Introduction

The career of poet William Gilmore Simms constitutes a cautionary tale: how ambition worthy of Wordsworth or Keats and talent comparable to any American poet before Whitman cannot alone guarantee a toehold in the canon. Its slippery slopes, subject to historical accidents, political prejudice, and shifts of cultural paradigms, leave nearly all writers vulnerable to revisions. Simms the poet, however, has faced virtual erasure. This is the common fate of poets who are not great: As Hayden Carruth has observed in evaluating the poetry of Mark Van Doren, poets “who have written superb, unimprovable poems, but whose work does not place them in the first rank,” risk “being forgotten.” But “time constructs the true canon,” Jim Harrison asserts, “not critics contemporaneous to the work,” and time now appears to be on Simms the poet’s side. Belatedly, since the mid-1980s a revival of scholarship on Simms’s life and work has managed to bring him back to more general awareness.

Nevertheless, besides the heroic editorial, critical, and bibliographical attention of James E. Kibler Jr., very little of this recent scholarship has focused on the poetry. Although John Caldwell Guilds credits Kibler’s work on the poetry, Guilds’s magisterial, corrective biography, which appeared in 1992, a century after William Peterfield Trent’s highly biased one, argues for the primacy of Simms’s fiction that charts the national history: “While it is remarkable,” Guilds says, “that he accomplished so much in other literary fields” including poetry, “it is as a writer of fiction, and particularly as a novelist, that Simms leaves his most enduring mark.” Other books on Simms’s work focus their lenses in directions that downplay the verse: Mary Ann Wimsatt privileges the novel in The Major Fiction of William Gilmore Simms, Jon L. Wakelyn unconvincingly views Simms as primarily a politician in The Politics of a Literary Man, and Sean R. Busick insists in A Sober Desire for History that “we can truly understand Simms only when we understand him as a historian.”
The reconstruction of Simms’s reputation as a poet launched by Kibler is important to a full understanding of nineteenth-century American literature. It is important not only because Simms produced nearly two thousand poems and published no fewer than eighteen volumes of poetry; and it is important not only because one of the period’s greatest critics, Edgar Allan Poe, judges Simms in a review of the poetry collection *Aretos* (1846) as “beyond doubt, one of our most original writers.” Above all, reconsidering Simms the poet is vital because he incorporated elements of British romanticism before Emerson, Thoreau, and Longfellow and was among the earliest American poets not only to use native materials and American settings but also to treat them realistically. Emphatically Kibler’s summary of “Simms’s chief themes” in the introduction to *Selected Poems* convincingly situates Simms in the center of the romantic tradition (*SP* xii, xviii–xix, xii). Furthermore, whereas Simms is best remembered as the author of two dozen novels, including *The Yemassee* (1835) and *Woodcraft* (1854), Simms himself repeatedly maintained that poetry was his first calling. In an unpublished letter to an unknown correspondent, written five years before he collected his verse in the two volumes of *Poems: Descriptive, Dramatic, Legendary and Contemplative* (1853), Simms explains that although the public views him as a prose writer because of the popularity of his fiction and his productivity as an editor and critic, in fact, “Poetry I hold to be my forte.” The year before he had explained that he has “never expected to realize money by verse-making in our day & in America,” but that he nevertheless regards “poetry as” his “forte” (*L* 2:257). Yet again as late as 1860 Simms asserts, “Poetry, I hold to be my proper province” (*L* 6:213). Moreover Simms believed that eventually his verse would rank higher than his fiction (*L* 3:190).

Simms’s most prominent readers have been reluctant to share his own faith and stake in his poetry. In his biography of Simms Trent dismisses Simms’s poetry as a “failure” and laments that Simms’s commitment to poetry has forced him “to allude more often to Simms’s poetical ventures than their intrinsic worth would otherwise warrant”; indeed, Trent refers with approval to Simms’s “forgotten poetry.” Simms, Trent laments, not only kept “writing new verses, but, what is worse,” kept “publishing them.” “Only by courtesy,” Trent decides, “can one call Simms’s verse ‘poetry.’” But even Simms’s modern, sympathetic critics have undervalued his poetry. Two scholars connected to the monumental *Letters* pay no compliments to the poetry: When Donald Davidson in his introduction fleetingly treats the poems, he complaints that “most of Simms’ poetry” seems “too obviously worked up” from literary sources rather than from “deeper” origins (*L* 1:li); and T. C. Duncan Eaves, one of the editors of *The Letters*, elsewhere discounts the poetry, asserting that “few of Simms’s poems have any right of
survival.” In his Twayne Series volume on Simms, J. V. Ridgely mentions Simms’s early books of poems but feels no need to analyze them and largely ignores the later mature poetry, for his poetry has “no significance, and it is unnecessary to disinter” it. And even Rayburn S. Moore, who published several essays sympathetic to Simms, including one for Guilds’s “Long Years of Neglect,” stunningly ignores Simms as a poetic influence on Paul Hamilton Hayne and states that Hayne, not Simms, “is the most substantial Southern poet of the nineteenth century”; moreover Moore’s list of “the three other nineteenth-century Southern poets of consequence” omits Simms in favor of Poe, Lanier, and Timrod.5

Not all appraisals have been so dismissive, but when favorable they have been brief and less enthusiastic than Simms’s self-evaluation. For instance, Edd Winfield Parks, who authored William Gilmore Simms as Literary Critic, allows that Simms’s complete poetic canon could yield “only a small volume of excellent poems” but affirms that such a book “would entitle Simms to rank with the better American poets”; still, even he believes that Simms “over-valued his poetry.” Only Allen Tate rates Simms’s verse as highly as the prose, briefly making this general evaluation in his “Note on Southern Poetry”: “For the thousands who read” Simms’s “novels and his defense of slavery, a handful knew his poetry, though by any test it deserved as much reading as his prose.”6 But even Tate falls short in his estimation compared to Simms’s own, which he offered upon the publication of Poems (1853). Simms confides to Evert Duyckinck what he thinks of his poetic achievement: “I flatter myself that my poetical works exhibit the highest phase of the Imaginative faculty which this country has yet exhibited, and the most philosophical in connection with it. This sounds to you very egotistical, perhaps, but I am now 47 years old, and do not fear to say to a friend what I think of my own labour. . . . My desire is rather to put myself on record for future judgment than to become a temporary cry of the hurrying mob” (L 3:261–62). Simms similarly held a high view of his earlier volume Grouped Thoughts (1845), which he considered “the best collection of sonnets ever printed in America” (L 2:111). Simms so believed in his poetry that he frequently paid some or all of the printer’s costs, and Grouped Thoughts presents just one such example.

The last several years have yielded signs that the critical tide is turning in favor of Simms and his belief in the lasting worth of his poetry. In Sacvan Bercovitch’s Cambridge History of American Literature, the volume on nineteenth-century poetry partly validates Simms’s claims. Its chronology of important books of American poetry lists Grouped Thoughts as one of five worth including for 1845, and Poems—Simms’s chief attempt to put his verse on record for posterity—as one of four worthy books for 1853. Other indications
that Kibler's spade work is paying off, however slowly, include several articles on the poetry since 2003. Most notably David W. Newton convincingly defends Simms's creative process as organically romantic and demonstrates the effectiveness of “The Streamlet”; Jason W. Johnson considers Simms's formal experiments, thereby contradicting past critics' claims that Simms is technically slipshod; and John D. Kerkering underlines Simms's importance by comparing him to Whitman.  

Two obstacles to readers' sharing Tate's, Simms's, and some recent critics' high regard for the poetry leap to mind. One is that Simms wrote so much poetry—even excluding the many pseudonymous poems his contemporaries could not have ascribed to him—he “managed to smother some really excellent work under the weight of too much mediocrity,” as Parks quips. Indeed, as Wimsatt observes, “the major reason that so few scholars have been willing to address the issue” of Simms’s “literary status” is that “discriminating assessment of Simms's oeuvre demands” an “enormous amount of reading.” Another obstruction to readers' recognition of Simms is that although anthologists such as Rufus Griswold and William Cullen Bryant regularly included Simms in their compilations, they tended to select poems that Simms called “the very worst I have written” (L 5:355), and not his truly exemplary poems. One of the “very worst” poems Simms apparently had in mind is “The Edge of the Swamp,” which has been reprinted again and again, not only in Bryant's Selections from the American Poets (1840), which Simms alludes to in his letter to Griswold, but also in Griswold's The Poets and Poetry of America (1842), as well as in Readings in American Poetry (1843) and Homes of American Authors (1853). Sensitive to Simms's preferences, Kibler eschews “The Edge of the Swamp” and “The Lost Pleiad,” another frequent choice of anthologists, for the modern edition of Simms's poetry, Selected Poems. But other modern critics who give Simms passing attention in their accounts of nineteenth-century American poetry probe no deeper for samples than these usual suspects and simply parrot what has come before, thus reinforcing Simms's marginalization as a minor poet. In The Cambridge History Barbara Packer limits her discussion of Simms to “By the Swannanoa” and “The Edge of the Swamp,” whereas Parks himself, who complains that anthologists have done little to separate Simms's “good” poems “from the bad,” comments in his introduction on only “The Edge of the Swamp” and “The Lost Pleiad,” both of which he uses in his anthology of southern poetry. In his recent Library of America edition American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century, John Hollander does no better, reprinting “By the Swannanoa” and “The Lost Pleiad.”

However, despite these obstacles and entrenched patterns of neglect, Kibler’s landmark works—The Poetry of William Gilmore Simms: An Introduction
and Bibliography (1979), which has established Simms’s canon, and Selected Poems (1990), which has made a cross section of his better poems readily available—finally enable scholars to treat Simms’s verse with the seriousness it deserves. Following Kibler’s lead that Simms’s place in the poetic canon needs to be reevaluated because of the work’s impressive quantity and quality and because it integrates influences of British romanticism before most other major American poets do, my study aims to analyze comprehensively and interpret Simms’s lifelong engagement with the major British romantic poets, especially Wordsworth. It will show not only that as poet and theorist Simms parallels these figures more extensively than any of his contemporaries, but also that he authentically incorporates their romantic traditions into American and southern landscapes (despite Trent’s claim that if Simms did write real poetry it would have been British). He emulates their progress from neoclassical themes and forms to lyric effusions of spontaneous feeling, blank-verse meditations like the conversation poem, and formal experiments in the sonnet; simultaneously he develops a pioneering American realism that encompasses local and regional places as well as some of the earliest sympathetic portrayals of Native Americans. In these poems Simms adapts Wordsworth’s realism and sense of place in such poems as “Michael” and “The Ruined Cottage.” In fact Simms’s ultimate achievement is that he cultivates a unifying romantic ecology worthy of Wordsworth. In his poetry, his criticism, and his daily life as a poet-planter-patriarch, Simms dwells in the particular ecosystem of Woodlands Plantation, and from this vantage he performs his universal role as poet-prophet practicing his holy craft.

Jonathan Bate’s description in The Song of the Earth of twentieth-century English poet Basil Bunting supplies an accurate analog to the canonical predicament of the nineteenth-century American poet Simms. In addition Bate unwittingly suggests an ecological reason for recovering Simms’s bioregionally grounded verse. Like Simms, who stayed put in the South far from the New England of Emerson, Hawthorne, and Longfellow, Bunting lived and wrote about his own region, Northumbria. This practice separated him from the rootless modernists who migrated to the metropolitan literary centers such as London and Paris. In fact Bunting’s Wordsworthian commitment to his own region helps account for his exclusion from the modernist canon, according to Bate. Ironically Bunting called those who controlled the canon—and those who called London and Oxbridge home—“Southrons,” Simms’s term for himself and like-minded members of the “sacred circle” of southerners such as George Frederick Holmes and Nathaniel Beverley Tucker. Like Bunting, Simms has comparably suffered a loss of literary stature in relation to the northern writers of the American Renaissance. As David Newton astutely points out, “Unfortunately Simms’s contributions to
the development of American literature during” 1850 to 1855 “have largely
gone unnoticed.” By employing the “American Renaissance” to interpret the
literature of this period, F. O. Mathiessen has emphasized the writers of
New England and New York and thus has helped diminish Simms’s canoni-
cal status, for, as Newton says, Mathiessen has redefined “what constitutes
American cultural values and literary genres.” However, Newton argues,
Simms’s poetry as represented in the 1853 volume *Poems* not only “anticipates
Emerson’s attempt to situate Romanticism within a uniquely American
context”; Simms’s best poems also reveal that he is “Emerson’s intellectual
equal, and, at times, a superior poet.”

Significantly Simms not only pursues environmental themes before
Thoreau, but also pursues them poetically with greater depth and breadth
than Emerson. To adapt Bate, because in his best verse in the romantic mode
Simms writes as “a bioregional poet,” the canon of American literature needs
to recover him. As Bunting does, in his best poems Simms locates identity in
place, tracing a web that not only intertwines the human with the natural
and the animal worlds, but also harmonizes the entire ecological region,
creating Wordsworth and Coleridge’s sense (in the latter’s “The Eolian
Harp”) of “the one Life within us and abroad.” As in his prose that cultivates
the soul and the soil of the South, in his poetry Simms aims to evoke the
spirit of landscape, to which mere materialists stay blind. For Simms “the
earth itself” ministers “to the soul of man” (PP 31), and one function of
poets is to open “our sympathies” to “the mysterious teachings of the natu-
ral world” (PP 28). In this paramount regard Simms the poet speaks to our
contemporary moment as powerfully as Thoreau or Wendell Berry.

Besides his trailblazing romantic ecology, Simms commands recognition
both for his commitment to and characterization of the poet as high priest
of American culture and for his lifelong dedication to the craft of poetry.
Like Wordsworth, who in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* ascribes to the poet
an “exalted” status, and Shelley, who in his “Defence of Poetry” associates
poets with legislators, inventors, teachers, and prophets, Simms similarly
elevates the poet. In *Father Abbott* (1849), Simms defines the poet as “a
Prophet” who “is decreed to be a leader—a guide—a discoverer” (FA 168).
Ultimately poets serve as “potent handmaids of religion” using “the diviner
impulses” of poetry to free “our souls, at moments, from the miserable toils
and vulgar anxieties which form the clogs to the soul’s progress upon the
earth” (FA 103, 99–100). This role as “a social benefactor” coincides with
Shelley’s portrait of the poet redeeming “from decay the visitations of the
divinity in man” (PS 532). This role serves an ultimately religious function
that parallels Simms’s sense of poetry in “The Age of Gold” as a “holy craft”
meant to combat the acquisitive instincts that starve the soul; significantly it
also parallels Wordsworth’s idea in “The World Is Too Much With Us” that “getting and spending” blunt our feelings and spirit and leave us hungry for visionary experience in nature.

Simms’s lecture *Poetry and the Practical*, which he delivered in three versions between 1851 and 1854, underlines Shelley’s point that poetry is needed more than ever in periods of selfishness and of excessive “accumulation of the materials of external life” (PS 531), an idea first advanced by Wordsworth in the preface where he delineates his aim to write poems “to counteract” such effects of industrialization as the blunting of the mind. Sounding like the Wordsworth of *The Prelude*, Simms explains that through nature’s ministries “we behold God himself every where about us” (PP 26) so that we feel the “soul grows lifted” and feel “that the world has not stript” us “of all” our “sensibilities” (PP 36). And it is the poet, Simms claims, who best interprets and reveals the “sacramental” in nature. Thus the poet’s “great work” is to unite “his fellow men” with the “spiritual truths” inherent in “universal” nature, and in this “dedicated” service the poet “may divinely minister to each” within “the whole heart of humanity” (PP 46). These sentiments all emphasize the religious and spiritual powers of romantic poetry and the faculty of imagination. As Marilyn Gaull has explained, in the romantic period “the imagination acquired a religious function” and brought “divinity, the sacred, however it was conceived, back into human affairs.” Poets revived “their ancient priestly roles as mediators between the sacred and the secular,” their poetry becoming “a religious surrogate.” Hence for Simms “the higher mission of Poetry” links it to religion since through imagination a poem can “prepare the soul for still nobler conditions” than those of the material world (PP 49).

Though Guilds and others may find Simms’s literary legacy in his fiction, Simms committed himself early to poetry and never stopped writing and publishing it, often in revised versions. In 1827, barely twenty-one years old, Simms already looked to the future to receive his due as a poet; he was in it for the long haul, thus displaying an ambition comparable to Keats’s. In the dedicatory preface to his second volume, *Early Lays*, Simms chafes at a Boston publication’s omitting his first collection of poetry, *Lyrical and Other Poems*, from its notice of new books, but he affirms that “I am willing, patiently to await the resolves of Time, to award the judgment which the Boston Editor has apparently so studiously endeavored to avoid” (EL viii). Despite this perceived slight Simms’s initial collections—though issued by Charleston publishers—received favorable reviews from the northern press. A critic as influential as Timothy Flint wrote about both books in separate articles for the *Western Monthly Review* (Intro 57), and William Cullen Bryant, who became a dear friend of Simms, admitted that the debut collection
suffered from “blemishes” but determined it evinced “no ordinary degree of poetical talent.” Given the lack of polish of some of the early poems, it is surprising that the *New York Literary Gazette and American Atheneum* gushingly placed Simms “among the first of American Poets” in its praise of *Lyrical and Other Poems.* In fact, later in life Simms told Griswold that the early books contained “a great deal of very sorry stuff” and he went so far as to revise many of these poems for republication in the *Southern Literary Messenger* (*L* 5:356). Still his early critics were not all wrong to praise some of this poetry, as we will see in chapters 1 and 4. Given that he was only twenty when the first book came out and that the second book contained a surplus of even earlier composition, Simms’s beginnings as a poet are perhaps comparable to Keats’s at the same point.

Impressively Simms began “doggrelizing” at age eight or nine, he tells Griswold, and started publishing verse in the Charleston papers at fifteen. His poem “The Ring,” written at thirteen and comprising “4 or 6 cantos” based on stories from the Italian, discloses Simms’s early ambitions (*L* 1:285). Consequently it is fitting that no less a literary figure than Hugh Swinton Legaré, the leading critic in Charleston who harbored affinities for both the
Introduction  9

neoclassic and the romantic, “recognized and encouraged Simms’s poetic efforts as a juvenile,” as Guilds reports.13 With this mentoring, Simms progressed to publish his first book in 1825, when he was just nineteen. In closed heroic couplets reminiscent of Philip Freneau, Simms eulogized the recently deceased Revolutionary War hero Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. But the Charleston papers were beginning to reprint poems of the English romantics, Guilds explains, and Simms felt their influence, as many lyrics in the first two books as well the third, *The Vision of Cortes* (1829), attest. Simms’s next important book was the imaginative narrative *Atalantis* (1832), and for this sixth volume he significantly secured publication through the New York house of J. J. Harper. It was reviewed widely, even in England by poet Thomas Campbell (*L* 2:221–22). With this publication ends his early period.

As several critics have noticed, Byron exerted a major influence over Simms’s early efforts, though Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley affect this verse too.14 But with Simms’s remarriage and move to the Woodlands Plantation in 1836, his poetry becomes grounded in place and grows more distinctive and polished, as well as more markedly Wordsworthian. The next decade and a half was an extremely productive time for Simms. His key books of poems include *Southern Passages and Pictures* (1839), which Simms felt in 1843, contained not only much of his best verse but poetry more original than is common in America (*L* 1:362, 378); *Grouped Thoughts and Scattered Fancies* (1845), his notable collection of sonnets; *The Cassique of Accabee* (1849); *The City of the Silent* (1850), a successful reversion to the neoclassical mode that garnered ten reviews, among them laudatory responses in *Harper’s* and the *International Magazine; Poems: Descriptive, Dramatic, Legendary and Contemplative* (1853), his two-volume collected edition that put his life’s work in poetry on record; and *Aretyos* (1860), an expanded edition of his 1846 collection of lyrics praised by Poe. The Civil War and its aftermath effectively ended Simms’s career as an author of books, but in 1866 a New York publisher issued his edited anthology, *War Poetry*; though only seven of the poems appear under Simms’s name, Kibler has determined that Simms actually contributed twenty-seven works to the collection (*Intro* 478). To be sure, Simms continued to write poems until his death in 1870 at age sixty-four, despite suffering from cancer and other ailments as well as intense financial pressures during his final years. During his final decade, when he received very little recognition as a poet, Simms nevertheless wrote many of his best works, many of them intensely personal, some as Kibler says evincing a move from romanticism to existentialism (*SP* xv). A short list would include “Sonnet to Hon. W. Porcher Miles,” “Ballad—Oh! My Boys,” “The Kiss Behind the Door,” “Among the Ruins,” new versions of “Chilhowee, the Indian Village” and “From the Study Windows,” and in 1870 his final work,
“Sketches from Hellas,” an ambitious nine-part poem. Clearly Simms dedicates himself to poetry almost upon achieving literacy and he practices the holy craft to the bitter end. I think he engaged in journalism and novel-writing both to serve the larger mission of literature, especially the cultivation of American literature, and to make a living. He well knew that most poets are poor, but agreed with Coleridge that poetry supplies “its own exceeding great reward” (PP 92).

Chapter 1 examines Simms’s early neoclassicism as well as his first forays in the romantic traditions of Byron, Keats, Shelley, and the Gothic and explores how Simms, like Byron, from time to time revives the Augustan, Cavalier, and Gothic modes even after his mature adoption of Wordsworthian romanticism. Chapter 2 analyzes his poetic theories and practical criticism, which like his poetry is deeply grounded in romantic perspectives. His remarks on craft and on his contemporaries’ verse establish his commitment to artistry, and comparison of early and later drafts of his poetry demonstrates his own execution of poetic technique, putting the lie to claims by Hayne and others that Simms always wrote hurriedly without revision and care for form. Next, chapter 3 isolates Simms’s involvement in the romantic revival of the sonnet and argues that his experimentation with the form exceeds even Wordsworth’s and Keats’s and embodies the romantic ideal of the organic intertwining of feeling, process, and poetic structure. Chapter 4 more fully interrogates the influence of Wordsworth on Simms and argues that his most accomplished poems emulate Wordsworth’s lyrics and contemplative verse in his approach to nature and in his belief in its sublimity. Finally, in chapter 5, building again on Wordsworth’s example and Bate’s ecocriticism, I situate Simms’s romantic poetry within the context of his ecology as he lived it at Woodlands and as he wrote about the earth and the interrelations of all its living organisms in his nonfiction prose. Moreover this culminating chapter shows how his romantic ecology enfolds his aims to create a native literature grounded in what Jonathan Bate terms bioregionalism, or we might call a realism of locality comparable to Wordsworth’s Lake District poem “Michael.” What Bunting means to Northumbria and Wordsworth means to Cumberland, Simms means to the American South.