do not mean anything in the divine realm, though Ransom’s emphasis on supernatural myth pervades Weaver’s writings. A higher purpose is the pursuit of the common good for a culture: people asking why they ought to be doing certain things, and not just how they might do them. If the culture is not aiming toward something, then what is the purpose of a culture? Finding the ought, to Weaver, was the very nucleus of activity for a cohesive culture. People know the ought of their culture because they are born and raised in it; they take in its history, its traditions, its collective memory and community of mind. As Weaver wrote in *VO*, “To *know* the right thing, without mediating thoughts as to what and when, is to be native born to the culture. An individual absorbs his native culture as he acquires his native tongue, with the most subtle shades of intonation... If a culture appears arbitrary in the preferences it makes and the lines it draws, this is because it is a willed creation.”⁸⁸

Absorbing a culture by acquiring a tongue: this thought is at the heart of Weaver’s conception of cultural solidarity. When people speak the language of a culture, they do not simply use words as “effective expression,” nor use terms whose underlying forms they do not innately understand. When people are formed in a culture, they are also formed in the fixed reference points of a culture’s terms. Without such reference points they cannot have the “willed creation” that is a cohesive culture, and it is through the language based on those points that a culture continually renews its solidarity and “makes itself felt in the style and conventions of its symbolic expressions or language.”⁸⁹ If man is the symbol-using animal, as Kenneth Burke had it, then a culture is the symbol-sharing entity.

Agreement on those symbols is essential, and creates a cultural covenant. According to Weaver:

“A covenant—and I like, in this connection, the religious overtones of the word—binds us at deeper levels and involves some kind of confrontation with reality. When we covenant with one another that a word shall stand for a certain thing, we signify that it is the best available word for that thing in the present state of general understanding... the convention or covenant of language must be treated as absolutely binding upon us, as far as our human condition permits, until a change is authorized by right reason.”⁹⁰

When people covenant and agree on terms, Weaver is arguing here, they form a culture and maintain its solidarity: “Now it must be evident that this conventional function of language is not possible unless there lies behind it *a oneness of mind*.”⁹¹ One can take “oneness of mind” here to reflect the agrarian concept of cultural solidarity.

Agrarian society, more so than industrial society, prizes solidarity for its emphasis on shared purpose. This arose from necessity: when times turn bad for subsistence farmers, they rely upon their neighbors for help. The goal is not just survival but community; when the Smiths help the Johnsons, they form something larger than each individual family. In modern society, the Agrarians believed, there is a much greater emphasis on separation and the lonely path of the individual. This is why Weaver wrote that while Chicago might be a great city, it could never be a great community: it is more a cluster of individuals than a group of people sharing values. It is hard to generate sympathy for someone eleven apartment buildings away, in other words, but much easier for someone who shares your fence. Solidarity in the agrarian scheme depends on nearness and tangibility, which compel people to align their cultural terms and definitions more often.⁹² Likewise in rhetorical criticism: when people use rhetoric to build societies and develop communities they are doing something greater than simply encouraging agency and opposing

discourses of power. They are acknowledging that symbols can and should be put to noble ends. They are acknowledging that the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts.

And yet Weaver's argument here for solidarity based on catholicity of terms poses an obvious problem for rhetorical scholars: how do we accept this and still confront the so-called "rhetorical turn" or "discursive turn" in philosophy and public life, and indeed our core belief that events are constructed through discourse? There is no doubt this is a lingering question in Weaver's work, and one that will likely not receive a satisfactory answer. It is the tendency of the liberal society—and here I mean "liberal" in the philosophical sense, to mean an emphasis on personal freedom and individual autonomy—to gradually lose the shared foundations of a culture. American liberals and American conservatives alike lament the disintegration of our social fabric, though they find different villains on whom to pin the blame. Is Weaver right that the root of the problem is our failure to agree upon terms? And if so, how are rhetorical critics—most of whom are committed to the idea that discourse is epistemic, and that the way we talk about things creates the reality of those things—supposed to react to this?

The best response, I think, lies in Weaver's roots. Weaver and the Agrarians praised the nearness and connectedness of the Old South. They thought the daily exposure to the customs and habits that revealed tradition and memory were an essential part of Southern society, which they saw as deeply solid and cohesive. The noble ends of Southern culture, the longing for something larger that helped distinguish it from the more industrial North, emerged from this seemingly quotidian highlighting of history and place. Solidarity, in short, was created through direct exposure and frequent accommodation of others.

This is where I believe rhetorical critics can pick up on Weaver's thesis even without embracing his idea that concrete realities underpin all our words. Given that we study

communication, perhaps rhetorical criticism can be a force for solidarity by expressing preference for those forms of discourse that reduce the distance between citizens. Surely the solidarity of civic life is improved when you know your neighbors as Tom and Susan rather than as mere faces in a crowd. Discourse and conversation with them on a regular basis forces you to know the instances where your history and tradition overlap with theirs, and thus exposure to them—whether in block parties, neighborhood meetings, or something larger—can help us feel a greater sense of shared purpose with them. We have a tendency in the United States to think of the activities of citizenship only in broad, political terms: national elections, acts of Congress, and so on. But perhaps more solidarity is formed in the quick chat with a neighbor than in the procedural machinations of the U.S. Senate.

In other words, *reduction of distance in communication is good for solidarity*. This is a fundamentally agrarian and anti-cosmopolitan argument. Weaver and the Agrarians believed that the human is capable of only so much sympathy, and that it is far easier to feel sympathy for a neighbor to whom you wave every day than, say, a genocide victim in the Middle East. The motto for agrarian solidarity might be: Think Locally, Act Locally. If we focus our cultural and civic efforts on those near us, and cultivate our relationships with those with whom we share customs and habits, perhaps we can find greater sense of shared purpose.

Rhetorical scholars are not just critics but also, and perhaps most importantly, *teachers*. We express preferences and values in our classes all the time, and often for the vague concept of “civic engagement.” An admirable goal to be sure, but how do we achieve it? Weaver and the Agrarians would want us to focus on engagement with those closest to us, radiating outward in concentric circles: in our classroom, on our campus, in our town, in our state, and only then in our nation. If solidarity is our goal, then we need to remake civic engagement and rhetorical

practice along agrarian lines. We need to eliminate the distance between those communicating in order to encourage a sense of shared purpose.

Finding shared purpose often means sacrificing some portion of our individual autonomy, as Allen argued, or even becoming complicit in a discourse of power—even a group of activist citizens, adjusting to each others' viewpoints and schedules, would meet this definition. If our stance as rhetorical critics—and, even more importantly, as *citizens*—is that such discourses are always and everywhere to be opposed, then what chance do we have of creating solidarity? Perpetual opposition to any discourse of power is an ontological cul-de-sac: it promises emancipation and freedom but delivers only atomism and isolation. What is the point of unrestricted agency and freedom from oppression if nothing is ever *created* with that ability? Why bother with effecting social change if to do so merely makes you complicit in a discourse of power? Opposing all discourses of power while offering no alternative save the primacy of the individual is not just intellectually unsophisticated but culturally stultifying.

Weaver always praised the *ordered* society: one in which people recognized different roles, appreciated the distinctions between cultures and persons, and worked to ensure a continued stability in social life. This may be too authoritarian a portrait for our libertarian era. But even those who most vocally trumpet the rights of the sovereign individual will eventually acknowledge the social value of some kind of unity of purpose, whether practical or metaphysical. If we are interested in achieving cultural solidarity in our age of fracture, it will require at least a small dose of Weaver's prescription. Rhetorical scholars should stress civic engagement and discourse on as local a level as possible—in terms of *nearness*, in other words. When rhetoric is locally focused, we can better form a community of mind and achieve some kind of consensus. Weaver's ideas of cultural solidarity can provide a conceptual starting point.

¹ I take my cue here from the late philosopher Richard McKay Rorty, who believed that “solidarity” should be the central feeling of democratic societies (under which term we’d include our democratic republic). Cf. many of his works, especially the second portion of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (U.S.A.: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and the final portion of *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (U.S.A.: Cambridge University Press, 1994), especially “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” pp. 175-196.

² Paul V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), Chapter 6 title page (“Agrarian in Exile: Richard M. Weaver and the Philosophy of Order”).

³ Raymie McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis,” *Communication Monographs* vol. 56, no. 2 (1989), 91-111, 91.

⁴ The so-called “General Assembly” of the Occupy Wall Street movement, which took the position that all viewpoints were equal and thus entitled to equal time for debate, became a classic and instant case study in the need for some kind of order. It is surely to be lamented that such a necessary movement collapsed under the weight of parliamentary relativism.

⁵ Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *peuple quebécois*,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, v. 73, no. 2 (1987), 133-150.

⁶ Michael C. McGee, “In Search of ‘The People’: A Rhetorical Alternative,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, v. 61, no. 3 (1975), 235-249.

⁷ Quoted in James A. Montmarquet, “Philosophical Foundations for Agrarianism,” *Agriculture and Human Values*, v. 2 (Spring 1985), 5-14.

⁸ Though note there’s also a strong argument to be made that we have moved much too far away from this idea into corporate, consolidated agriculture. And as I mentioned above, perhaps we too often dismiss the element of romance when speaking of ideal cultures. Yes, we romanticize the (perhaps apocryphal) idea of the early Republic’s virtuous yeomen. But perhaps our romanticizing merely reveals our desire to reclaim something that has been lost along the road to our present state. Rhetoric deals with symbols, and we rhetorical critics of all people should be slow to dismiss the value of symbols that resonate with something deep within us.

⁹ You could choose virtually any American artifact to support this: Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, contemporary novels by the Iowa writers Jane Smiley and Marilynne Robinson, the film *Field of Dreams*, et cetera. It is an incredibly enduring theme in American culture.

¹⁰ Berry (2002), 163.

¹¹ Eugene D. Genovese, *The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 3.

¹² This was not a justification for slavery, though it sounds a bit like one. A better way to think about it is as a system for boundaries and limits. For example, I accept that the priest at my parish has a certain role in my community while my dentist has another. What the Agrarians rejected was the idea that any person could be anything he or she wanted, and the modern equalitarian idea (an extreme but not uncommon one) that my claim to possessing sacerdotal power is the same as the priest’s.

¹³ M.E. Bradford, “Is The American Experience Conservative?” in *The Reactionary Imperative: Essays Literary & Political* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden & Company, 1990), 140.

¹⁴ Donald Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1958), 45.

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- ¹⁵ M.E. Bradford, “The Agrarian Tradition: An Affirmation,” in *Remembering Who We Are: Observations of a Southern Conservative* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1985), 86.
- ¹⁶ M.E. Bradford, *A Better Guide Than Reason: Federalists and Anti-Federalists* (U.S.A.: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 29.
- ¹⁷ Genovese (1994), 102.
- ¹⁸ Bradford, “Agrarian Tradition” (1985), 86.
- ¹⁹ Genovese (1994), 80.
- ²⁰ Clearly, this is a rosy interpretation of the antebellum South. It should be clear by now that the Agrarians, and later Weaver, usually remembered, wrote about, and advocated the resurrection of the very best parts of the Old South, while pointedly overlooking exactly what horrors that “republic of order and hierarchy” included.
- ²¹ Genovese (1994), 3.
- ²² Paul K. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 82.
- ²³ It might seem confusing to see “individualism” and “mass” in the same sentence. Weaver and the Agrarians believed that a consumption-oriented society encouraged each individual to pursue his or her own material ends and desires, and that self-actualization and profit were the pinnacles of achievement. All of these consuming individuals taken together formed a “mass” consuming society—thus the strange pairing of these two terms.
- ²⁴ Conkin (1988), 172.
- ²⁵ Conkin (1988), 171. Here Conkin means in comparison to other groups of critics like the New York intellectuals, for example.
- ²⁶ Bradford, “The Agrarian Tradition” (1985), 86.
- ²⁷ This is a skewed interpretation of Thoreau, as I will explain below.
- ²⁸ Though beyond the scope of this project, it is worth noting that this view is a direct intellectual descendant of Adam Smith’s “impartial spectator” idea in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.
- ²⁹ Allen Tate, “Notes on Liberty and Property,” in Herbert Agar & Allen Tate (eds.), *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999), 123.
- ³⁰ Aldo Leopold, “The Farmer as a Conservationist,” in Edwin C. Hagerstein, Sara M. Gregg, & Brian Donahue (eds.), *American Georgics: Writings on Farming, Culture, and the Land* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 307.
- ³¹ John Crowe Ransom, “Happy Farmers,” *The American Review* v. 1, no. 5 (October 1933), 528.
- ³² Herbert Agar, “The Task for Conservatism,” *The American Review* v. 3, no. 1 (April 1934), 3.
- ³³ Agar (1934), 3.
- ³⁴ Murphy (2001), 158.
- ³⁵ *STB*, 224.
- ³⁶ *ER*, 125.
- ³⁷ *VO*, 26.
- ³⁸ *VO*, 63.
- ³⁹ G. Thomas Goodnight, “Rhetoric and Culture: A Critical Edition of Richard M. Weaver’s Unpublished Works,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1978), 37.
- ⁴⁰ *LS*, 180.
- ⁴¹ Goodnight (1978), 38.
- ⁴² Goodnight (1978), 39.

⁴³ *ER*, 211.

⁴⁴ *LWP*, 18.

⁴⁵ *LWP*, 65. This essay, “Two Types of American Individualism,” originally appeared in the Spring 1963 issue of *Modern Age*—thus appearing at the very end of Weaver’s life. Randolph represented for conservatives at the time a sort of Cincinnatus figure, humble in practice but resonant in stature, who returned to his farming life after government service. Weaver also praises him for freeing all his plantation’s slaves in his will, while “heartily regretting that I have ever been the owner of one.” Randolph was the subject of a biography by Weaver’s friend Russell Kirk, a giant figure of the midcentury traditional conservative scene.

⁴⁶ *LWP*, 71.

⁴⁷ *LWP*, 71-72, emphasis added.

⁴⁸ Quoted by Weaver in *LWP*, 73-74.

⁴⁹ *LWP*, 74.

⁵⁰ *LWP*, 90-91.

⁵¹ Joseph Scotchie, *Barbarians in the Saddle: An Intellectual Biography of Richard M. Weaver* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 102.

⁵² *LWP*, 86.

⁵³ Fred Douglas Young, *Richard M. Weaver, 1910-1963: A Life of the Mind* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 123, emphasis in original.

⁵⁴ *LWP*, 86, emphasis added.

⁵⁵ *LWP*, 74.

⁵⁶ *LWP*, 79.

⁵⁷ *LWP*, 80-81.

⁵⁸ Though this example is deeply instructive for an understanding of Weaver’s ideas on rhetoric and community, his understanding of Thoreau is, frankly, rather misleading and disappointingly shortsighted. Thoreau was a complex and nuanced thinker whose internal struggles were borne out on the page. In “Civil Disobedience,” as in “Walden,” you can see him arguing with himself about many of the issues discussed. When he asks “Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then?” he is genuinely exploring the issue and not, as Weaver seems to think, *only* advocating dialectical principles. (See Carl Bode [ed.], *The Portable Thoreau* [New York: Penguin Books, 1982], 111.) I think what we see here in Weaver is a bit of cherry-picking from Thoreau’s many works in order to create a philosophical opponent for the venerated Randolph. It might also be worth noting that Thoreau was hardly as isolated at Walden as Weaver seems to think. He walked into town and visited with people nearly every day, and he acknowledged that he was living in a cabin owned by a fellow community member—namely, his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson.

⁵⁹ For a contemporary example of this problem, consider the recent laws passed in some states allowing open carry of large, military-grade weapons in virtually all public places. This is a classic instance of dialectic triumphing, Weaver would surely argue. We uphold the abstract principle of absolute gun ownership rights, but we lose the solidarity created by a community in which people feel safe. The gun rights advocates, he would likely say, are merely pursuing freedoms without any thought given to their obligations to others.

⁶⁰ *VO*, 11-12, emphasis added.

⁶¹ Jay P. Childers, “The Democratic Balance: President McKinley’s Assassination as Domestic Trauma,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, v. 99, no. 2 (May 2013), 171.

⁶² *VO*, 10.

⁶³ *STB*, 42.

⁶⁴ *SE*, 210.

⁶⁵ *IDT*, 485.

⁶⁶ Christopher L. Johnstone “An Aristotelian Trilogy: Ethics, Rhetoric, Politics, and the Search for Moral Truth,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1980), 2.

⁶⁷ James A. Herrick. “Rhetoric, Ethics, and Virtue,” *Communication Studies*, vol. 43, no. 3 (1993), 138, 145.

⁶⁸ *IDT*, 532.

⁶⁹ *IDT*, 677. This is undoubtedly the harshest and most profane sentence in the Weaver canon.

⁷⁰ Johnstone (1983), 189.

⁷¹ Johnstone (1983), 187.

⁷² This makes Weaver’s view somewhat aligned with that of John Dewey, who is so roundly loathed by many contemporary conservatives. Dewey, however, for all his advocacy of local engagement, was dismissive of physical proximity as a requirement for culture, and was a proponent of technological development as an aide to democracy. These latter views are where he and the Agrarians would have parted ways.

⁷³ *VO*, 91.

⁷⁴ *LWP*, 112.

⁷⁵ Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 16-17.

⁷⁶ Richard L. Johannesen, Rennard Strickland, & Ralph T. Eubanks, “Richard M. Weaver on the Nature of Rhetoric: An Interpretation,” in *LS*, 17-18.

⁷⁷ *ER*, 23.

⁷⁸ Murphy (2001), 152.

⁷⁹ *LWP*, 12.

⁸⁰ *LWP*, 3. A popular—if hyperbolic and perhaps apocryphal—example in conservative circles is to describe the young humanities scholar who insists there is no distinction between the sonnets of Shakespeare and, say, the rap lyrics of Jay-Z, because both are simply poetry and neither one can be “better” than the other. I should also note here that in their later years, several of the original Southern Agrarians embraced this very view. Ransom in particular had an evolution of thought that can only be described as bizarre. He advocated making peace with industrialism, rejected the idea of faith, embraced the ideas of John Dewey, and, with Tate, Warren, and Cleanth Brooks (Weaver’s dissertation director at LSU), became a leading voice in the “New Criticism,” which looks at literature in total isolation from historical and biographical and cultural context. The best description comes in Conkin (1988), especially (and appropriately), “Part V: In Retreat.” Here is Conkin on Ransom in later years: “At times he pushed his claims to the extreme, insisting in 1941 that his poetic theory constituted a science, a new kind of science involving a new kind of discourse.” This was a stunning shift for Ransom, akin to Richard Dawkins enrolling in divinity school.

⁸¹ *LS*, 116.

⁸² *LS*, 116.

⁸³ *LS*, 208.

⁸⁴ *ER*, 21.

⁸⁵ Goodnight (1978), 44.

⁸⁶ *LS*, 221, emphasis in original.

⁸⁷ *Goodnight* (1978), 52-53.

⁸⁸ *VO*, 12, emphasis in original.

⁸⁹ *Goodnight* (1978), 69.

⁹⁰ *LS*, 136.

⁹¹ Weaver, “The Strategy of Words,” speech delivered at the Lake Bluff Woman’s Club in 1962, in *Goodnight* (1978), 548, emphasis added.

⁹² This is not just an Agrarian or agrarian argument: recall Heidegger’s famous observation in *Being and Time* that modernity abolishes all distances, but brings no nearness.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

If words are all we have as world and god, we must treat them with care and rigor; we must worship.

– David Foster Wallace

When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.

– John Muir

Richard Weaver did not care for much of modern life. He variously inveighed against cities, industrialism, the degradation of language, relativism, democracy, liberalism, individualism, and many other things we accept as cultural givens. He has been pigeonholed, in our field and others, as a curmudgeon: he saw things he did not like and mounted ferocious, if usually lonely, crusades against them. He clung to a romanticized idea of what once was, this version of the Weaver story goes, and his legacy is one of unrelenting complaints about the loss of order, tradition, and social bonds.

This depiction, however, is an unfair and incomplete categorization of a wide-ranging, highly original, and heavily influential social philosopher. Little attention has been paid, whether by rhetoric or by fields like political philosophy, to other dimensions of Weaver's arguments. Yes, Weaver was a critic, but to deploy that old canard of parenting, he criticized because he loved. As a biographer notes, Weaver "loved and cherished" his culture and background "but had come to see its flaws well enough so as to gain a certain detachment."¹ He saw good elements of the American way of life that were being slowly corroded by the forces of materialism, sophistry, and nominalism. Weaver was above all a preservationist: he saw good and tried to nurture it; saw virtue and tried to maintain it; saw culture and tried to safeguard it.

Weaver penned his scathing critiques of modern life and appreciations of bygone days mostly in the 1940s and 1950s. That we now look back on many of those years as a golden age

of American community and social cohesion suggests that Weaver would be horrified by what he would find today: a rights-obsessed culture whose members press for personal autonomy above obligation in all spheres; the steady decline of social bond institutions like churches and community groups; the displacement of cosmological explanations by an arrogant scientism that purports to explain all consciousness and morality through empiricism; and a relentless and chattering mass media that elevates spectacle over substance. Perhaps it is a better time than ever to reconsider the ideas of a man who waged lonely wars against these forces. Perhaps it is doubly appropriate to see that man as more than simply a theorist of how rhetoric ought to be used.

To see Weaver as *only* a scholar of rhetoric, arguing vociferously against corruption of language and sophistry in public life, is an unjust reduction of a career—akin to seeing Adam Smith as merely a describer of pin factories. And yet this is exactly how our discipline has remembered and appraised Weaver: as someone who devised an interesting, if methodologically tenuous, theory of argument and terminology. To see Weaver solely in this light is to make the very ontological mistake that the man himself saw in modern life. Just as humankind's place in the world must conform to a broader cosmological vision, so too must Weaver's rhetorical theories be seen as just one element of his larger project.

For Weaver, rhetoric was a tool for building just and moral societies. It was the means through which moral truths were apprehended, and the way in which a person's underlying ideals and principles were revealed. To be a moral rhetor, for Weaver, was to be a moral person. Rhetoric must be at the heart of society because corruption of *words* betrays corruption of *thoughts*. To reduce this vision is to miss the stakes of the problem he was trying to diagnose. The battle for moral rhetoric is a battle for the souls of humans themselves, Weaver believed.

There was too much at stake in society, he thought, for rhetoric to be reduced to circumstantial arguments or supplanted by the cold rationality of dialectic.

In this dissertation I have argued that the best way to understand Weaver is as heir to the intellectual tradition of the Southern Agrarians, his teachers and friends. This in itself is not a novel argument. The neo-Agrarian M.E. Bradford argued that Southern Agrarianism “found its final completion in Weaver’s more general and sustained excursions into social theory, rhetoric, educational philosophy, intellectual history, and related fields... Always Weaver remained *inside* the tradition he appropriated through the Agrarians, a tradition always ‘at bay’ and always defensible.”² A common conclusion in the fields of history and philosophy is that Weaver was the central voice in maintaining the Agrarian critique.

Weaver was interested not just in social preservation but in social *construction*: he meant for his criticism to spur a remaking of society along different lines—along *older* lines. This remaking requires, as Weaver quotes Nathaniel Hawthorne arguing, “love for an invisible hypothesis.”³ Weaver built upon this idea in *ER* with his notion of “spaciousness,” or ideas that ring true with all people in a given culture even if they lack “definite correspondences.”⁴ The key requirement for building a better society is an increased usage of and reliance upon such spaciousness, which people are able to recognize because there is a broadly shared definition—a sort of cultural enthymeme. It is a social tool that relies upon ideas of shared authority: it “is acceptable only when we accredit someone with the ability to review our conduct, our destiny, and the causes of things in general,” as he put in in *ER*.⁵

But how, in a pluralistic and democratic society, are we to find such sources of authority? Weaver’s ideas for building a better society rely, at so deep a level they cannot be sidelined, on a Judeo-Christian rendering of the world that allows for ultimate, Godly authority over

preternaturally dualistic humans. Even the most ardent Weaver supporter surely recognizes that such a conception is a virtual nonstarter in a thoroughly secularized America. But what I have argued here is that Weaver's Agrarian philosophy—moving more closely toward sources and consequences; being of a place and finding culture in that place; finding spacious ideas around which to form local solidarity—represents a kind of secularized version of things around which we can rally, and, crucially, that these things can go beyond the tired triumvirate of rights, security, and prosperity. For if scholars hope to recapture parts of Weaver's project of a rhetoric that advances people toward noble ends, then those ends cannot derive from our current national idols: economic growth at all costs, efficiency as an intrinsic end, worship of technology, and relentless expansion of individual rights with no heed paid to obligations.

In this final chapter, I will take a broader view of Weaver's ideas. I will first examine what rhetoric education has been and what it can again be in terms of moral formation for citizens, then explore how Agrarian rhetoric might be a possible model for rhetorical education and rhetorical criticism and contrast it with an example from contemporary scholarship. Next, I will discuss the main flaws and drawbacks of Weaver's program and suggest situations in which his ideas might help or hinder. I will examine further the idea of solidarity, which should be of central concern for rhetorical scholars, and suggest an agrarian-empathic format for our work. Finally I will recap the main arguments of this dissertation and offer some concluding thoughts on Weaver's agrarian rhetoric.

Rhetoric as Moral Education

In the first chapter, I mentioned that Pat Gehrke's study of our field's history found that "growth of the soul" was once a central concern of a comparatively unified field of rhetoric. But the fragmenting of our field in the last half-century has mirrored the fragmenting of our society.

As Gehrke tells it, we began to distrust grand narratives and shifted our focus from *guarding* civilization to *exposing* its more unjust elements at every possible opportunity. With this development, and the rise of postmodernism, came a reluctance to accept that there even existed knowable concepts like “noble” and even “truth.” As Gehrke writes, “In place of knowable, objective truth came a view of truth as a product of human interactions and relations. From this view, rather than truth governing the operation of rhetoric, rhetoric was instead the force that gave the truth-value to truths. Truth, then, *was a contingent phenomenon.*”⁶

Worse, Gehrke says, the rise of critical rhetoric and ideological criticism turned rhetoricians away from seeking or instilling truth and toward what they called permanent critique and permanent politicization. Attention was now paid to “which rhetorical theories and methods were most appropriate for achieving emancipatory political purposes.”⁷ Scholars who opposed critical rhetoric and permanent critique were called “complicit in continuing the social and political ills against which many rhetorical theorists and critics positioned their work.”⁸

I raise these issues for several reasons, all of which suggest the need for a correction in the path of our discipline. First, the notion of truth being entirely contingent may be appealing for a relativistic, socially constructed worldview, but it is also diametrically opposed to the goal of a liberal arts education. As rhetoric is a liberal art—chief among them, according to Weaver—it is spurious to cast our entire field as one without some kind of higher or larger good. If there is no truth beyond the socially constructed, contingent version of truth, and thus nothing to which the human can aspire, then what is it exactly that we *do* as rhetorical scholars and teachers?

If we assume there is no truth beyond the self—and the self is always and everywhere the necessary center of a socially constructed world—then we have reduced rhetoric to instrumental reason. We have made it yet another thing that one does because there is some possibility of

personal gain or utility, and not because there may be some intrinsic good within it. If we can no longer claim an intrinsic good, as so many other areas within the liberal arts seem unable or unwilling to do, then we have simply redefined ourselves as the economic creatures Weaver bemoaned. Failure to offer a measurable economic benefit to students will result in the slow withering of our field.

Second, a stance in rhetorical studies of permanent critique is not a workable philosophy. We cannot train students to be opposed to every discourse of power, and to always work to expose any instance of power. If we do, we are offering them nothing beyond the ability to see some narrowly defined unfairness and deem it so. This is problematic for two reasons: first, it convinces students that labeling something unfair in a classroom is the same as working to change it; second, it weakens the authority we still claim as teachers. If we must be opposed to discourses of power, then we have undermined our very position as someone with knowledge to pass on to others. Permanent critique inadvertently leads to opposition to the discourse of power adumbrated by teachers at the beginning of every class.

Teaching someone to question every discourse of power is not education: it is instruction in what the novelist David Foster Wallace called “spectation”—the practice of standing on the edges of democratic life, rather than participating meaningfully and sincerely in that life. The stance of permanent critique is not just intellectually unsophisticated but in fact intellectually *lazy*.⁹ It is designed for tearing down power structures and only rarely for replacing them with something new. Weaver saw rhetoric, as most of our field once did, as a tool for building ethical societies. But the critical rhetoric enterprise is not concerned with this potential tool, because it opposes the discourse of power underlying the notion that we might build a society with laws, customs, and codes of behavior. Such a stance is purely theoretical, and never practical.

Third, the dissolution of standards of truth and noble ends and the expansion of the emancipatory project mask a more troubling reality: a field cannot proceed without ethical underpinnings any more than a person can. At some point, the individual and the discipline alike must finally land somewhere—must finally decide that *this is what I do and this is why I do it*—and the assumption of an ethical stance will inevitably be exclusionary in some fashion.¹⁰ I hasten to add that I do not advocate resurrecting the Old South, nor joining Weaver's call for traditional roles for women. But people cannot proceed without an ethical stance, and it needs to be superior to a permanent opposition to anything that smacks of privilege or power. People use ethics in their own lives to *build* things: friendships, childhoods, standards of personal behavior, expectations of others. In other words, they believe that one manner of behaving is superior to another and they make clear their assumptions in that very behavior—they move themselves toward noble ends that they have defined for themselves.

What are the noble ends for rhetoric, both in criticism and in instruction? Is our purpose merely to criticize and tear down? It is one thing to defend those marginalized unfairly, but surely our task must not stop there; surely we must also outline a broader picture of a better culture. If we are going to tell students or colleagues to follow some behavior because it is better than another—and this occurs in the classroom and the journal article each day—then at some point we need to determine the ends of that behavior, and why those ends are worth pursuing.

Agrarian Rhetoric as a Model for Criticism and Education

Weaver's heretofore overlooked Agrarian education and philosophy offers a potential model for rhetoric's moral center and social goals. Agrarian philosophy prizes practical knowledge over scientific technique, rootedness in place over abstract cosmopolitanism, and

community cohesion over aggregation of atomized individuals. The discipline of rhetoric, in both its critical and pedagogical avenues, can adopt these three concepts as a model for itself.

First, practical knowledge: rhetoric is about more than mere persuasive strategies, tones, and implied audiences. Use of symbols and language to persuade is a tremendous power, and such persuasion never occurs in a social vacuum where all that matters is a congeries of accumulated rhetorical techniques. Further, rhetoric is incompatible with mechanism; one could never follow a formula that says “If audience response is positive, move to rhetorical strategy B—argument from circumstance.” The power of rhetoric simply cannot be isolated into discrete strategies that can be deployed scientifically. In our own culture, saturated with the banality of infotainment sound bites and the stage-managed oratory of TED talks and Silicon Valley product announcements, it can be difficult to think of rhetoric as something more than structured presentation or performance. But the best rhetoric, as Burke made so clear, is that which helps us identify with one another in order to overcome the perpetual divisions that plague humankind’s majestic and mundane pursuits. Rhetoric must be about something more than sales, public opinion, or elections: it must move people closer together within a broader picture of cosmological wholeness and harmony. It must be built upon a foundation of what has come before in order to reach forward to what comes next.

This is why the *practice* aspect of Weaver’s agrarian rhetoric is so important. In agrarianism, knowledge comes not from scientific or technical thinking but from an evolving body of knowledge that builds upon its practitioners and traditions alike. Each generation adds to the whole picture of land-based pursuits; each user of the land draws from a reservoir of communal knowledge and experience. Most importantly, each person knows that he or she is participating in a broad web of agriculture and community endeavor: what happens in one field

affects what happens in another, and the work done in one season directly dictates what produce is reaped in the next. Each element of agrarian knowledge is an inseparable part of a whole—they can never be divided into piecemeal components of the entire process.

Likewise with agrarian rhetoric, then: scholars must recognize that each symbol or piece of language exists in a whole spectrum of symbols that affect and are affected by each other. Weaver's argument from definition, for example, can never be an isolated persuasive. An argument from definition can only truly succeed when an underlying form backs up the concept in both the rhetor's and audience's mind; when metaphysical bases for terms are agreed upon; and when the definition in question spaciouly resonates with the broader structure of symbols in that particular community of mind. Far from being technical and strictly rational, this version of rhetoric is rooted in the shared tradition and knowledge being continuously shaped by the very people who act upon it.

To use Susanne Langer's terms, rhetoric is not *discursive* but rather *presentational*.¹¹ The former term refers to rational, strictly enumerated discourse: that which has denotative elements of meaning, can be defined on formulaic terms, and can be understood by the processes of rationality. Presentational forms, by contrast, are contextually dependent and can only be understood within a web of relations to the whole—they are cosmological, to use Weaver's term. Rhetoric is not a set of denotative terms that can be understood through mechanistic rationality—it is in fact closer to an art that occurs *in situ* and *in totum*, contingent upon an audience to endow it with metaphysical meaning and to understand it as a uniting force. A *presentational* understanding of rhetoric elevates the importance of practical knowledge even further, for only those schooled in a tradition of connotative knowledge can truly grasp the reach of rhetoric.

Then what might a *placed* rhetoric look like? In chapter 3 I asserted that a metaphysical community of mind can only cohesively exist in a limited, tangible place. This applies to rhetoric as well, in Weaver's agrarian scheme. If people are asked to broaden their community of mind to accommodate the maximalist ambitions of cosmopolitanism, then too much is asked of them. The narrowest rhetoric is often the most effective rhetoric, as people are naturally tribal beings who feel most comfortable inside a familiar web of symbols. When Weaver praised the placed rhetoric of the Old South, he was praising a community of mind that equated metaphysical forms with the place in which those forms arose and were perpetuated. Just as the land is inseparable from the agrarians who work it, so too is placed rhetoric inseparable from the inhabitants who invest a place with certain symbols.

It is a common belief in agrarianism that the land is more than its elements: a particular place is more than the soil, grasses, trees, and even people that compose it. It becomes something more when people rely upon and nurture it, and when they invest it with symbolic significance that transcends their own limited experience with it. Being of a place means situating oneself along a continuum, with the knowledge that the place predated you and will outlast you. Far from the dogmas of modern techno-scientific rhetoric, which encourages domination and mastery over nature, agrarian rhetoric fosters a sense of human limits and recognition of what is larger than the self.

Rhetorical scholars and teachers can use this doctrine of placed rhetoric to cultivate a greater sense of permanence and stewardship in symbol use. If rhetoric, as Weaver believed, is how we apprehend moral truths about self and society, then citizens need a fixed sense of how those truths are enacted. People need the daily repetition and daily exposure of moral truths *in a particular place*. It is not enough for them to simply hear "Be kind to your neighbors"—they

need to see kindness enacted on the Thompson family next door. The community of mind that values kindness will have much more sway and significance when its symbols are seen and lived by its members as often as possible. If one goal of rhetoric is to overcome division through identification, then surely the closest and most tangible connections between people and symbols are the best candidates for identification. In this sense, rhetoric should be as *local* as possible—that is, both the physical *and* metaphysical gap between rhetor and audience should be narrow. Successful rhetoric is that which can thrive on, and so help build, neighborly relations.

Weaver believed a rhetorical community of mind could only coexist within a cohesive, intact, regional culture that existed in a certain—and limited—place. This means that citizens need to focus more on what they have in common than on what sets them apart. Rhetorical scholars have an obvious opportunity here: critical rhetoric and ideological criticism have focused on *difference* in the past three decades, and on what aspects of our identity make us free, autonomous, untethered beings free from oppression and domination. Unfortunately, it is the very bonds of community—and the normative social codes those bonds produce—that are often seen as serving discourses of power. Being told to act a certain way, or to embody a certain script in the spirit of communal cohesion, is a nonstarter in the critical rhetoric project. And yet acting a certain way and sacrificing some small measure of agency is exactly how community is formed.

Attaching ourselves to a place, and to the rhetoric that forms in that place's community of mind, allows us to look past the twin urges of mobility and progress and instead focus on *being* in that place, which can create harmony among the community of mind's members. According to the scholar Peter King, "Harmony is a concern for permanence, for settlement, for what we might call dwelling. To concentrate on dwelling allows us to focus our actions in their fullness..."

We dwell because we are capable of establishing and operating conventions which moderate and regulate our relations with others.”¹² Moderating our relations to others, not perpetually striving for autonomy unloosed from all social constraints, is what allows us to create the metaphysical community of mind based on symbols with underlying forms.

Without accommodating ourselves in some way to ends larger than ourselves, we never participate meaningfully in social life, and symbolic accommodation in a place is one of the central paths to community. Only when we accept, however marginally, the communal good of the noble ends rhetoric strives for do we finally become more than a collection of discrete selves; only then do we begin to exist as a culture *in a place*. Placed rhetoric is tangible rhetoric: rhetoric we see enacted each day by people we know and trust and live with. We are far more likely to accommodate ourselves to noble rhetoric when it is in service of a place to which we attach some sense of permanence—when the noble end is not some indefinable “progress” but is instead social cohesion in a place we nurture and cultivate. Agrarian rhetoric is *direct* rhetoric, in contrast to the nebulous abstractions of cosmopolitanism: it is rhetoric that moves us closer to a place and to our fellow citizens within that place. Agrarian rhetoric asks us to settle, to limit, and to grow together.

The third component of Weaver’s agrarian rhetoric, solidarity, is the most obvious candidate to be taken up by rhetorical scholars—as solidarity has, named as such or not, been one of the central preoccupations of rhetoric for millennia. In the first chapter I defined solidarity as the feeling of common pursuit that comes with belonging to a specific and tangible set of experiences, and which helps bind one to other members of a group. Spacious symbols are one of the central things around which people can and do rally to find common pursuit. Indeed, we might go so far as to say that spacious symbols are the *only* things around which people rally.

The key point in Weaver's idea is that the spacious symbols need to have a transcendent form at their base—something that a metaphysical community of mind can agree on as a noble end.

One need only briefly survey political campaign material to see the centrality of potent symbols like “gun rights” and “low taxes.” But Weaver argued that a hollow solidarity is formed around symbols like these, which serve more to divide and isolate people into discrete ideological groups than to bring them together. The solidarity of Weaver and the Southern Agrarians is more tightly centered on the spaciousness of a community of mind. For Weaver, this attitude comes from the lifestyles of subsistence farmers in the Old South, whose very survival sometimes depended on sacrifices by others. Though privately owned, the land for these farmers was never something wholly separate from neighboring land, and this attitude was reinforced in the social relations of the farmers themselves. They helped others because they were engaged in the same pursuit, and because success of the community depended on the altruism and participation of each member.

The subsistence farmer would not have recognized the “emancipation” at the heart of the critical rhetoric project, because he would not have recognized self-cultivation and self-formation as the highest good of the autonomous citizen. The discourse of power so denounced by the critical rhetorician—the community that dictates standards of behavior and norms for daily life—was for the subsistence farmer the very thing that made daily living palatable and possible. The community was where one turned when she needed help, and in return for that help she placed the greater good ahead of her own needs and desires.

Further, we cannot expect to build—or rebuild, as Weaver would say—a decent and just society if we simply assume that “society” is an aggregation of atomistic utility-maximizers, each one free to do as she chooses without any social constraint or thought paid to the greater

good. Freedom and liberty, for Weaver and the Agrarians, were not the *end* of the journey but the *inception*: freedom was the beginning of responsibility. Just as becoming a farmer is the beginning of stewardship and cultivation, so too is becoming a citizen the beginning of responsible and morally beneficial participation in civic life. We cannot very well rally around spacious symbols if we refuse to recognize what binds us to each other and what we owe to each other.

So how might rhetorical scholars encourage solidarity? First, we need to recapture the idea of rhetoric as a teleological endeavor. This means combining the idea of persuasion with the idea of teleology, giving us a way to pursue rhetorical identification while understanding why and for what purpose we seek that identification. If we are to teach students the means of persuasion, then surely we must also teach them both the responsibility that accompanies persuasion and the ways to understand the noble ends of persuasion—or at least the ability to define their and their communities' noble ends. Merely teaching students the *how* of persuasion without also teaching the *why* makes our field little more than glorified salesmanship—a course in mere compliance-gaining without a broader understanding of the social and ethical context in which persuasion occurs. Making democratic solidarity or local solidarity a central goal of persuasion is one way to recapture the teleological dimension of rhetoric: we persuade in order to identify in order to pursue something together in this place.

Second, rhetorical criticism—which, as I explain below, should be secondary to rhetorical education—should aim upward toward synthesis and holistic understanding, not downward toward increasingly specialized interpretations of texts that speak to narrow groups. To take an almost random example (such is the extent of critical rhetoric's grip on contemporary criticism), consider an essay from a recent issue of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. In this essay

Charles E. Morris III, a prominent rhetorical critic, offers a “queer interpretation” of Abraham Lincoln, whom he describes as a “queer resource of troubling and propulsive indeterminacy and inducement regarding sexuality, which is also then intersectionally to say race, gender, class, age, ability, and more.”¹³ His goal is not to examine Lincoln’s rhetoric per se, or to find what spacious ideas we might find therein, but rather to contest a non-“queer” reading of Lincoln by rhetoricians and historians and instead reclaim him as a “contested” site: this “boundary queering, though long a source of heteronormative and homophobic dominance, affords opportunities for queer worldmaking through disruptive undoings of historically leveraged ‘truths’ and normativities, challenges to institutional and individual violences, and enticing invitations to rhetorical reconstitutions.”¹⁴

In other words, the goal of the critical rhetorician here is not to *find* truth but to contest the very idea of “truths” and “normativities.” Implicitly rejected here, in fact, is the idea that a communally defined noble end for rhetoric could even exist; the noble end, by contrast, seems to be the ability of the individual agent to engage in her own “worldmaking” by challenging institutional “violences” and engaging in “reconstitutions.” Anything that imposes a constraint on individual action—or, here, anything that suggests a truth is contained in a text—is to be viewed askance. I see little opportunity here for rhetoric to be a force for social solidarity. In fact, rhetoric here seems closer to being a force for *division*: something in which truth is always contingent, interpretations are always personal and subjective, and notions of the good are always relative.

Perhaps none of this is objectionable on its face. But it’s hard to determine exactly what this type of rhetorical scholarship is *for*. Gone in Morris’ telling is Lincoln the orator, Lincoln the great leader, and Lincoln the iconic American unifier. Morris wants to redefine Lincoln “as a

mnemonic wedge and rhetorical catalyst that potentially troubles and opens reflection, engagement, and voice, constituting material and meaningful interventions against multiple injustices and violences in schools and beyond them.”¹⁵ Lincoln, to put it differently, is now a symbol that can be used to oppose discourses of power, to “trouble” the notion that a spacious idea can unite us and move us toward noble ends. To Lincoln’s famous assertion that a house divided against itself cannot stand, it is easy to imagine the critical rhetorician’s response: Who are *you* to tell me I’m a member of a house?¹⁶

Problems of the Weaver Rhetorical Program

To this point, my analysis of Weaver’s work has largely been sympathetic, as I see in Weaver some valuable ideas that our field and culture might recover. But there are, of course, many flaws in Weaver’s views. They are often ethnocentric. They rely perhaps too heavily on old ways of living left behind by urbanization and industrialization. They do not leave much room for people who are reluctant to accept their metaphysical premises. They are sometimes inhospitable to pluralism, suspicious of democracy, and out of step with much of modern life. Here I’d like to explore two hypothetical examples—one that might benefit from Weaver’s ideas, and one that might suffer—in order to understand the advantages and disadvantages of his theories.

An area that would do well to adopt Weaver’s Agrarian idea is charity and philanthropy. One of the few benefits of the massive centralization of capital in the last half-century is the explosion in the growth of foundations and global charities. It is easier than ever to direct dollars to the populations and causes most in need of help. Foundations, non-governmental organizations, and sprawling advocacy groups have brought new energy and focus to causes ranging from fighting malaria to conserving wilderness.

But this growth of large, centralized groups has had an unfortunate side effect that would be familiar to the Agrarians: abstraction of social ills from the lives of donors and supporters. Where people once volunteered at their local soup kitchen in order to combat hunger in their own region, they now tend to simply donate a few dollars to the same group at the grocery store checkout lane. The latter action is still beneficial, of course, but it comes at the cost of moving the giver a few more degrees away from the recipient. Instead of direct assistance, we are left with systematized and professionalized charity: one in which our donation frees us from the need to actually *see* the problem in question, and to understand its ill effects on our own lives and those of our neighbors.

The political scholar and sociologist Theda Skocpol has written extensively about this move toward “managed” democracy and participation in American civic and charitable life. “Professionally run advocacy groups and nonprofit institutions now dominate civil society, as people seek influence and community through a very new mix of largely memberless voluntary organizations,” she argues.¹⁷ Large organizations like the Sierra Club, for all their undeniable virtues, now operate on the implied principle that once people give money, the donors have fulfilled their obligation to the cause and now do not have to do any of the direct work themselves. This is essentially an outsourcing of direct engagement and responsibility: where once people volunteered in person, now they give money on the assumption that someone else will address the problem.

Yes, the donation of course surely still helps—but this tactic refashions charity and neighborly giving into detached instrumentalism: take action A, assume result B. Weaver’s theories on rhetoric and culture, by contrast, would insist that people avoid abstraction whenever possible and always attempt to move members of a community closer together. Further, a

coherent community of mind that bases life on the same shared symbols will *always* benefit from personal immersion in the reality of a social problem or flaw. In other words, the closer people can get to truly understanding what a poverty-stricken neighbor actually experiences, the better off the community is—and they do not defeat abstraction or create community of mind by giving money to a distant organization and leaving the work to someone else. They do it through direct, tangible involvement.

This is the solidarity component of agrarian rhetoric: forming around a shared symbol a community of mind that is truly communal. Even more important, though, is *place*: people should direct our efforts at social improvement, Weaver's theory holds, at as local a place and level as possible. No doubt good work is done by, say, the Gates Foundation's effort to provide mosquito nets to parts of Africa, and donations to that foundation for that effort would be commendable. But the concept of place would instead direct a Kansan to provide assistance for those closest to her, radiating outward in geographic circles of sympathy. People can feel only a vague sense of sympathy for those suffering half a world away; suffering at a neighbor's house is another thing entirely.

Placed rhetoric is local and direct rhetoric: it is rallying around symbols and taking direct action in a place that truly means something to its inhabitants. If spacious symbols in Lawrence, Kansas, include opposition to child poverty, then the residents of Lawrence—whose dedication to the place presumably means something beyond mere cohabitation—should direct their energies to solving that local problem, rather than giving money to an abstract national organization and assuming the good will be done.

There is a danger to this plan, however, and this leads to the main flaw of Weaver's Agrarian rhetoric and its dictates. It is not an insurmountable problem for either citizens or

rhetorical scholars, but it is nonetheless a concern: what discursive and practical dangers are posed when a community of mind is wholly cohered around a certain symbol? Put differently, what happens when we are *too* unified?

Take conservation in western Kansas as an example. An ecosystem of traditional grassland prairie has been nearly completely converted into a zone of crop monoculture, with native grasses uprooted and non-native plants grown widely. This has meant not just harm to the soil, but displacement of native animals and deterioration—and, in some cases, near-extirpation—of entire sub-ecosystems. To make matters worse, much of the land not used by corporate farms is being used for oil and gas drilling. It is not just environmental scientists who see this as a tragic and irreversible loss for the state and the region. We are running the risk of entering another dust bowl phase on the Great Plains.

And yet the support among rural Kansans in these areas for both corporate monoculture farms and energy drilling is quite high. In an area battered by recession and residential flight, these two activities represent long-sought economic growth and community development. In other words, the community of mind among rural Kansans has rallied around the shared symbol of promised economic growth and rejected the symbols of preservation and limits to development. They have chosen the symbol that they see as offering greater possibility for their place, and who can really blame them?

The problem is that objections to this rhetorical stance—advocacy of economic growth even at the cost of the place itself—would quickly be dismissed by community members. The reason some have criticized Weaver's views on culture and society as bordering on the fascistic is that a cohesive community of mind is not exactly hospitable to a diversity of viewpoints. When people place the community above the individual, it can be a dangerously short journey

from unity to exclusion. When most parties in a place agree that economic growth is a savior, then symbols of economic growth will quickly become argumentatively triumphant. Objections to such growth, or offers of alternatives, will inevitably be sidelined.

What seems to be missing from much of Weaver's theories is the importance of the detached outsider, and the necessity of an extra-regional force. This example is one of the times a force from outside the community of mind would be valuable. In this case, the federal government plays an extraordinarily important role in environmental regulation and conservation. National experts, with no sentimental attachments to the place in question, can form recommendations based upon empirical data rather than on the rhetorical community of mind in that place. The environmental expert here plays the same discursive role as the artist in so many other societies: she is outside the dominant cultural mindset, and therefore can offer important viewpoints that might otherwise be neglected or shunned.

Contrary to the insistence of the Agrarians and Weaver, abstraction and distance from a situation can sometimes be a tremendous advantage. When we lack the metaphysical ties to a place that color the public debates of that particular community of mind, we gain a valuable perspective on what is truly important within as neutral an evaluation as possible.¹⁸ In this case, the forces currently creating economic development in western Kansas will more than likely produce a barren wasteland devoid of life, human or otherwise. As flawed, irrational beings, we usually elevate current benefits over future costs—but an outsider could possibly offer a more fair interpretation and recommendation, even if it goes against the community of mind. One could hardly expect people benefitting from oil drilling to take a wholly unbiased view of the environmental situation. But the environmental regulator from Washington certainly has a better

standpoint for offering an alternative than someone invested, literally and figuratively, in the drilling enterprise. It's a fine line between cohesive community of mind and outright groupthink.

The only possible rebuttal Weaver offered to this objection is not a completely satisfying one, and it is one I discussed at the end of the first chapter. His notion of the “outsider” or “exile”—that figure who has willingly left a place and who with the benefit of distance can more fairly and accurately judge the place's people and symbols—probably comes closest to what I'm discussing here. People who break with the community of mind, according to Weaver, can become “temporal exiles, or anachronisms. They are left little islands of protest, or eccentrics whom the regime can tolerate just because it possesses so complete a mastery.”¹⁹ This is hardly a perfect vision of democratic dissent; surely most of us would hope that differing views would be granted greater status than as “little islands of protest” that are merely tolerated by a regime.

This is the biggest problem with Weaver's Agrarian vision of solidarity: how might we endeavor to see ourselves in common enterprise while still tolerating individual difference and objections to that enterprise? Weaver stressed metaphysical unity and resonance of spacious ideas that ring true with a people—but is it good if rhetoric rings true with all people in a place all the time? That scenario certainly smacks of intellectual tyranny.

Perhaps the most helpful way to think about this is in terms of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. One intellectual community proposes an idea, another proposes a countering or competing idea, and over time and through the deliberative process the two are synthesized into a workable and mutually satisfying idea—“authorized by right reason,” as Weaver put it.²⁰ An Agrarian vision of a community of mind could be structured around such disagreement and eventual accommodation and sacrifice.

At heart, this problem with Weaver's theories is the problem at the core of democratic societies: how do we maintain community solidarity while still respecting individual difference? To err on the side of the community is to risk fascistic ideology, as the scholar and novelist Umberto Eco famously diagnosed it: a cult of tradition and a rejection of modernism in pursuit of communal cohesion (which certainly sounds uncomfortably close to the Agrarian program).²¹ But to err too strongly on the side of individual difference is to enter a Thatcherian dystopia, with insistence that a collection of individuals never adds up to anything like a society or culture, and that we do not truly owe each other anything. Such a view also reflects the analytical dominance of microeconomic neoliberalism, with a relentless focus on individual action and a disregard for larger, structural, more frequently unjust forces. Hewing too closely to the primacy of the individual, and to the differences between those individuals, is surely no better for a culture than total disregard of those differences.

There is no completely satisfying answer to this quandary to be found in the Weaver canon—but neither is a completely satisfying answer to be found anywhere in the history of Western societies. I rather like Charles Taylor's assertion that the best and healthiest debate in democracies "does not aim at general truths but rather is the search for enlightening contrasts."²² Perhaps that term, "enlightening contrasts," with its emphasis on dissent and disagreement in the service of the quest for greater knowledge and something larger than individual opinion, could serve as the basis for an Agrarian solidarity.

What I mean is that objections to the community of mind should not be met with exilic impulses or the ejection of the dissenter, but rather with a general consideration of the objection in order to form a greater understanding of our culture and our selves. Perhaps the goal should not be *unified* community of mind but community of *open* mind: an effort at solidarity and

common pursuit with a healthy dose of self-examination and willingness to consider difference. Agrarianism, after all, is supposed to be skeptical of the certainty proclaimed by scientific knowledge: of all people, Agrarians should be open to the idea of knowledge changing and evolving over time. How else is practical knowledge to be formed if not through trial and error—the search for enlightening contrasts?

The most important thing to take away from Weaver's somewhat flawed notion of solidarity is the virtue of the *attempt* at community cohesion. For Weaver, rhetoric was the force that broke down boundaries between us and attempted to fashion a more complete social whole from the assembled democratic parts. When he lamented the decline of spacious rhetoric, his point was not entirely to lobby for the resurrection of a bygone intellectual hegemony. His true lamentation was for what was lost: discursive rallying points for members of a community. When we have fewer symbols in common, he thought, we are worse off as a society and culture. When we forsake attempts at forming greater community, we lose something of ourselves.

Consider political life in the United States today. With its dreary roster of special interest groups, lobbying firms, and thickly cloaked political action committees, political activity often seems centered around protecting only the individual interest of this or that elite and moneyed group. When the Koch brothers, to take a local example, lavishly fund an effort to weaken environmental regulation, their goal is hardly to improve community well-being—it is, admittedly and transparently, to improve the profits of their business and so their personal fortunes. This is virtually the definition of self-interest at the expense of community, since the subsequent gains go directly and completely to the brothers themselves. The rhetoric deployed in the anti-regulation effort is not rooted in spaciousness and never aims to aid, or even to address, community. It is merely the primacy of individual gain.

I have suggested here that the critical rhetoric project unintentionally performs the same rhetorical move: it focuses too much on endless categories of individual difference with too little attention paid to how those categories might be reassembled into a beneficial whole. Even if it does not work perfectly, what is admirable about Weaver's rhetorical program is that it places great emphasis on reassembling that whole: on recognizing, accommodating, and eventually transcending individual difference in pursuit of solidarity. This may not strike us today as entirely flawless—but what aspect of democratic life is?

The problem with critical rhetoric is that, in its zeal for finding oppressive discourses of power at all times in all places, it becomes “a totalistic formulism that erodes the empathy and critical self-reflexiveness that gave leftism its original life,” as Celeste Michelle Condit put it.²³ Rather than searching for enlightening contrasts, the critical rhetorician is forever arguing for a general truth that to support forces greater than the individual is to reinforce hegemony by default. Small wonder that such theory, according to Condit, “threatens to become a cookie-cutter template rather than a critically reflective way of thinking that attends to specific conditions and realities.”²⁴ It is these “specific conditions and realities” that should be the rhetorician's main focus, since we are concerned with how discourse acts and reacts in the material world, and especially with how we might create discursive—and thus material—solidarity.

But critical rhetoric moves away from concern for specific conditions in its enthusiasm for high theory and in seeing that theory totalized through indictments of discourses of power. Condit argues, “When old perspectives become so rigid that they act as blunt weapons rather than delicate instruments, or when they shatter on impact with the material world, then it is time to move back to experience.”²⁵ Our current fractured moment, with greater social atomization

and political gridlock than ever, is the collision with lived experience that shatters the critical rhetorician's vision of society.²⁶ In the same way that Wittgenstein abandoned his philosophical atomism once he realized it did not provide a workable framework for living a real human life, so too must we move forward to whatever comes after critical rhetoric.

For Condit, this would mean a rhetorical approach fostering “a complex mix of liberal respect for the desires of the embodied human person and social concern that all individuals have the *necessary communal support* to survive and grow.”²⁷ Condit's preferred rhetorical approach is deeply agrarian, focusing first on the “tenet, held by many human groups, that the central value is care for all living things,” which “encourages the attempt to achieve an empathic orientation to all around us.”²⁸ This is remarkably close to Weaver's vision of agrarian rhetoric's role in a local culture: rooted in the cyclical nature of life, focused on how we attach to others, and respectful of the type of knowledge gained through personal encounters with the community. Attaining an empathic orientation to our community members is not easy. Most good changes take time. Even the historical objections to the prevailing American community of mind we'd most praise today—civil rights, safe working conditions, and so on—did not immediately resonate, to say the least, with dominant opinions.

The Agrarian scheme may not create perfect conditions for social solidarity. But neither does critical rhetoric, which insists that no knowledge or opinion can be said to be any better than any other knowledge or opinion, thus making solidarity around knowledge or opinion impossible. This view, however, fails to recognize that opinion need not be absolutely certain to be practical, effective, and beneficial. Stephen Toulmin's famous example was medical knowledge: we may not know with absolute certainty that a treatment will work, but we can still make an educated guess based on the circumstances. He wrote, “If absolute agreement is too

much to ask in the technical context of clinical medicine, must not the moral realm, too, leave room for honest and conscientious *differences of opinion*?"²⁹

Toulmin's point was that we should abandon the dream of finding a universal science of human society and instead embrace the messiness of particularism. Agrarian rhetoric, with its emphasis on how life is actually lived on the ground by real people rooted in practical knowledge, has a better chance of creating conditions for solidarity than any totalizing and abstracting theory. This could be aided by Weaver's old-fashioned rhetoric: forming a well-reasoned persuasive argument and airing that argument in a public forum, with the goal of helping discern moral truths about a particular community of mind. This kind of rhetoric is based on what Toulmin called "fields of substantial argument," or those conditions in which truth is based not on scientific logic but on the needs of the situation.³⁰ This kind of rhetoric also acknowledges that persuasion and spacious symbols must always include the thoughts, opinions, and beliefs of real people who live real lives. Agrarian rhetoric, unlike critical rhetoric, allows that people are more than mere subjects to a discourse of power.

Weaver's ideas are not perfect. His views on rhetoric and culture are not a cure-all for our democratic ills. But they lead to a proposition for contemporary rhetoric: those symbols which move us closer together in solidarity are to be admired; those which drive us apart are to be viewed with an extra dose of skepticism. Identification with each other, in other words, should be our goal. This need not preclude individual difference, but it should place the burden of argumentative proof on the objecting party and compel them to justify the difference with the community.³¹ An honest and conscientious difference of opinion, taking into account and acknowledging what others hold true, is worth airing even if it breaks with the community of mind.

Critical rhetoric seems to take the value of individual difference as a general truth, when it should actually be used to offer enlightening contrasts. Contrasts can be accommodated and assimilated; claims to sole truth through totalizing theory generally cannot. Incorporating individual difference into solidarity takes time but is possible, and acknowledges that we aim upward toward something greater when we make some sacrifice for each other.

Rhetoric, Aiming Upward

“There are no goals of labor like those of the cathedral-builders,” Weaver wrote.³² He meant that they treasure their work because they see it as contributing to an overall cosmological order that *exceeds themselves*, in which each member is aware of a certain role in society and of a subordination to the greater good. He contrasted this type of work with that of the modern citizen, who toils in an anonymous, wealth-driven society with no regard for how individual activity defines and shapes the soul. He took a similar view of rhetoric and language: if we do not see rhetoric as something that “moves men towards noble goals,” then we debase our language; if language is debased, then the transcendent forms behind language are forgotten.³³

Weaver’s works, I believe, offer us a new—which is to say old—vision of what our discipline could be. We need to return to a framework based upon rhetoric as a moral force: a tool, yes, but a tool that should lead toward a noble and intrinsically good end. Our goal, as both teachers and critics, should be to remember Weaver’s central lesson: that rhetoric is not merely a collection of appeals and arguments, but is instead a force for advancing the good life for humans and for society. We should not be afraid to instruct such ideas nor to deploy such ideas in our criticism, which ought to contribute in some way to Weaver’s project of *building* a society rather than simply criticizing it.

I have written this dissertation as both diagnosis and recommended cure—both broad examination of a specific thinker and specific critique of a broad field. I have done so because Weaver’s ideas have not received the comprehensive scrutiny they deserve from our field; because rhetoric once again could use a firm ethical foundation that will form a broadly accepted axiological standpoint; because the project of critical rhetoric has weakened our own conception of how and why rhetoric should be taught; and because rhetoric is needed to move citizens toward noble goals that create solidarity.

At the heart of all of this is language. Weaver called it “sermonic” for a reason: because the terms people use for things matters in a way that few other things matter. When people collectively call a thing by a certain name, they agree on its properties and its consequences and its metaphysical bases. What people call “patriotism” matters for civic life and for questions of tyranny and dissent. What people call “democracy” matters for both electoral processes and basic questions of fairness in governance. When people disagree on what a terminology stands for—see the current debate over what a “marriage” is, or what constitutes “torture”—it leads to social division and even conflict. Disagreements over terminologies prevent people from achieving a state of identification with each other. They prevent people from moving toward social cohesion and a harmonious society.

I have argued here that the tripartite scheme of agrarianism—practice, place, and solidarity—represents a structure for a more noble rhetoric as laid out by Weaver. First, practical knowledge and tradition must inform rhetoric as something closer to an art experienced in the moment than as a skill deployed formulaically. Second, rhetoric should strive to be as locally placed as possible, both to build a culture and to achieve a solid and coherent community of mind. Third, the goal of rhetoric should be a focus on what can bring people together in

solidarity and move them toward collective noble ends. I said earlier that agrarian rhetoric is *direct* rhetoric, in the sense that it shortens the distance between the self and the community, and between the term and its metaphysical basis, and between each of person and their sources and consequences.

People's terms reflect their thoughts and moral foundations, Weaver believed. If people are confused about their terms then they are confused about who they are and what they believe. They need agreement on terms to have even a chance for agreement on social structures and questions of the good life. At some point, according to Appiah, people must choose a script in order to live—and the script they choose reveals that they value some things more than others, some ideas more than others, and indeed some people more than others. Our discipline, according to Gehrke's study, once chose a script similar to that advocated by Weaver: one that saw rhetoric as a force for growth of the soul and for preserving civilization. Our current script is much more muddled.

Fields like chemistry and classics, for all their undeniable virtues, rarely have a *moral* component as they are deployed in society. It is both the burden and the opportunity of our field that rhetoric is charged with such a task. The human is both *homo narrans* and *homo ethicus*; we tell stories and make ethical judgments because both are required for humans to build a society together. Weaver's views, however imperfect they admittedly are, may offer us a way to recapture part of that endeavor. No, Richard Weaver did not care for much of modern life. But grant him this: he wanted to preserve and expand something that would enable people to live good and noble lives.

“There are but three ways for language to affect us,” Weaver wrote. “It can move us toward what is good; it can move us toward what is evil; or it can, in the hypothetical third place,

fail to move us at all.”³⁴ If we decline to move people toward what is good, or even the attempt to define what is good, then we shirk the moral responsibility of rhetoric itself. We have enough philosophically neutral critics; we have enough high-theory sophists. We need more cathedral-builders.

¹ Fred Douglas Young, *Richard M. Weaver, 1910-1963: A Life of the Mind* (Columbia, MO: The University of Missouri Press, 1995), 5.

² M.E. Bradford, “The Agrarianism of Richard Weaver,” in *Remembering Who We Are: Observations of a Southern Conservative* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1985), 74, 78, emphasis in original. Elsewhere in the same book (88) Bradford called Weaver the “best expositor” of Agrarianism.

³ *STB*, 58

⁴ *ER*, 165.

⁵ *ER*, 183.

⁶ Gehrke (2009), 107, emphasis added. I should perhaps note here that, while Weaver believed that rhetoric was how moral truths are apprehended, he did not believe they were *constructed* through rhetoric, as contemporary view hold. He believed there were forms underlying the things we are able to discover, and thus that truth is already an independent reality external to human relations.

⁷ Gehrke (2009), 128.

⁸ Gehrke (2009), 127.

⁹ Slothful connotations here are intended, and I indict this stance for the same reason I indict libertarianism: it doesn’t require any *work* to just be left alone.

¹⁰ This is what Appiah meant when he talked about “scripts” of modern identity. Inevitably, when we accept or adopt a script of identity, we are in some way embracing, or at least tacitly acknowledging, the ethical standards that come with such a script.

¹¹ I draw this comparison from Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), particularly Chapter 4, “Discursive Forms and Presentational Forms.”

¹² Peter King, *The Antimodern Condition: An Argument Against Progress* (UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014), 2-3.

¹³ Charles E. Morris III, “Sunder the Children: Abraham Lincoln’s Queer Rhetorical Pedagogy,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* vol. 99, no. 4 (November 2013), 396.

¹⁴ Morris (2013), 397.

¹⁵ Morris (2013), 400.

¹⁶ The speech in question is an excellent example of a spacious symbol at work in a community of mind, as Lincoln’s audience would surely have recognized the allusion to three of the four gospels.

¹⁷ Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman, OK: The University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 127.

¹⁸ I recognize, however, that it is a quick trip from this view to outright technocracy, whose tendencies troubled Weaver and Kenneth Burke alike. For example, what I have just described could also be a reasonable description of, say, the “emergency” city manager brought into Detroit to help that city manage its finances. The city manager is ostensibly objective and neutral and can make decisions based purely on data and not on political interests. (Whether or not it’s even possible to make apolitical, “data-driven” decisions about politics itself is itself an unresolved issue.) This raises all sorts of questions, beyond the scope of the current discussion, about epistemology, the role of persuasion, and what Jurgen Habermas called the “scientization of politics.”

¹⁹ Richard Weaver, “Agrarianism in Exile,” *Sewanee Review* v. 58, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1950), 602. Weaver compares these exiles to the people who “would propose the teaching of Latin or of poetry in a vocational college, or who would distribute in Detroit leaflets attacking the motor car.”

²⁰ *LS*, 136. I do not mean a version of pragmatism, that peculiarly American strain of philosophy, in which something is deemed theoretically satisfying if it is practically successful. Rather, I mean that over time the two camps advance arguments, cede ground, and test the strengths and weaknesses of their own ideas in order to find something that is as satisfying as possible to as many as possible. Ideally, the goal is not to win the argument but to improve life for the many.

²¹ Umberto Eco, “Ur-Fascism,” *The New York Review of Books*, June 22, 1995, available at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1995/jun/22/ur-fascism/>.

²² Charles Taylor, “Cultures of Democracy and Citizen Efficacy,” *Public Culture*, v. 19, no. 1 (Winter 2007), 119.

²³ Celeste Michelle Condit, “The Critic as Empath: Moving Away From Totalizing Theory,” *Western Journal of Communication*, v. 57, no. 1 (Spring 1993), 178.

²⁴ Condit (1993), 179.

²⁵ Condit (1993), 181-182.

²⁶ For a learned and extensive discussion of today’s form of social and political atomization, see Mark Lilla, “The Truth About Our Libertarian Age,” *The New Republic*, June 17, 2014, available at <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118043/our-libertarian-age-dogma-democracy-dogma-decline>.

²⁷ Condit (1993), 186, emphasis added.

²⁸ Condit (1993), 187-188.

²⁹ Stephen Toulmin and Albert R. Jonsen, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 45, emphasis in original.

³⁰ Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11-15. This is a fundamentally Aristotelian view, as Toulmin explained.

³¹ This needn’t be as confrontational as it perhaps sounds. Take the civil rights era: as the objecting parties, leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. were forced to explain how and why black Americans deserved the same rights as white Americans. Ideally, those explanations should be self-evident—but history again and again demonstrates that for many people they simply are not. King’s rhetoric gave us some of the most outstanding and unforgettably spacious symbols in the history of speech, and in doing so he focused on how to improve the community, not how to further isolate individuals.

³² *ER*, 116.

³³ Joseph Scotchie, *Barbarians in the Saddle: An Intellectual Biography of Richard M. Weaver* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 14.

³⁴ *LS*, 60.