In the 1930s, the United States witnessed the worst economic crisis in its history. We refer to this as the Great Depression. Along with episodes of drastic panic, the crisis produced a host of economic plans for rescuing and restructuring the economic systems in place, including all the programs rolled out by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as he sought to strike a New Deal with his fellow Americans and address the mounting unemployment problem. It was in this context that John Crowe Ransom’s short economic treatise, \textit{Land!}, was written.

But Ransom was no economist. He was a poet and literary critic. A man of letters, he taught in Vanderbilt University’s English department from 1914 to 1937. From there he went to Kenyon College, where he was installed as professor of poetry and became the founding editor of the \textit{Kenyon Review}, one of the most distinguished literary journals of the twentieth century. These are
impressive credentials indeed, but not for publishing a book on economics.

How, one might ask, did Ransom ever come to write such a book? Ransom was sensitive to this question himself. In the preface to Land! he admitted his own limitations, but he also believed that “the amateur with all his disabilities may quite conceivably have a certain advantage over the professional; he may sometimes be able to make out a wood when the professional, who lives in it, can see only some trees.”¹ Experts working within a system depend on the system for their livelihoods, which leaves them in a bad position to question the validity of the system itself. As one standing outside the guild, however, Ransom felt he was in a position to question it. He was also confident he was right.

But where did Ransom get the confidence to challenge the economic system? In order to answer that question we must know the larger story of which Land! is a small yet significant part. We must know the book’s background, development, and eventual dissolution. We must also understand the impulse behind it and how the impulse lived on in spite of its never being published in Ransom’s lifetime.

The story suggests that Ransom’s experience as a poet actually conditioned him for his venture into economics. For Ransom, the higher values of life turned on sentiment, and his aesthetic commitments helped him to see the limits of the intellectual habits ascendant in his day, among them the practical and applied sciences in general and the dismal science in particular, which in Ransom’s view did not keep honest ledgers.

**Background**

Land! was a product of Ransom’s agrarian vision for the South, which he cultivated in close company with several like-minded colleagues. In the 1920s, Ransom joined a group of faculty and stu-

¹. See the preface to Land!, 5.
dents associated with Vanderbilt University who would become known as the Fugitives. Their primary interest was neither politics nor economics but poetry and criticism. It was a group that produced several important twentieth-century literary figures—Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Merrill Moore—and became the seedbed for what would become known as the New Criticism. Yet out of this tightly knit group evolved a growing concern for a Southern way of life.

During his Fugitive years, Ransom developed as a literary critic and expressed concerns about the demise of the arts. As he put it, poetry had “felt the fatal irritant of Modernity.” Several of his essays express his frustration with this irritant. He argued that works of art “constitute the formidable reproach which a disillusioned humanity has had to cast at the scientific way of life.” This “scientific way of life” was more than just the ascendancy of the practical sciences over the traditional liberal arts. It was a pervasive way of approaching life that disturbed Ransom and his colleagues. For all the technological advances and conveniences of the modern era, Ransom recognized the limited ability of science to account fully for the way we experience the world. Whereas the practical bent of science focused on efficiency and production, “the experience we have when we appreciate a work of art, or when we worship God, is quite different from the scientific experience, and often it seems preferable for that very reason.” Yet Ransom and other Fugitives feared that science had achieved an unwarranted

2. They published a magazine called The Fugitive from 1922 to 1925.
6. Ibid., 125.
place of honor, not only in the modern mind but in all areas of modern life.

Concerned with the limits of science, Ransom devoted the greater part of his studies to aesthetics. He intended to write a book on the topic, the writing and rewriting of which ran on for several years. In it he sought to distinguish between, on the one hand, our scientific impulse to conceptualize and quantify our experiences for practical use and, on the other, the aesthetic reflex that attempts to appreciate the experience for uses that are not practical at all. Not wanting to deny the importance of science, Ransom was careful to point out its deficiency and the need for religion and the arts to help us come to terms more fully with our experiences.7

Ransom’s book on aesthetics was never published, though he used the material in different ways. He was able to publish what he referred to as “an abridgement of some very central chapters in my aesthetic system” in The Saturday Review of Literature, under the title “Classical and Romantic.”8 Various themes of his study were also carried out in subsequent projects and reflected in the essays collected in The World’s Body. One such essay, “Sentimental Exercises,” examined the difference between scientific and aesthetic knowledge and the pivot that holds the two together. Whereas science prizes knowledge for efficiency, aesthetic knowledge is formed by sentimental attachments whereby we appreciate objects for the sake of their own individuality. In this essay, Ransom obviously asserted the importance of the arts for cultivating this aesthetic knowledge. Yet it is also apparent that he desired a mature

7. A synopsis of this work is given in a letter from Ransom to Tate, September 5 [1926], Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom, ed. Thomas Daniel Young and George Core (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 154–57. He called it “The Third Moment,” reflecting what he saw as an order of experience: the initial moment of experience, the scientific moment of conceptualization, and the aesthetic moment of reconciliation. He contemplated the title “Studies in the Post-Scientific Function” in a letter to James A. Kirkland, October 1, 1928; see Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom, 178–79.

society that would encourage people to form attachments to the objects of quotidian life, rather than a society in which people are hurried along merely for the sake of production. 9

For Ransom, the aesthetic life was developed regionally—that is, with respect for place. This was clearly his approach to writing poetry and to the other arts, an approach that could adequately be described as provincial in the proper rather than in the pejorative sense of that word. Yet it became increasingly clear that he also took a regional approach to religion, politics, economics, and other aspects of life. As his aesthetic sensibilities detected the detrimental effects of modern science on culture, he also perceived that the progressive ideals of modernism were at odds with traditional principles and ways of life in the South. In the wake of the famous Scopes trial of 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee, many Southerners felt increasingly belittled in the public eye of the nation at large. Davidson reflected years later: “For John Ransom and myself, surely, the Dayton episode dramatized, more ominously than any other event easily could, how difficult it was to be a Southerner in the twentieth century.” 10 Tapping in to a long-standing current of Southern pride and resentment since the War between the States and the era of Reconstruction, Ransom and his colleagues sounded the trumpet of sectionalism and embarked on a campaign for the Southern way of life that they affectionately knew as the cause. These Fugitive poets would soon be known as the Southern Agrarians.

Writing sometime in the spring of 1927 to Tate, who had moved to New York to write and work as an editor, Ransom described a transition that was occurring within the group:


The Fugitives met last night. The more I think about it, the more I am convinced of the excellence and the enduring vitality of our common cause. Here at Vanderbilt, which draws a lot of Old South talent, we have a very workable mine of young poets and fresh minds; always some one or two or more just clamoring for the right food and drink and society. We've got to keep on working that field; we have some perpetuals for the carry-over, like Don and me; and our cause is, we all have sensed this at about the same moment, the Old South.11

They pursued the idea of writing a book on Southern matters, though it was unclear what direction the book would take.12 Tate seems to have initially envisioned a book on Southern literature, but Ransom leaned more to addressing a principled way of life. Ransom wrote to Tate in early April:

I am delighted with your idea of a book on the Old South, but have had little time to think closely upon it—our difficulty is just this: there's so little in Southern literature to point the principle. I subordinate always art to the aesthetic of life; its function is to initiate us into the aesthetic life, it is not for us the final end. In the Old South the life aesthetic was actually realized, and there are fewer object-lessons in its specific art. The old bird in the bluejeans sitting on the stump with the hound-dog at his feet knew this aesthetic, even. Our symposium of authors would be more concerned, seems to me, with making this principle clear than with exhibiting the Southern artists, who were frequently quite inferior to their Southern public in real aesthetic capacity. But

11. Ransom to Tate [Spring 1927], Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom, 166.
12. Davidson first made mention of a Southern symposium in a letter to Tate, March 17, 1927; see The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate, ed. John Tyree Fain and Thomas Daniel Young (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), 95.
there are performances surely, to which we can point with pride, if you believe the book should be one mainly of literary criticism.\textsuperscript{13}

Ransom had already been working on an essay that he called “Pioneering on Principle,” which he passed along to Tate as an example of the sort of material he felt would best fit their symposium.\textsuperscript{14} He would use this article several times over the next few years in order to forward the cause. For instance, Ransom “reduced and compressed it to a rather provocative belligerent form” and tried to get it published as “The South—Old or New?” \textit{The Nation} declined to publish it in the spring of 1927, but Ransom was finally able to get it published in the \textit{Sewanee Review} in 1928.\textsuperscript{15} An expanded version of the article was published in \textit{Harper’s Monthly Magazine} in 1929 under the title “The South Defends Its Heritage.”\textsuperscript{16} There was talk of an offer to have an even further expanded version published in the Today and Tomorrow series of booklets, though such a piece never materialized.\textsuperscript{17} And when the group’s idea for a symposium finally came together, Ransom adapted the essay yet again. It ran as “Reconstructed but Unregenerate” in \textit{I’ll Take My Stand}.\textsuperscript{18}

The group book project did not take off immediately. Though there was initial interest on the part of Ransom, Tate, and

\textsuperscript{13} Ransom to Tate, April 3 and 13, 1927, \textit{Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom}, 173.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 174.


\textsuperscript{17} Ransom to Tate, July 4, 1929, \textit{Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom}, 182.

Davidson, it soon fell neglected in 1927 and 1928. But in February 1929, Davidson wrote a letter to Tate, who was now in Paris on a Guggenheim fellowship, seeking for the group to redouble its efforts. He not only solicited Tate’s help in reviving the book project, but he also cast a larger vision of influence with a dream of starting a Southern magazine. Yet in the midst of his visionary efforts, Davidson voiced his pessimism about the whole scheme. “Economics, government, politics, machinery—all such forces are against us. With the issue of prosperity before everybody’s eyes, Southerners get excited about nothing else—except religion.”

Over the next few months, the trio renewed the cause with vigor. They discussed matters of organization, contributors, and publishers. They also deliberated greater structural concerns for the cause, such as starting an academic society, placing essays in various journals, starting a magazine or newspaper, and connecting with young literary groups at colleges. The Agrarians had a renewed sense of focus, a plan, and plenty of energy. But was that enough to overcome Davidson’s concern about the soporific effect of prosperity? By fall the economic scene underwent a noticeable change that would alleviate some of that pessimism. Davidson wrote to Tate on October 26, 1929: “The terrific industrial ‘crises’ now occurring almost daily in North Carolina give present point to all the line of thinking and argument that we propose to do. I don’t know whether you have read of these or not. It is enough to say that hell has pretty well broken loose, and the old story of labor fights is being repeated. It all means more ammunition for us.” On October 29, 1929, the U.S. stock market crashed, and the country found itself reeling under what would become known

19. Davidson to Tate, February 5, 1929, *Literary Correspondence*, 221.
20. Davidson to Tate, July 29, 1929, *Literary Correspondence*, 226–29; Tate to Davidson, August 10, 1929, *Literary Correspondence*, 229–33; Davidson to Tate, August 20, 1929, *Literary Correspondence*, 233–34.
21. Davidson to Tate, October 26, 1929, *Literary Correspondence*, 235.
as the Great Depression. By the end of the year, Davidson declared that “the time is ripe.”

The Agrarians hurried to finish the book, secured Harper & Brothers as a publisher, and rejoiced to see the book published in the fall of 1930. Under the title *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, the book distinguished between what its contributors saw as agrarian and industrial ways of life. *I'll Take My Stand* received wide recognition upon publication, though many of the reviews were negative. It was received unfavorably by such Northern critics as the influential H. L. Mencken. Yet from the beginning Ransom had recognized that their greatest battles would be against progressive-leaning Southerners. As he had written to Tate in the spring of 1927, “Our fight is for survival; and it’s got to be waged not so much against the Yankees as against the exponents of the New South.” And, as predicted, opposition came from their fellow Southerners. Over the next year, Ransom engaged in a number of debates to defend the Southern way of life advanced in the book. Although they received significant opposition to their cause, the Agrarians had developed a platform and were being heard.

*LAND!*

In the wake of *I'll Take My Stand*, economics became a main source of tension between Ransom and his New South opponents. Ransom’s agrarianism stood opposed to the capitalism of a predominantly industrialized society. But whereas *I'll Take My Stand* addressed the multifaceted cultural problems related to indus-

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22. Davidson to Tate, December 29, 1929, *Literary Correspondence*, 246.
24. Ransom to Tate [Spring 1927], *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 166.
trialism, Ransom thought the book lacked a significant economic argument for an agrarian return. As he says in the preface to *Land!*, he saw the need for an “economic sequel to the group-book.” Land! would be that sequel, and its purpose would be to assess the unemployment crisis and to name its principal cause: the problem of overcapitalization. As Ransom observed, the percentage of farmers had severely dropped over the years as people vacated the countryside for jobs in the cities. With the unemployment crisis underway, he proposed that people return to the land: there was plenty of work to do on the farm. The book would also review commonly proposed solutions to the Great Depression, ranging from capitalist fixes to socialist schemes. Yet it would distinguish the agrarian program from both capitalism and socialism, arguing for the existence of a completely different economic option from the two prevailing systems. It was a system that would promote self-sufficiency and local interests, prioritizing farm life over manufacturing.

Inasmuch as he “debated and discussed and even wrote that topic” during the winter of 1931, Ransom concluded, “I might as well ‘capitalize’ my efforts into a book and get it behind me.” Ransom had been awarded a Guggenheim scholarship for the 1931–32 academic year, so bringing a bit of closure to his foray into economics would allow him better focus on his poetic calling. He proposed the book idea to Harcourt under the title “Capitalism and the Land” and hoped to finish writing it that summer before going overseas.

Summer ended and the book was not complete. Once in England, Ransom continued to work on the book, and he recruited Tate to serve as his stateside literary agent. Harcourt had declined his proposal, and, as appears from a letter to Tate, Scribner’s had

26. Preface to *Land!*, 4. Shortly after the publication of *I’ll Take My Stand*, Ransom’s attempt to get the group to sign on to a positive economic project apparently did not succeed; see Ransom to Tate [December, 1930], *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 201.

too. With two rejections on the proposal, Ransom submitted part of the manuscript to Harper & Brothers with an offer to have a complete manuscript by January 15, 1932. Ransom instructed Harper & Brothers to send it to Tate if they decided not to publish it, with the idea that Tate could help pitch it to other publishers.28 Harper declined the manuscript.

As the New Year rolled around, Ransom continued to work diligently on his economic project. A small light of hope began to shine when The New Republic published an article from his labors under the title “The State and the Land.”29 With a little wind in his sail, Ransom approached Harcourt once again with a reworked book manuscript, to be titled simply Land! In May 1932 Ransom received a rejection letter from Harcourt. Discouraged, he let Tate know of his reticence to send it to any other publishers. He wanted Tate to see the manuscript in its present form, which he felt was much stronger than earlier versions, and he even considered having Tate propose the book to Macmillan. However, Ransom started to weary under the strain of negotiating the manuscript from overseas, and his confidence as a lay economist became shaky. Ransom lamented,

the economic subject matter shifts so rapidly that an utter-
ance becomes an anachronism before it can get to print.
Don’t peddle it any further, therefore. It may be that in the
fall I can take it up again profitably. But it may be, on the
other hand, that my kind of economics won’t do, and that
I’d better stick to poetry and aesthetics. I’ve learned a lot
of economics lately, too! But I must confess I haven’t the
economist’s air, flair, style, method, or whatnot.30

28. Ransom to Tate, November 23 [1931], Selected Letters of John Crowe
Ransom, 206.
February 17, 1932, 8–10. See appendix herein.
30. Ransom to Tate, May 19 [1932], Selected Letters of John Crowe Ran-
som, 208.
Nevertheless, not all was lost. Whereas Harper & Brothers had also declined the book at an earlier stage, they now agreed to publish part of his work as an article in the July issue of *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*. It was given the title “Land! An Answer to the Unemployment Problem.”

When Ransom returned to the United States in the fall, his hopes of recovering the book project came to a decisive end. Writing of his dissatisfaction, Ransom told Tate:

> My poor book is nearly a total loss—I don’t like it. It would have been a passable book published a year ago. Several publishers nearly took it. Within these next ten days I will have kicked it into the incinerator or else taken a grand new start and started over on a new outline together. The latter course would relieve my system, and I am getting a little bit gone on my new (hypothetical) approach.

As a book project, *Land!* had come to an end. Ransom gave up on publishing it. And his saying that in a few days he would have “kicked it into the incinerator” caused many later scholars to believe he had in fact destroyed the manuscript altogether. Ransom seems to have had a penchant for feeding the fire with old unwanted materials. For instance, in the preface to *The World’s Body*, he tells of how he had recently “consigned to the flames” his rejected manuscript on the aesthetics of poetry, which he had

31. John Crowe Ransom, “Land! An Answer to the Unemployment Problem,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, July 1932, 216–24. This essay consists of most of chapter 1, four paragraphs from chapter 4, and some additional material that is not a part of *Land*!

32. Ransom to Tate, October 25 [1932], *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 210–11.

worked on so hard before and alongside the agrarian project. So it is reasonable that his remark to Tate led people to assume the manuscript no longer existed. But although Ransom’s plans for publishing *Land!* had gone up in metaphorical smoke, the manuscript itself evaded the literal flames.

And although *Land!* was aborted as a book project, Ransom’s comments to Tate indicated an alternative approach that would allow him to address the topic in a new way. He did not spell out that new way in the letter to Tate, but his publishing efforts over the next five years demonstrated that he was not quite finished addressing agrarian economic concerns. Rather than write a book, Ransom wrote a number of articles for various publications. These articles were not excerpted material from the book but fresh pieces that addressed the issues in different ways. However, rather than sticking to strict economics, as he had in *Land!*, Ransom infused these essays with aesthetic and regionalist concerns. The original book project might have been abandoned, but it took several years of publishing articles to clear his system of his agrarian fervor.

**The Resigned Poet**

By 1936, Ransom expressed concern over his involvement in the agrarian cause. All during the years of advocating agrarianism, he had simultaneously maintained his interest in writing poetry and criticism. For a while his agrarian and poetic output served as complementary projects in his defense of the humane tradition against a modernist society. But he came to a point at which he feared the

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agrarian cause was subverting his calling as a poet. Not that the two projects were antithetical. But he was being emotionally consumed by the project in a way that was compromising his literary aims. Ransom wrote to Tate about how “patriotism is eating at lyricism”; “patriotism has nearly eaten me up,” he said, “and I’ve got to get out of it.”36 A few years earlier Ransom thought he recognized a similar problem in Davidson, though he could not see at that time how it would come to eat him up as well. He once wrote to Tate, “You know, our rebel doctrines are good for all [of] us but Don, and very doubtful there, because they are flames to his tinder.”37 Now he found himself eaten up and burned out. There had been in Ransom an aesthetic impulse that carried him into his venture in agrarian economics, but when he sensed that the extended project began to compromise his commitments to poetry, he chose to regroup and concentrate solely on his artistic calling.

Ransom struggled with his patriotic dilemma over the next year. For the sake of his sanity and career he looked for projects that would keep his mind and hands busy with literary concerns. For instance, he discussed with Tate the idea of starting an American academy of letters.38 And writing to Edwin Mims, chair of the English department at Vanderbilt, Ransom gave assurance that he had lately “gone almost entirely into pure literary work.”39 Making that transition was not easy. Ransom confessed to Tate that he found himself “lapsing occasionally” back into the agrarian project because there were still things he felt he had to get off his chest.40 He was working on an article that took the agrarian project in a more political direction. He told Tate that he was “signing off

36. Ransom to Tate, September 17, 1936, Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom, 217 (emphasis in original).
37. Ransom to Tate, October 25 [1932], Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom, 209.
38. Ransom to Tate, September 17, 1936, Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom, 217–19.
40. Ransom to Tate, March 11, 1937, Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom, 221.
but a little by degrees” and described the article as his “last act of patriotism.” Ransom sent the article to Seward Collins for publication in the *American Review*, which went defunct a few months later, and Ransom’s article never appeared. But the agrarian fever proved persistent. At one point Ransom remarked to Tate that “there’ll never be complete immunity for any good man from patriotism” and that they might better commit to “keep out of a repetitive patriotism at least.” But as much as the fire burned within him, its dying seemed inevitable. His final published agrarian piece appeared at the end of 1937. It was a review for the *Saturday Review* of Walter Prescott Webb’s *Divided We Stand*. He used the piece as a platform to encourage the southern and western regions of the United States to take a political stand against the “economic dominion of the North.”

What made the year 1937 a decisive break is that Ransom had indeed diverted his attention to significant literary concerns that would solidify his career as a leading literary critic. That year he wrote an important article entitled “Criticism, Inc.,” which called for a more precise and systematic practice of literary criticism. He worked this article and a number of his previous articles on poetry into a book, *The World’s Body*, one purpose of which was to set down precisely what it is that poetry does for us that the sciences cannot. Also in 1937, Ransom relocated to Gambier, Ohio, taking the job of professor of poetry at Kenyon College. Removed from Nashville and expected to lead Kenyon’s English department to distinction, Ransom found little to no incentive for delving back into the Southern agrarian project.

Having retreated from the front lines of the agrarian cause, Ransom sought to maintain his fight against modernity’s ill

41. Ransom to Tate, April 6, 1937, *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 222.
42. Ransom to Tate, June 17, 1937, *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 224.
influence but focused it more singularly in the arena of literary criticism. He came to accept the agrarian program as a lost cause, but he never lost the aesthetic concerns that carried him into it. In “Art and the Human Economy” he reproached those who still proposed agrarianism, but he also spoke of an “agrarian nostalgia” as “a mode of repentance not itself to be repented.” The project allowed the Fugitives to recognize something that was being lost in the rapid progress of industrialization. And although witnessing a return to an agrarian way of life that preserved aesthetic values within its very economic system no longer seemed possible, Ransom concluded that they were better suited to infusing into the modern world, by means of the arts, as much aesthetic sensibility as was possible. It was a retreat from agrarianism as an economic program, but not from the sentiments that had given rise to it.

This publication of *Land!* after all these years, resurrects for us the story of a poet temporarily turned lay economist. Ransom was acutely aware of the way that a modern progressive spirit was revolutionizing the South. All of the emphasis on a scientific push for efficiency had altered an older, more traditional agrarian economic system—a system with a simple aesthetic quality built into it. As Ransom and his colleagues challenged the industrial way of life by advocating agrarianism, and as the economic crisis of the Great Depression gave them a greater platform for their cause, they also recognized that their agrarian proposal would have to stand up under economic scrutiny if Southern society were to consider such a return a viable option. Thus, *Land!* was a strictly economic justification for a Southern agrarianism. Feeling out of his element in ever-changing economic times, Ransom failed to bring *Land!* to publication. Instead, he lobbied agrarian economics from the vantage point of the critic, touting its aesthetic advantage and its greater ability to preserve human dignity. Finally, when that

cause seemed completely lost, he resigned himself to the life of a
diligent literary critic, hoping that the arts would preserve the aes-
thetic life he longed to see maintained.

In this story we can see that the very thing that drove Ransom
to even attempt writing an economic treatise was his ever abiding
concern for developing the aesthetic side of life. This is what ex-
plains the oddity—if “oddity” is the right word, for Ransom was a
man of letters in the old sense—of the poet-turned-economist. He
ventured outside of his expertise in order to give an economic jus-
tification for a more aesthetically responsible way of life. At that
moment in American history everything seemed to turn on eco-
nomics. Ransom recognized this, but his foray into economics
was not for the love of it as an economist. Rather, his stint as an
economist turned on the fact that he valued a society where daily
production allowed people to form local attachments and enjoy
the everyday aspects of a life well lived. The advantage of a self-
sufficient farm, he wrote in Land!, is that “it offers expression
to Man Thinking as well as to Man Laboring.” He could not
expect economists of his day to articulate the economic sense of
agrarianism, for they could not see the forest through the trees,
so he sought to learn enough economics to do the job himself.
And what led him to do it? One could say that it all turned on
sentiment.

46. See chapter 4 herein, 105.