

ANALYSIS

The Fathers (1938)



Allen Tate

(1899-1979)

"It is a curious story which Allen Tate unfolds (in *The Fathers*), subtly and delicately, all the notes muted. It is a story which lends itself readily enough to the allegorical suggestion, and the rhythm of the prose reminds us that a poet wrote it. It is concerned with imponderables, with the meanings behind the formal speeches and codes, with clashing philosophies of life symbolized by people who would never use the term. It is a psychological horror story, but it is the psychology of Henry James rather than of William Faulkner; despite the catastrophe that overwhelms all the characters it is concerned with life rather than death, with significance rather than with futility."

Henry Steele Commager

New York Herald Tribune (25 September 1938) 5

"Mr. Tate's prose moves with a finely balanced rhythm that is a definite aid to the narrative flow of the story, and which is almost always subtle enough not to obtrude itself into the reader's consciousness. It is a style well suited to the material, handled so skillfully that it never seems at all mannered and, while it often makes for a separate kind of beauty, it remains a part of the vital texture of the novel... Of the innumerable novels that have come out of the South in the past decade or two, I think Mr. Tate's very easily challenges comparison with the best and the most penetrating."

Herschel Brickell

New York Times (25 September 1938) 2

"The prose is straightforward and, sentence by sentence, of the utmost simplicity. Yet the air of the narrative is charged, and behind the words, behind the imaginary narrator, who is rather a simple fellow--we are aware of a mind sharp and intense, clear as to its own situation, yet so caught in difficulties that it seems devious; secure in its own courage and yet in the midst of combat never ignorant of the imminence of defeat.... Mr. Tate is not unaware of the conflict in which he is involved. Because he is a poet and because it is as clear in his mind as it is confused in his emotions, he has created out of it, first in his poetry, and now in his prose, a dramatic irony, which for intensity is scarcely to be surpassed among his contemporaries."

John Peale Bishop

New Republic (9 November 1938) 25-26

"This [is an] excellent novel....The reason that so many Southern novelists have chosen to make use of the Civil War is perhaps most readily seen in *The Fathers* by Allen Tate. It is perhaps easier to begin with Mr. Tate's book because of all modern Civil War novelists he is the only one who completely defined his position on the South and the Civil War some years before he sat down to write his novel. I do not mean to imply by this that *The Fathers* is in any way redundant. The values of Mr. Tate's novel are not precisely those found in 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' and the book has its meanings beyond those which are stated

in 'Religion in the Old South.' But in 1938, when the book was published--or for that matter in any subsequent year--a great many readers must have approached *The Fathers* with some rather definite notions concerning Mr. Tate's view of the South.

One should have known, for example, that Mr. Tate deplored slavery on the ground that the Negroes did not function as a proper peasant class, which in turn is the *sine qua non* of a great culture. He should have remembered what he had been told in one of the essays: that the Southern God was a spurious God, an alien borrowed from sixteenth-century merchants. He should have recalled Mr. Tate's contention that the plutocracy of the North and the aristocracy of the South were similar in their essential qualities. But most of all he should have kept in mind the essayist's distinction between the Long View and the Short View of history. For the Long View is 'the religion of the half horse,' and only the Short View--that way of seeing history as an image or a number of images--can provide the artist with a foundation on which to build his world.

To the Southern writer who would deal with the past, the Civil War is the most significant image of all. For, if I may borrow a term from the spatial arts, the War is the pregnant moment in Southern history, that instant which contains within its own limits a summation of all that has gone before, an adumbration of the future. To put it another way, the war is important not merely in itself, but in what it implies; for at the hands of a skillful artist, the single image may be made to convey an entire civilization and the moral code on which that civilization was constructed. Indeed, in many Civil War novels the actual conflict exists only as a background against which certain ramifications of the traditional Southern code are developed.

Shortly after *The Fathers* first appeared, it was reviewed in one of the quarterlies by Lionel Trilling. Now, I have no quarrel with Mr. Trilling, whose work I respect almost as much as I respect that of Mr. Tate, but...Mr. Trilling's remarks are an excellent example of the sort of misunderstanding that results from the use of the Long View of history as a critical principle. Mr. Trilling took Major Buchan to be a representative of the old order, and he saw Major Buchan's limited, Virginia world as a microcosmic manifestation of the traditional society of the South. George Posey, he understood as a symbol of Northern industrialism, and the conflict of the novel was joined with the meeting of these two forces. This is, as far as it goes, a legitimate reading of *The Fathers*, but Mr. Trilling had one complaint to make.

He could not see that Mr. Tate had *logically proved* the superiority of the traditional society over the culture that Posey represented. There was, he said, only Mr. Tate's fine and sensitive writing about the Buchans, which was ultimately, no kind of proof at all. In other words, the novel contains no abstract theory, but merely a grand image. Mr. Tate had taken the Short View. The central image of *The Fathers* is the Buchan family group including on one hand a dead grandfather and on the other the in-law, George Posey, and from beginning to end, the essential qualities of the image do not vary. I do not mean by this simply that the closing events of the book are prepared for in the opening pages. Certainly, this is true. But of more importance is the fact that the destructive element, that weakness of the Southern culture which leads toward doom is visibly present with the ordered precincts of the family. The reader's progress through the novel, the way of the book, itself, is that of discovery; we are allowed to see, one after another, the various faces of the image, and we come to understand the profound truth of it in the end.

The critic's first task, then, is to ascertain the exact dimensions of the image, and this done, to probe for its meaning. I have no desire to re-examine ground that has already been covered by reviews of *The Fathers* which were written almost fifteen years ago, but it is necessary to point out that Posey is not only a part of the central image but also a manifestation of a rudimentary weakness in the culture of the South. If he seems out of place in the Southern tradition, he does so simply because we have come erroneously to believe that Henry Grady was the first traitor to the agrarian ideal. For the reasons that Mr. Tate has given us, we should know better.

Grandfather Buchan, the dead ancestor who comes to life in the final pages of the novel, points out that Posey could not have existed in his, the grandfather's, eighteenth-century world. 'The only expectancy that he shares with humanity is the pursuing grave,' the old man says, 'and the thought of extinction overwhelms him because he is entirely alone. My son, in my day we were never alone.' But Grandfather Buchan goes further. He tells the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece, not only more clearly to define the nature of

Posey's defection, but to show as well that evil breeds without fail in any vacuum that is created by the absence of good. Posey's intention is morally neutral. The intention of the *ante-bellum* society was good. But there were rents in its armor, gaps in the philosophy on which it was built. This is evident at the beginning of the novel.

When we see Major Buchan and Posey together for the first time, they are locked in battle and the issue is resolved in Posey's favor. Posey wins because he will not abide by the rules, he will not conduct himself in accordance with inherited standards. This reading of Southern literature as the story of traditional men who must either violate their own code or suffer defeat is one that has been suggested many times before. It has been developed, for example, by Malcolm Cowley in his excellent essay on Faulkner. But not enough attention has been given to the underlying reason for the failure of the traditional Southern culture. We cannot believe, of course, that in this world victory is always with the right, but neither are we justified in assuming that the warrior unrestrained by rules will always overcome the man who fights by an ethical code. Grandfather Buchan's society was as ordered as that of the major; its code was as strict. But the culture of late eighteenth century Virginia was powerful enough to hold in abeyance the spirit that motivated Posey. This was so because the Southern weakness of believing that the highest good of man is the good of politics had not, before 1861, developed to its destructive logical conclusion.

Major Buchan was a religious man and on the eve of the Civil War he read in his morning prayer the alternative version of the Episcopal service which was provided in the book for use when calamity threatened the family. But this final decision to cast his lot with the Union was a moral judgment made according to political theory rather than Christian theology. That is to say, he looked to Thomas Jefferson to find out what was right and then prayed God to strengthen his resolution. He was doomed in the end to be defeated by Posey and all that Posey represented not because he lived by traditional rules, but because the tradition itself was founded on a political and not a religious ethic.

As the narrator, Lacy Buchan, puts it, 'I cannot to this day decide just how papa looked at it: whether in his mind the domestic trials, growing out of my mother's death, were one thing, and the public crisis another. Nor can I decide in my own mind whether it was possible to distinguish the two--they worked together for a single evil, and I think the evil was the more overwhelming among us because of the way men had of seeing themselves at that time: as in all highly developed societies the line marking off the domestic from the public life was indistinct.'

In the final analysis, what Mr. Tate is telling us is this: the War must be understood as the climax of Southern culture, the last moment of order in a traditional society. Before 1861, the inherited code of the South remained an adequate guide for ethical conduct--the existence of all the George Poseys notwithstanding. After 1865, the old morality was no longer sufficient to serve as a valid standard of behavior. Therefore, the War, taken alone without reference to the tradition, is meaningless. It functions in the Southern novel as a dramatic symbol; in a sense, it is the catastrophe at the end of the play. For the character of the ante-bellum South was essentially that of the conventional tragic hero. It was strong and great and good, but it had a flaw."

Walter Sullivan
"Southern Novelists and the Civil War"
Southern Renaissance: The Literature of the Modern South
eds. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. and Robert D. Jacobs
(Johns Hopkins 1953) 113-17

"His only novel, *The Fathers*, is constructed around the mysterious conduct of one of the principal characters who cannot either contain himself in a real tradition or submit to picturesque imitations of the surface of tradition."

Wade Donahoe
"Allen Tate and the Idea of Culture"
Southern Renaissance (1953) 48

"The central issue of *The Fathers*, like that of its design, is a tension between the public and the private life, between the order of civilization, always artificial, imposed by discipline, and at the mercy of its own

imperfections, and the disorder of the private life, always sincere, imposed upon by circumstances, and at the mercy of its own impulses. We see, on the one hand, the static condition a society reaches when, by slow degrees, it has discipline all personal feeling to custom so that the individual no longer exists apart from the ritual of society and the ritual of society expresses all the feelings the individual knows. We see, on the other hand, the forces that exist--because time does not stand still--both within and without the people who constitute a society, that will destroy the discipline of its civilization and leave the individual naked and alone."

Arthur Mizener
Southwest Review (Autumn 1959) 6

"There are two generalizations which are often made about major American fiction. One is that Hawthorne or Melville or even in the Mark Twain of *Huckleberry Finn* the novel is both something less and something more than, say, the greater English novels of the Victorian age. It is less in that it does not give us the sense of a weight and thickness of social pressure around the characters; they are more alone and more free, live more in their thoughts and less in their 'world' than the characters, say, of George Eliot. On the other hand, such classic American novels often seem to have a meaning in depth, a poetic quality, an underlying pattern of moral fable or covert allegory, which is, on the whole, lacking in major Victorian fiction. The other generalization sometimes made is that owing to the hopefulness, the largeness, the newness of the American scene, American fiction tends to lack the tragic sense of life. The American hero handles and controls circumstances, rather than feeling hemmed in by them.

In 1938 a distinguished Southern poet and critic, Mr. Allen Tate, produced his only novel, *The Fathers*. It has just been republished in a slightly revised version. To it the first generalization only half applies. It is a book remarkable for the way in which it re-creates a sense of the weight and thickness of social pressure in the Old South, just before and just at the beginning of the Civil War. But, though it can be read straight through as a realistic fiction, it does have an underlying pattern which much enriches it. It is partly a kind of fable or allegory about the relation of the individual to society. And it does display, movingly, a tragic sense of life. It is not a poet's novel in the sense in which Mr. Lawrence Durrell's Alexandrian books are a poet's novel. The prose, the imagined narrative of an old man looking back on his youth, is deliberately bare and plain. Mr. Tate, in fact, gets some of his finest effects by writing a dramatic situation down, not by writing it up. It is a poet's novel, however, in the unusual depth of its conception and in the way in which it manages to give scenes and episodes, which might seem slight or ordinary in themselves, an air of ominous implicit meaning.

The Fathers is a tragic novel both in the medieval and the classical sense of the word. It exhibits the turnings of fortune's wheel; Major Buchan, the father of the narrator, is a generous, dignified, courteous man, presiding, when the story opens, with a properly impersonal grief and a proper consideration for his domestic slaves and his remote relations, at his wife's funeral ceremonies; ceremonies which are the occasion for a gathering of the 'connexion' and for what we would call in England a garden party. Major Buchan is a model of what a Southern gentleman should be; if he has a moral fault it is that he is proud (but his pride never makes him violent or unjust); if he has an intellectual flaw it is that he is a little stupid; but the story in the end exhibits stupidity as almost a desirable quality, a safeguard against the abyss.

By the end of the story Major Buchan's Unionist politics have isolated him from his friends and estranged him from his sons, his son-in-law has shot his son, the son-in-law's wife is mad, Federal troops have burnt his house down, and he has hanged himself. He has lived by 'custom and ceremony,' in Yeats's phrase, an example to his fellows, and has suffered the common fate of upholders of 'custom and ceremony' in a changing world. Major Buchan is hardly a person; it is his destiny, it is his representative aristocratic quality, that all his reactions to life are impersonally representative. He enacts his given role. His is the medieval tragedy, like the tragedy of the Duke of Buckingham in *Sackville*. The classical tragedy in *The Fathers* is that of Major's son-in-law George Posey.

Posey is a man rather nobler than the rest of us, who brings progressive destruction upon everybody he cares for, because he does not care for the habits that they care for; he has become excessively personal; his responses are unpredictable, even to himself. Posey is, in a way, the modern man in a traditional society. He brings personal passion and free intelligence to bear on a network of traditions at once so complex and

so fragile that they cannot bear that pressure. He is nothing so simple or so obviously dangerous as the radical or the rebel. He is merely the man who takes the public life as the mere background to the personal life. He is above, or outside, not opposed to, the tribe; he seeks to help the tribe, often, in his individualistic ways. He is fully an individual human being in a sense in which, in a traditional society, it is not safe to be. He seeks private or personal satisfactions outside the public order. That public order is, in any case, like Major Buchan, doomed; but, within the circle on which he makes his immediate impact, George Posey notably hastens and in a sense 'personalizes' the impact of the doom.

Mr. Tate is best known as a poet and critic, as one of the founder members of the group of young Southern writers who first forgathered, around 1922, in Nashville, Tennessee. Nashville is not known to everyone. For those who have never been there Mr. John M. Bradbury's book on the Fugitive group gives the impression that in some ways it is like an English Midland provincial town: many factories, many Rotarians, a great strength of Methodism; it has, too, an old-fashioned tradition of Southern oratory. The group of the Fugitives were looked at a little askance when they started, until they began to make a reputation. Mr. Tate began to write good poems when he came to New York. It was from the perspective of New York that he began to see the South passionately, took his stand, wrote his biographies of Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis. He has made the Old South, in his criticism and in his poetry, bear the weight of a lust for tradition that is partly pastoral but is partly Yeats's dream of 'unity of being,' Mr. Eliot's belief that there was some period or place in history where a 'certain dissociation of sensibility' had not set in.

The South is a tragic region, which is why Mr. Tate is able to write a tragic novel, and why Mr. Faulkner's novels have their violent truth. It is a region which has suffered European experiences, defeat in war; something like occupation; an effort of industrial reconstruction that bought moral independence at the expense, almost, of traditional identity. That traditional identity was never that of a high, literary, artistic, or philosophical culture in the European sense. The Old South, as Mr. Tate notes in his collected essays, had no place in its social life for a man of purely literary genius (and of dim family connexions) like Edgar Allan Poe. The men of the Old South loved words, but they saw law and politics as the proper outlet for a rhetorical gift; poetry, as a full-time preoccupation, was not quite a man's job. The old Southern idea of civilization was based partly on custom and tradition, on social ritual, and partly also on self-respect. They preferred, Mr. Tate notes somewhere in his essays, rhetoric to dialectic; they loved, as most Americans love, anecdote as a conversational instrument, the simple fable carrying a moral. Neither metaphysics nor poetry carried a high prestige with them, and therefore, where the argument jammed, when there was no communicating image, when self-respect was severely offended, they often shot one another. It was a mannerly but leisurely and sometimes almost slovenly civilization.

The hero of Henry James's early novel *The Bostonians* is a typical Southerner. Stranded in Boston, he longs for a rocking chair, a hot evening, a long glass of mint julep. He is at first amused and astonished, in the end bored and exasperated, by the restless urge for vague self-improvement of the New England mind. James sees him half ironically, half romantically. He rescues the heroine from her dreadful willful intellectual, unconsciously Lesbian mistress; but still for the heroine, James hints sadly, he is not a great catch. Henry Adams was at Harvard with the son of Robert E. Lee, Rooney Lee. He says of him: 'Tall, largely built, handsome, genial, with liberal Virginian openness toward all he liked, he had also the Virginian habit of command.... For a year at least...[he] was the most popular and prominent man in his class, but then seemed to drop slowly into the background. The habit of command was not enough, and the Virginian had little else. He was simple beyond analysis; so simple that even the simple New England student could not realise [*sic*] him.' There was the same splendid simplicity in his father who during the Civil War used to refer to the enemy as 'those people over there.'

Nobody could call Mr. Tate 'simple beyond analysis.' He would perhaps be an even better critic than he is (he is a very good critic indeed) if he had not such an absorbing curiosity about, and such a gift for expounding, commenting on, qualifying and placing other men's ideas. Often in this collection of his main critical essays one could wish that so much effort was not spent on courtesies and reservations about the ideas of Mr. Eliot and Dr. I. A. Richards, for instance, or on noble shadowboxing with the ideas of the progressive, positivist, scientific mind, and more effort on pure criticism, pure appreciation, pure placing, for which in, for instance, his essays on Poe, on Hart Crane, on Emily Dickinson, on John Peale Bishop, Mr. Tate shows an exceptional gift.

He often cannot get to the core of what he has to say till after a few paragraphs of Southern oratory in the relaxed and informal mode, paragraphs which are in a way an apology for doing something so personal, and untraditional, as putting sharply a complexly definite point of view. But possibly the simplicity under the sometimes laboured and cumbrous expository procedure is the great moral quality. There is a fine short late essay on Hart Crane, which does not dodge the subject of Crane's homosexuality; what expiates that, for Mr. Tate, is that Crane was unwillingly homosexual; had passionate attachments to women, not middle-aged women, but women of his own age; died in the middle of a normal love-affair; had such appalling parents that his homosexuality is explicable, and, as Mr. Tate notes, it is a Christian commonplace that God takes account of conditions.

The same fine simplicity comes into two essays on Mr. Pound, an early one on the *Cantos*, a late one on the controversy about the Bollingen Award (for which Mr. Tate voted). The *Cantos* for Mr. Tate are conversation, conversation about nothing--or nothing continuous or important--but conversation made poetry. About the Bollingen Award he makes it clear that he thinks Mr. Pound's ideas crude and incoherent to the last degree, that he has no personal bias towards him (Mr. Pound having always treated his own poetry with the utmost contempt), that Mr. Pound's anti-Semitism shames him (like most Gentiles he has felt himself, and been ashamed of, impulses of anti-Semitism) but that, in honour bound, as a man devoted to poetry, he must pay his tribute to a gift for revivifying language; a gift which he does not associate with any central wisdom in Mr. Pound.

And the simplicity, and the admiration for simplicity, come out even more in *The Fathers*: it seems, as one reads it again after twenty years, possibly one of the great novels of our time. It is as short, and as free of any material extraneous to the narrative line and the thematic pattern, as a novel by Turgenev. It is about a kind of Turgenev society, or a society like that depicted by Somerville and Ross, under the surface, in the *Irish R. M.* books; a patriarchal or cavalier society, in unconscious fatal decay. The decay is there in the richness of the funeral gathering at the beginning, a richness which George Posey, too refined to be civilized, cannot bear. He cannot bear the formalities, the introductions to remote connexions whose names and faces he forgets as soon as he has met them, the making of death, or of its marking, a kind of heavy celebration. He is always thinking, planning, using his intelligence; and therefore, in a traditional society, many people admire George, but nobody quite trusts him.

They are right not to trust George. After all, by the end of the tale, without meaning to, when he takes a positive step without quite knowing why he does it, George has shot two men dead, one his brother-in-law, driven his wife mad, broken the hearts of his father-in-law and of his younger brother-in-law, Lacy, who tells the story. George rides away unscathed; Lacy is left alone, to try to prop the ruins of a tradition.

It is a large argument for simplicity, for the impersonal authority of a code. But the book is a tragedy because George is a hero, not a villain; Mr. Tate knows all the dangers of personal impulse and unbridled intelligence; but his celebration of Major Buchan's slow, impersonal, social rectitude is also a criticism of the vulnerability of the unexamined social life. As a fine poet of strain and tension, as a critic who notes how strain and tension are held together sometimes, and transcended, in good poems, Mr. Tate knows that intelligence can be murderous; he also knows we cannot do without it."

"Southern Style"

anonymous reviewer

The London Times Literary Supplement 59:196 (5 August 1960)

"It is an ancient and productive literary habit to compare things as they are with things as they used to be. 'We are scarce our fathers' shadows cast at noon.' Decisive historical events, types of the aboriginal catastrophe, acquire the character of images upon which too much cannot be said, since they sum up our separation from joy or civility. So, in imperial Rome, men looked back to the Republic; so to this day they look back past the Reformation or the Renaissance or the Civil War, the points at which our characteristic disorders began. The practice has its dangers; the prelapsarian can become merely a moral and intellectual deep shelter, and there is some difficulty in drawing the line between the good old days of the vulgar myth and the intellectual's nostalgia for some 'organic society.'

The lost paradise lies archetypically behind much worthless historical fiction, and agreeable though it may seem that the community as a whole appears to share the view that the second Temple is not like the first, the fact is that the first can be reconstructed on the South Shore, or on a Hollywood set, far more comfortably than in a work of imagination. The first requirement for such a work, on such a theme, is dry intelligence working on real information. To be obsessed by the chosen historical moment, as a theologian might meditate the Incarnation, so that one shares it with everybody yet avoids all contamination from less worthy and less austere intelligences--that is the basic qualification. For another way, it is a power of self-criticism perhaps found only in an aristocratic, but not barbarian, sensibility. A few modern historical novelists have this quality. The authors of these two books have it in an extraordinary degree, especially Mr. Tate, whose theme, the break-up of the Old South, is known to be unusually productive of gushing nonsense.

If, as we are told, many Americans have a confused and erroneous idea of the Old South, it is not very likely that we, founding ours on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Gone with the Wind*, can avoid mistakes. Mr. Tate, of course, is thoroughly informed, but it is not his business to impart information. His novel is Virginia-colour, steeped in the province, but if he mentions, say, Helper--a book studied by his principal character and locked away from other members of the household--he will not add that this book was called *The Impending Crisis in the South* (1857), or explain its importance. And this necessary reticence extends to matters more subtle: to the landscape and the climate, still to the European and the Yankee surprising, exotic; to the Jeffersonian politics of the old Southern aristocrat; to the archaic manners of the South and particularly to its views on personal honour, which make credible the violence of Mr. Tate's climax. In fact, as presented, this climax is hardly violent at all; Mr. Tate's strategy requires the maintenance of a very even tone and the preservation of the reader's distance from the events described. All the meanings are qualified by this calmness and this distance, and at certain crucial moments, narrative and symbolic, one senses the huge invisible effort the feat required. Explanation, discrimination between fact and myth, would have falsified all this, but their absence makes the work a delicate undertaking for English readers; for the tension between fact and myth is essential to the novel.

The myth of a valuable and archaic southern civilization is not without basis. Crèvecoeur could call Charleston the most brilliant of American cities. The antebellum South thought of itself as in a great tradition, the heir of Greece and Rome; and if its account of its aristocratic provenance was largely spurious, it was for all that essentially aristocratic in its structure. Yet it was a perversely democratic aristocracy, if only because of the slaves, whose very existence made it important to set difficult barriers between different classes of whites. In any case, the population was bound together by blood, by a network of cousinships that took no account of status and even included slaves. The Negro was not feared or hated in the antebellum South, and he was not--effectively at any rate--exploited (all parties, including Mr. Tate's Agrarians, seem to be agreed that the slave system was extremely, perhaps disastrously wasteful). Any civilization is built on paradoxes, but few so curiously as this one. These backward-looking fine-mannered men had the activity of pioneers and hunters, and their natural violence was fostered by the alternately languid and vehement climate. Civic and personal pride coexisted with a central hedonism, a passion for gaming, drinking, love-making, talking. It was a world no outsider could improve, and one could represent the Yankee attack on slavery as directed not only against one's way of life, but against civility itself, even against God.

The emphasis on personal honour is a feature of societies which feel themselves highly privileged; and the South had its dueling, and was strong on the honour of women--the 'fragile membrane' as Faulkner calls it, that needs so much male blood to protect it. At the climax of Mr. Tate's novel a Negro enters a girl's room and attacks her; the consequences are death, madness, sterility. But what seems a myth--the revival of some incredible tabu--is a matter of fact. Such tabus are protection from what Mr. Tate calls the abyss, essential though atavistic elements of civility.

An image of civility so distinctive, and so decisively destroyed by war, can stand quite as well as that of England before its Civil War for the vanquished homogeneous culture that preceded some great dissociation, the effects of which we now suffer. It had all the gifts save art; and that, as Henry James said, is a symptom of the unhappy society. What the English Civil War meant to Mr. Eliot the American means

to Mr. Tate; the moment when the modern chaos began, though it cast its shadow before. His book is about the antebellum South under that shadow.

The war, so considered, is also a myth with correlative facts. It is commonplace that one thing more than any other sets the Southerner apart from other Americans: he is the only American who has ever known defeat, been beaten, occupied and reconstructed, seen his society wrecked and had no power to rebuild it on the old lines. Hence, as Cash says in *The Mind of the South*, a division developed in the 'Southern psyche'--the old hedonists warred with a new puritanism, old loyalties with new destinations. A tolerant society became bigoted. The Klan attacked not only the now-hated Negroes but Jews, atheists, fornicators. And Yankee culture moved in. The link with the past, the 'traditional men,' was gone. In Mr. Tate's poem the Confederate graveyard stands, in his own words, for 'the cut-off-ness of the modern intellectual man' from the world.' Could anything be saved? Mr. Tate and his friends in the 'twenties proposed and developed an Agrarian solution for the South, and were accused of sentimental organicism, of naively hoping to revive the virtues of the antique world by restoring its economic forms. What they really wanted was a new society uncontaminated by the industrial capitalism of the North, a society living close to life in a manner made impossible by the great dissociation. 'I never thought of Agrarianism as a *restoration* of anything in the Old South,' Mr. Tate says explicitly, 'I saw it as something to be created...not only in the South...but...in the moral and religious outlook of Western man.' He sought a way of life having the kind of order that is now found only in art; an order available to all, and not only to the estranged artist.

Mr. Tate also proposed a theory of 'tension' in poetry (an extensive literal statement qualifies and is qualified by intensive figurative significance, which is a translation to aesthetics of his view of life. And his meditations on the South, or the image of it he has made, include these complementary literal and figurative aspects. Finally, by 1938, in this novel, he presents the image itself at its most complex, containing the maximum tension between letter and spirit, fact and myth.

Thus the calm of the book is not merely a matter of Southern dignity (though that has its place in the effect) but of intellectual control, the tightened bow. The South is matter of fact; but it is also

a pleasant land
Where even death could please
Us with an ancient pun--
All dying for the hand
Of the mother of silences.

The 'place' of the Buchans is called 'Pleasant Hill,' in recognition of the basic myth; but it is not Paradise, it is merely a place where the radical human values are recognized, where the community and not the individual owns the myths which fence off the abyss. The time is just before the War. The narrator is Lacy Buchan, now old, speaking of the pleasant land as he saw it in boyhood. Memory works on a series of images: the death of Lacy's mother and the mourning of the 'connexion'; a chivalric tournament; the beginning of the fighting; a Faulknerian family disaster; the burning of Pleasant Hill by Union troops. It would be difficult to exaggerate the skill and integrity of the presentation, the slow unfolding of figurative significance. The principal characters are Major Buchan and his sons and daughters; George Posey, caught between the Old and the New South, who becomes Buchan's son-in-law; Yellow Jim, a Negro half-brother of Posey's. The basic fable is virtually Greek; rarely outside Greek drama is there to be found this blend of civilization and primitive ritual, the gentleman who is *eupheus* but at home in actual life, and with his roots in immemorial custom.

Major Buchan's mistake--his *hamartia*--is the honourable one of backing the wrong version of history; he finds himself giving his daughter to Posey, whom he cannot understand, and adhering to the Union when his family yields to the overwhelming emotional attraction of Confederacy. All depends, in the book, upon the successful rendering of his dignity and authority, the order of his house. But the detail that shows his life and his house to be in some ways less than great--archaistic revivals of a dead past, like the splendors of the jousting--is also important. Woven into the myopically rendered texture of the book are the qualifying facts: Mr. Broadacre forgetting to spit out his tobacco before making a formal oration on

Southern chivalry, unsurpassed in the world; Lacy's mother conducting a household task as a little ritual 'not very old to be sure but to my mother immemorial'; the revived custom of dueling.

These are the newly created traditions that Posey, the new man, dishonours. He is stronger than his opponent in the duel but will not fight it; he cannot be disarmed by the only weapon Major Buchan uses against him, a subtle withdrawal of courtesy. But his disregard for the absurd forms of his society is a symptom of his estrangement. He fears the dead, is embarrassed by the sight of a bull mounting a cow. The nature of the Buchan commitment to life he does not understand. 'They'll all starve to death,' he says. 'They do nothing but die and marry and think about the honor of Virginia.' He sells Yellow Jim, his half-brother, treating him as 'liquid capital,' and so precipitates the domestic crisis of the attack on his sister. Even then Posey is half-hearted about the obligation to kill Jim, and the job is done by Semmes Buchan, Lacy's elder brother, whom Posey kills instead. He also kills his enemy Langton, a man as representative of the Old South in his corrupt activity as Semmes is in his archaic sense of honor. Posey's position in the War is ambiguous; he smuggles arms, carrying the carpet-bag which a few years later was the hated emblem of Yankee exploitation.

Posey destroys the Buchans as surely as the War, and he does it out of a modern confusing, doing evil 'because he has not the will to do good.' The Old South is the Major, disowning his son for choosing Confederacy, but surrendering his house and his life rather than tell a Yankee officer that he himself is not 'seecesh.' As Lacy and Posey leave his grave, Lacy to return to the fighting, Posey to disappear on his own occasions, we learn of the last Buchan victim: Lacy. We know what to make of Posey, but there is always more to be made; as when Lacy, in his last sentence, declares his allegiance in the remarkable sentence, as rich a sentence as ever ended a novel: 'If I am killed it will be because I love him more than I love any man.' This is the reward of Mr. Tate's method: his images, though always sufficient, accrete significance as the narration develops, so that the whole book grows steadily in the mind.

The dignity and power of this book depend upon the power of a central image presented with concreteness and profundity, and not upon one's acceptance of Mr. Tate's history. But without his integrity of intellect and imagination the image would have been false and imperfect in ways that might have exposed it to such disagreements. By a bold device, the intervention of a ghost, Mr. Tate hands on this image to us through three generations of Buchans; it is as if ratified by a time-defeating community of sentiment, and the life in it is good and transmissible as well as tragic. If we could rescue the word 'civilized' from the smart and fashionable, we could apply it, in deep admiration, to this book.

The Leopard [Ariosto Lampedusa] is also a deeply meditated book, extremely original and possessing an archaic harshness of feeling, more alien and more ancient than the civilized calm of *The Fathers*. It is, however, a less consistently well made work... It is also, of course, an aristocratic novel, but with a very different heritage from that of *The Fathers*. If it has the brilliant intelligence of Stendhal it has also something of his superior carelessness. But only a little; it is a work entirely worthy of that master (whose admiration for Ariosto Lampedusa evidently shared) and it is also in many ways a work of this century. The coincidence of theme with Tate's is remarkable. A Southern world is changed by soldiers from the North; but now the South is Sicily and the soldiers are Garibaldi's. The time (1860) is the same. The theme--the break-up of a civilization--is the same, though what is lost here is, for all its power, a world of death. And at a level not far below the surface the theme of *The Leopard* is death, the conditions under which men as well as societies long for it...

The civilization that ends with Salina is greater and darker than Major Buchan's; and Lampedusa has got its presence into his book, which therefore is a bigger book than Tate's. There is nothing that a Major Buchan can do which has the sheer historical weight of significance that Salina's dealings with the Jesuit, in part submissive, in part insulting--as when he makes the priest help to dry his magnificent and recently sinning body--have as a natural right. Yet of the two books Mr. Tate's is the more perfect. It cannot be more than once or twice in a lifetime that a critic might have on his table, at the same time, two new novels of such rare quality."

Frank Kermode
"Old Orders Changing (Tate and Lampedusa)"
Puzzles and Epiphanies

"No writer is more conscious of what he is about than Tate.... The dynamics of the novel have either not been seen, or else have been seen out of focus.... Lacy as a boy imperfectly understood the events in which he participated. As he now seeks to recall the past, to force it to reveal itself to his mind, he is often forced to admit that his knowledge was inadequate and that it is still incomplete. One peculiarity of *The Fathers* is that it is usually the case that Lacy's understanding fails with his vision: to the extent he *sees*, he *knows*.... I have called the mode of action in *The Fathers* the symbolic mode. Perhaps it would be better to call it a symbolic mode: it is that mode in which the physical environment is transmuted, by its passage through a consciousness, into tone and action.... In *The Fathers* the symbolic mode is justified, for it is so firmly grounded in Lacy's perception...

Major Buchan, living in a world old before he was born, whose habitual courtesy and formalized manner leave him no way to deal with George Posey, let alone the anarchy of the world he represents. Here is Lacy's older brother, Semmes, caught between two worlds; and his sister, Susan, who is to marry George Posey. Posey, with Lacy, is the most important character in the novel: an erratic, violent, deracinated Marylander, a man of heroic proportions and direct action who, always performing the unexpected, is the finest and most brilliant man young Lacy has ever known. It is no wonder: Posey is a man of superb talents, an expert horseman, a practiced marksman, an engaging personality. But he cannot abide the indirect courtesies of Pleasant Hill. He has no code... George is the untraditional man in the traditional society....

The public celebration of the South's defiance are marvelously visible as the new companies are formed and new uniforms and military equipment appear everywhere; orators roundly declaim the selected facts and necessary fictions which are the prelude to war. The Posey house at Georgetown, however, is different. The Poseys are isolated from the world; they have become eccentrics, fugitives from one of Poe's tales of the grotesque.... 'The Abyss,' the final section, takes place almost entirely in the dark, except for those scenes in which the light is so brilliant it is dazzling.... Tate's use of the narrator is marvelously subtle in this book; it is more subtle, I think, than any of James's uses of the first person--a device James considered 'barbarous'--and is comparable with Ford Madox Ford's manipulation of John Dowell in *The Good Soldier*, though Tate uses the technique differently. For Tate has really managed to combine a first person technique with a variation of a central intelligence. The elder Lacy looks over the younger Lacy's shoulder; it is the elder Lacy who speaks to us, at times admitting us to the young boy's mind, at times removing us further from the scene....

In all of this, Lacy is a spectator, yet in the scene; he attempts to will the events into clear sight; he seeks to understand an experience too chaotic for understanding. He is caught between Major Buchan and George Posey. The attempt to mediate between two visions--the old order in which he matured and the new order--is too much for him. His father is an ideal; yet he loves George Posey 'more than I love any man.'... Imperfectly disciplined in the old order and eager for new experiences, he is captivated by the heroic Posey. Posey's very heroism is what destroys those around him, for it is a completely *personal* power which he exercises.... Lacy is still attracted to George: to the virile, destructive man of the new order.... As long as he can maintain his senses, his vision remains keen. It remains, in fact, abnormally keen: it is heightened to the point of hallucination.

The ghost of his grandfather appears, offers him the image of a life unified and whole, and shows George Posey to be a modern Jason, seeking his golden fleece to the exclusion of all other virtues, destroying all he touches. But Lacy, too, is at least partly modern: when he returns to his senses he says 'my grandfather was dead--dead as a herring.' Lacy is caught: he can move in neither direction--toward Pleasant Hill or toward George Posey. Indeed, he collapses near the end of the book, and his fever renders him unconscious for six weeks: the complete failure of vision, from which he returns to find the older world nearly destroyed. But George Posey whom he loves--in a peculiar way--is present....

Lacy grown old completely effaces himself in the final paragraph, but he is still there. He re-enters the past; he merges with the young Lacy to perpetuate the tension between Major Buchan and George Posey and what they symbolize. The present tense re-affirms the cataclysm, and when he says 'if I am killed' it is not young Lacy's fear of battle speaking so much as old Lacy's knowledge, gained through the discipline of

time, that the entrance into the modern world is accomplished only by killing some part of the human spirit. The young Lacy, in the course of the book, moves into a world he cannot reject: it is no metaphor to say that something in him has died in the process.... Lacy Buchan, grown old, no longer belongs anywhere: he has become a man of the modern, provincial world.....

Mr. Tate once remarked that he sometimes thought of his poems as records of those situations from which there is no escape. *The Fathers* is a brilliant evocation of such an experience. And it is valuable to the careful reader for at least two reasons. The first is because it is a great novel, and that is enough. But to the critic of Tate's entire work it has another value: not only do specific scenes and details recur in certain poems, but the peculiar angle of vision and the tragic character of the novel are also fundamental to his poetry. *The Fathers* is, then...one of the best introductions to Tate's poetry."

R. K. Meiners

The Last Alternatives: A Study of the Works of Allen Tate
(Alan Swallow 1963) 81-96

"In Allen Tate's *The Fathers*, the narrator, in a moment of extreme exhaustion, has an hallucination in which his grandfather sits with him on a pile of fence rails beside a Virginia road and tells him the story of Jason and Medea in such a way as to make Jason a counterpart of the novel's hero, George Posey. This episode is managed with great care for the conventions of the realistic novel of which it is a part--for the physical condition of the narrator that allows him to imagine it, for the Neoclassical bias of his culture that makes the story of Jason familiar to him, for the family piety that makes the portrait of his grandfather hanging 'in the front parlor' of the house he grew up in a living memory for him'....

The occasion of *The Fathers* is a public one, the achievement and the destruction of Virginia's antebellum civilization. Within that occasion the novel discovers the conflict between two fundamental and irreconcilable modes of existence that has obsessed American novelists and haunted American experience. *The Fathers* moves between the public and the private aspects of this conflict with an ease very unusual in American novels, and this ease is the most obvious evidence of the novel's remarkable unity of meaning and form. The action of the novel not only communicates the novelist's meaning; it *is* that meaning, is made with a careful respect for both the author's expressive needs and the conventions of realism that bring alive for the reader what the author expresses. This is the aesthetic aspect of the novel's meaning, the social aspect of which may be briefly described as the idea that 'the belief widely held today, that men may live apart from the political order, that indeed the only humane and honorable satisfactions must be gained in spite of the public order,' is a destructive delusion.

The formal ordering of the novel is quite deliberate. 'I wished,' Mr. Tate has written--'to retain the great gains in sensuous immediacy won by the Jamesian or impressionist branch of the naturalistic [Realistic] tradition, and to eliminate its hocus-pocus of 'motivation' and cause and effect, along with its reliance upon 'recognition' or mere detailed photography of the scene for effect upon the reader... To do this I constructed an artifice which would permit the reader to experience meaning rather than recognition; or put otherwise, I tried to make the whole structure symbolic in terms of realistic detail, so that you could subtract the symbolism, or remain unaware of it, without losing the literal level of meaning...but if you subtract the literal or realistic detail, the symbolic structure disappears.'

What makes this effect possible is the novel's narrator. Lacy Buchan is an old man who had, as a boy, participated in the events he is describing. As narrator he thus has a double perspective on the events of the novel, and allows Mr. Tate to move back and forth between the now mature but uninvolved judgment of the old man and the partial understanding but direct sensuous response of the boy whom the old man remembers. 'In my feelings of that time,' Lacy says, 'there is a new element--my feelings now about that time...the emotions have ordered themselves in memory, and that memory is not what happened in the year 1860but rather a few symbols, a voice, a tree, a gun shining on the wall....'

Thus every event in the novel is given 'the sensuous immediacy' as well as the probability of the modern realistic novel, and at the same time, because the events have ordered themselves in the old man's memory as his growing understanding of them has led him unconsciously to select and arrange them, each event has become symbolic--'a voice, a tree, a gun shining on the wall.' With an almost Jamesian neatness and

economy, the novel makes the very process by which Lacy's apprehension changes from the sensuous immediacy of boyhood's experience to the quiet wisdom of his old age an example of its theme.

The quiet wisdom of Lacy's old age is not a natural product of merely growing old; the idea that old men grow wise merely by growing old would, I think, be as firmly rejected by Mr. Tate as it is by his poetic master, Mr. Eliot; in fact, even when men do grow old wisely, there is a limitation on wisdom that is complementary to the limitation on the passionate immediacy of youth's response to experience, compared to which in old age 'The serenity [is] only a deliberate hebetude, / The wisdom only the knowledge of dead secrets / Useless in the darkness into which they peered / Or from which they turned their eyes.'

In *The Fathers* Lacy's growing up is a particular example of the civilizing process through which the Virginia society, represented in the novel by Pleasant Hill, puts its citizens; the process has been only half completed with the boy Lacy whom the old Lacy is remembering; it is one of the central points of the novel that it never occurs at all with Lacy's brother-in-law, George Posey. As a boy, Lacy remembers, 'I shared [George Posey's] impatience with the world as it was, as indeed every child must whose discipline is incomplete'....

The novel's narrator, with his old man's wisdom and his memory of his boyhood experience, will be expected by the reader to present the events of the novel as they 'have ordered themselves in memory,' and this expectation makes it possible for the novelist to present the events, without loss of probability, in the order that will bring out their meaning rather than in the order of chronology. The novel opens on the day of Mrs. Buchan's funeral at Pleasant Hill in April 1860. After the narrator has told us how his brother-in-law, George Posey, refused to attend the funeral, his mind jumps, almost inevitably, back to the point two years before when George Posey was wooing Susan Buchan and about to become an in-law of the Buchans. The narrator continues to recall the events that occurred after George began to woo Susan until he has filled in for us the two years between that time and the day of Mrs. Buchan's funeral. But this recollection is in turn thrice interrupted by his recollection of events that occurred on the day of the funeral; they come naturally to his mind as he is remembering, and they are thus communicated to us in conjunction with those events of the previous two years to which they are most significantly related.

During the whole of this double narration we are aware that Mrs. Buchan's funeral occurred fifty years ago and that what we are hearing is not a contemporary account of it but the recollection of an old man who happens to have been her son. Complex as this narrative procedure may sound when it is described, it does not create the slightest confusion for the reader because it is essentially a very familiar one, an adaptation to the demands of the realistic novel of epic narrative structure. Its purpose is to give the novelist a chance to arrange his events in the non-chronological order his novel's meaning calls for without destroying our sense that we are observing actual events occurring in actual time. In this way the novel's meaning is made something we discover in the verisimilar, represented life of the novel, not something we are told by the author; we are, as Mr. Tate puts it, given a chance 'to experience meaning.'

Because we do experience meaning as we read *The Fathers* we are likely to be particularly conscious of the loss the novel's meaning suffers when it is paraphrased, but paraphrased it must be, however crudely, if it is to be discussed.... The central tension of meaning in *The Fathers*, like that of its formal presentation, is a tension between the individual's public and his private sense of experience, between his commitment to the order of civilization--always artificial, imposed on men by discipline, and at the mercy of its own inherent imperfections--and his commitment to the disorder of the private feelings--always sincere, imposed upon by circumstances, and at the mercy of impulse.

We are made to see, on the one hand, the static condition a society reaches when it has been fully civilized, when, by slow steps, it has disciplined all the personal feelings of its members to established and customary modes of feeling so that the individual no longer exists apart from the ritual of society and the ritual of society expresses all the feelings the individual knows. We are made to see, on the other hand, the forces that exist (because time does not stand still and both rituals and individuals change), both within and without the people who constitute the society, that will break down the discipline of its civilization and leave the individual naked, alone, and lost. 'People living in formal societies,' says the narrator who himself

once lived in such a society but does not now, 'lacking the historical imagination, can imagine for themselves only a timeless existence.'

So it is with Major Buchan. But George Posey, for all his great personal gifts--his generosity, his kindness, his charm--must receive 'the shock of the world at the end of his nerves' because he does not live in any society, least of all the one he exists in, but is alone and unprotected. He is a man who, having nothing to tell him how to act in order to express his feelings, is always in violent motion; as a boy, when he could not wholly understand why, Lacy Buchan saw George as 'a horseman riding over a precipice.' Remembering as an old man the differences between the Posey family and his own, he thinks, 'Excessively refined persons have a communion with the abyss; but is not civilization the agreement, slowly arrived at, to let the abyss alone?'

The richness of life with which *The Fathers* realizes both aspects of this theme is remarkable; it makes one suspect that, if *The Fathers* is ever read with attention in the South, Mr. Tate may become as unpopular with the voting public there as Faulkner would be if his work were read attentively. Mr. Tate knows all too well that Pleasant Hill is gone forever and that he is not Major Buchan and never can be, knows that he is as completely excluded from the world of Pleasant Hill as George Posey was, and cannot avoid sharing George's feeling that it is radically absurd. But if he cannot avoid feeling Pleasant Hill's absurdity, he understands very well what it was and sees that, though time has--inevitably, perhaps even rightly--destroyed it, it was civilized in a way his and our life is not.

This attitude is very like the attitude of the speaker in Mr. Tate's 'Ode to the Confederate Dead.' It is possible, by reading that poem and Mr. Tate's essay about it, 'Narcissus on Narcissus,' to guess the extent to which Mr. Tate considers the personal situation of us all in the contemporary world like the situation of George Posey in the Virginia world of a hundred years ago. The integrity of *The Fathers* is never, even indirectly, violated by a personal intrusion of the author or a lecture on the disjointedness of our times, but it is not impossible to guess that the raw material out of which George Posey is made is the author's conception of himself: 'George Posey, c'est moi.' If this be so, it is only the perfectly maintained narrative integrity of the novel that conceals the extent to which an important part of its life, like the life of other American novels of its time, derives from the author's 'inebriated *sense of self*,' from his heightened, private sensitivity that invents many promises for life that he recognizes with something like despair life cannot possibly realize.

The difference between the attitude of *The Fathers* and that of most other American novels of its time--and it is a significant difference--is that *The Fathers* can, like 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' imagine an order of society and a conception of the self that do not commit the self to impossible hopes or society to their destruction. It can 'praise the arrogant circumstance / Of those who fall / Rank upon rank, hurried beyond decision' even though it knows that we ourselves--like the George Posey who is forever excluded from Major Buchan's world by the very nature of his own consciousness--remain 'Here by the sagging gate, stopped by the wall.'

Almost the most impressive thing about *The Fathers* is that, despite its awareness of what the civilization of Virginia did for its members that our society does not do for us, it does not yield to the temptation to romanticize in a nostalgic way the life of Pleasant Hill. The antebellum South of *The Fathers* is a believable world, drastically limited in many ways, full of evils very imperfectly controlled, and subject like all civilizations to the destruction of time and change. Neither its virtues nor its defects are magnified by the Gothic exaggeration of event or the romantic extravagance of rhetoric that Faulkner so frequently resorts to in describing the South.

Thus the attitude of *The Fathers* can do justice to the nature of its very American hero, but, unlike most novels of its time, can also do justice to the world that does not--cannot--satisfy the hero's demands upon it. This attitude extends the range of the modern American novel's feelings considerably, and *The Fathers* realizes this extended range of feelings even in the smallest of its occasions. When, for example, Major Buchan leads his family, single file, into a hotel and says to the clerk, 'We need rain, sir!' we are at once charmed by the perfection of his manners, astonished by the innocent confidence in the coherence of society with which he performs them, and amused by his simplicity--not very creditably, for it is this same

simplicity of feeling and directness of performance that make him leave his place in his wife's funeral procession to take the 'brown hand (of his wife's personal maid) to lead her into the line and make her take her place ahead of us just behind the body of her mistress.' It is an irresponsible--if uncontrollable--indulgence of the romantic irony habitual to the private American self and its unlimited demands on the social order to find such acts simple.

Major Buchan's manners are a complete expression of his nature; they are at the same time like Cousin Custis' literary effusions. Major Buchan himself realizes that in these compositions 'the tropes become more tropical every year,' but he nevertheless observes quite sincerely that 'Custis is a most accomplished gentleman. A very fine artist, sir! In the heroic style. And an elegant speaker.' There is no doubt that the author's feeling color this passage; however much it makes us respect Major Buchan, it also makes us feel he is comically innocent. Dr. Cartwright, the Episcopal clergyman of *The Fathers*, seems to Lacy Buchan 'to be just a voice, in the *ore rotundo* of impersonality, no feeling but in the words themselves.' This is the quality of Cousin John Semmes' orations in the novel, and it is the quality of Major Buchan's habitual mode of speech. Mr. Tate's essay 'The Profession of Letters in the South' shows the same double feeling about this style, and in 'What Is a Traditional Society?' he speaks in the same way about the *ore rotundo*.

This complexity of feeling is equally evident in the pattern of incidents in *The Fathers*, just as it is in the novel's main design. Consider, for example, what we are made to feel when the drunken John Langton challenges George Posey after the tournament. As Major Buchan is an embodiment of the best possibilities of his civilization, so John Langton is an embodiment of the worst, 'a bold and insolent man who deemed himself an aristocrat beyond any consideration for other people.' When he and George meet on the field of honor, George first makes a magnificent practice shot and then, suddenly, throws his pistol away and knocks Langton down. 'I never did like Langton, from the time we were boys,' says Jim Mason, his second, 'But that ain't the point.... Mr. Posey agreed to come out here and there was only one thing to come for. Not for this.' He is right.

As always, George cannot realize his feelings in the humane and honorable terms established by the world he exists in, because he does not live in that world. Living in the isolation of his own consciousness, he lives with the illusion that will destroy any man, that 'the only humane and honorable satisfactions must be gained in spite of public order.' The very qualities that gave him his personal splendor, 'the heightened vitality possessed by a man who knows no bounds,' make him reject the modes of behavior provided by the public order of his time and place, leaving him with no meaningful way of realizing his feelings at all.

The implications of this scene are extended by the fact that we watch it with Lacy Buchan from under the pavilion set up for the tournament. There Lacy has found a contemporary, Wink Broadacre.... And he points to a 'half-grown mulatto girl with kinky red hair and muddy green eyes in a pretty, Caucasian face' who is lying on her back a short distance away. This episode is a prologue to the duel. Its sexual and social evil is fully realized; it is, like Langton's malicious arrogance, a part of this civilization, and the novel faces that fact squarely. At the same time there is something comic, in a Tom Sawyerish way, about Wink Broadacre ('Say, Buchan, cain't you cuss?'), as if this evil were limited in a customary society: John Langton can be insolently arrogant only within the bounds of the customary ways of behavior of his society, and Wink Broadacre is rebelling against the bounds of polite conversation and polite sexual conduct in ways that are themselves customary and familiar to his society. This does not make these evils any less evil, but it does make them evils that are held within limits by an otherwise orderly world.

Before we condemn that world for containing such evils, we must consider the unintended but unbounded evil produced by the wholly personal sincerity of George Posey's love for Susan Buchan that involved him in the duel which shares our attention with Wink Broadacre's dalliance beneath the pavilion. 'There is no doubt,' as the narrator says, 'that [George] loved Susan too much; by that I mean he was too personal, and with his exacerbated nerves he was constantly receiving impressions out of the chasm that yawns beneath lovers; therefore he must have had a secret brutality for her when they were alone.' In the end George drives Susan mad.

The first third or so of *The Fathers* is a sustained contrast between the old and still dominant way of life of Major Buchan and his family and the new way of George Posey and his family. In it, because the

narrator's mind moves back and forth among the events that belong for him to the changeless period of childhood, time seems nearly to stand still, as it does for those who are part of the society it is describing (who 'can imagine for themselves only a timeless existence'). Because we all know, as the Buchans cannot, that the Civil War was about to break out, we are aware of how short a lease on life this timeless existence has, and that in turn alerts us to the evidence that the forces of change, unobserved by everyone except George Posey, who embodies them, had already undermined the Virginia way of life before the outbreak of the war--which was only a manifestation on the national political level of a change that had begun a long time before at the roots of our social life. This is what Mr. Tate calls... 'the literal level of meaning in the novel,' the historical meaning it is, as a realistic fiction, bound to have. As such, the novel constitutes an example of how time, working within a civilization and the individuals who make it up, destroys them.

The novel's contrast between the old way of life and the new comes to a climax in the scene where George comes, not to ask Major Buchan for Susan's hand, but to announce his intention. 'Major Buchan,' he says, 'I intend to marry your daughter.' A whole civilization is denied by that mode of approach to Susan's father. Major Buchan had begun this scene with George by putting George as firmly in his place as he knew how to; he had failed to ask after George's family, 'the first thing he always did when he met anybody, black or white,' and he tells George that 'I don't know that we are entitled to your kindness--no, sir, I don't know that we are.' But George is unaware that he has been put in his place because he is quite unconscious of the customary patterns that give these gestures their force; 'he was incredibly at his ease, the way a man is at ease when he is alone.' Confronted by this imperviousness to the most violent rebuff his system of manners allowed him to administer, Major Buchan could only look astonished, 'as if someone entitled to know all about it had denied the heliocentric theory or argued that there were no Abolitionists in Boston.'

This is comedy, but high comedy, filled with tragic possibilities. Major Buchan is a man who exists in terms of this game, whose consciousness has wholly identified itself with the moves laid down by his society's system of manners for the expression of every feeling. 'Our lives,' Lacy thinks, 'were eternally balanced upon a pedestal below which lay an abyss I could not name. Within that invisible tension my father knew the moves of an intricate game that he expected everybody else to play. That, I think, was because everything he was and felt was in the game itself.' The possibility that an individual life might be lived without regard for this system of manners was incomprehensible to him, and he is baffled and helpless before the anarchic, impulsive, personal conduct of George Posey. The scene reminds Lacy of 'the only time I had ever seen my father blush; somebody had tried to tell him his private affairs, beginning, 'If you will allow me to be personal,' and papa blushed because he could never allow anybody to be personal.'

Because such men cannot conceive of themselves except as members of a society, they simply do not understand individualism, and Major Buchan never comprehends at all the individual competition for power that is rapidly taking control of the political and economic life of his country.... They and their society can be saved from ruin at the hands of the new way of life only by ceasing to be what they are and becoming something like the new men and the new society that are bringing them to ruin.

In Major Buchan's world property is not conceived financially; it is a final reality in itself and it never occurs to Major Buchan to think of property in monetary terms, as something that may be sold, exchanged for amounts of money. This attitude makes the slave-holding of Pleasant Hill, with all its defects, something very different from what it appears to those who do think of property in monetary terms. Major Buchan would no more think of selling a slave than of selling his wife or his daughter. He neither loves nor hates money; it simply does not exist for him. George Posey does hate money, and it the nearest thing to a final reality he knows, almost the only thing that gives him a sense that other things exist. He even thinks of Yellow Jim, his Negro half-brother and slave, as 'liquid capital,' an attitude that shocks the Buchans almost as much as does George's refusal to pay his 'labor enough to buy bacon and meal,' though he will, on an impulse, in all the confusion and embarrassment of this naked exposure of personal feeling, give a beggar woman ten dollars. George is neither parsimonious nor uncharitable; he is simply, as people like him presently learned to say, 'practical.'

The profound effect of this difference comes out clearly in the history of Pleasant Hill, the novel's particularized image of Virginia's antebellum civilization. Throughout the novel the way of conducting the

everyday life of Pleasant Hill that Major Buchan follows without conceiving that any other is possible gradually becomes unworkable as the larger society of which it is a part changes over from the principles and practices of the eighteenth century to the finance capitalism of the late nineteenth century. The seeds of that change are present from the start of the novel. The unfamiliar silence of Pleasant Hill on the day of his mother's funeral makes Lacy think of it for a moment empty of life 'if we went to town.'

They do have to go to town a little later, and George Posey, who grew up in a town, where civilization as the Buchans understand it does not exist, takes over Pleasant Hill in order to preserve its financial value for the heirs. Almost like a well-to-do retired New Yorker today taking over an eighteenth-century country house (near Charlottesville?), he repairs and repaints the house and puts the plantation on a business basis. Cousin John Semmes thinks it is 'a piece of damned impertinence for George Posey to mind Lew's business for him' in this way 'because,' as Lacy says, 'he allowed himself to see not what George was doing but only the way he did it.' This objection to Cousin John's criticism is justified enough; Major Buchan would not have long continued to have a business to mind if he had continued to run Pleasant Hill himself.

Nevertheless, George saves Pleasant Hill, at least temporarily, only by destroying everything in its life that made it Pleasant Hill. George's contribution to the Confederate cause is smuggled goods, which he purchases with great shrewdness in the North, brings in himself, and sells for cash on the barrel head, very cheaply and also at a profit, to the Confederates. Holding his satchel of money in his hand after one such transaction he says to Cousin John, 'Mr. Semmes, your people are about to fight a war. They remind me of a passel of young 'uns playing prisoners' base.' So far as the war they are about to fight is concerned, anyone like Major Buchan is a young 'un playing a game. Yet the man like George Posey who belongs to no community--'your people' he calls his fellow Virginians--and does not recognize the rules of Major Buchan's game, or some such game, is at the mercy of exposed nerve ends and random impulses.

Lacy once recalls for us how his mother dealt with a child's question about why a bull had been brought to Pleasant Hill. 'He's here on business,' my mother said, and looking back to that remark I know that she was a person for whom her small world held life in its entirety, and who, through that knowledge, knew all that was necessary of the world at large.' But when George Posey, walking with Major Buchan about Pleasant Hill, comes on a young bull who has been turned into a pasture with a herd of cows--'I looked at George Posey. He was blushing to the roots of his hair. He looked helpless and betrayed.'... 'The Poseys,' as the narrator remarks elsewhere, 'were more refined than the Buchans, but less civilized.'

The Buchans and the Poseys differ in the same way when confronted by death. Major Buchan 'was crushed [by his wife's death] but in his sorrow he knew what everybody else was feeling, and in his high innocence he required that they know it too and be as polite as he.' So great is his sense of dignity and honor that he is even polite to George first rudely refuses to attend the funeral and then suddenly turns up again. His father's conduct teaches young Lacy a great lesson: 'It seemed plain [at my age] that a great many people had to be treated, not as you felt about yourself, but as they deserved. How could you decide what people deserved?'... George had fled the funeral because he 'needed intensely...to escape from the forms of death which were, to us, only the completion of life, and in which there could be nothing personal.'

The intensity of George's need to escape is made clear by the agonized brutality with which he greets Semmes Buchan--a medical student--on his return; 'I reckon you'll be cutting up your cadavers again this time next week,' he says to Semmes. In speaking to Lacy he brings together the two things that exasperate him most about Major Buchan's way of life, its unwillingness--in his exasperation George thinks of it as a stupid refusal--to see what he believes is obvious, the hard but real financial aspect of life and the shocking but real cadaverous aspect of death. 'And by God they'll all starve to death, that's what they'll do. They do nothing but die and marry and think about the honor of Virginia.' He rammed his hands into his pockets and shouted: 'I want to be thrown to the hogs. I tell you I want to be thrown to the hogs!' (and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it.) In the wild confusion of the destruction of Pleasant Hill at the end of *The Fathers*, only the devoted propriety of Mr. Higgins saves the body of Major Buchan from the hogs.

'As to all unprotected persons,' Lacy thinks later when he understands George better, 'death was horrible to him; therefore he faced it in its aspect of greatest horror--the corrupt body.' So great is this private horror that he cannot even pay his respects--as the old phrase goes--to his own dead mother. When his uncle greets him at the door of the parlor where she is laid out, he says, 'Nephew, it pains me to greet you in these melancholy circumstances.... Your mother--' But George, 'looking at him as if he were a child,' interrupts him: 'She's dead, ain't she?'--and then turns abruptly away without ever seeing her.

'As Brother George threw back the door to the steps down to the kitchen,' says the narrator, 'I believed that he was imponderable, that I could have put my finger through him. When death could be like this, nobody was living. If [the Poseys] had not been of their Church, they would have thrown one another at death into the river.' George does in fact throw his half-brother, Yellow Jim, into the river after Semmes has shot him. This is what it is to live a life 'in which the social acts are privacies.' In the Posey household the last fragment of social existence is old Aunt Milly Jane's spying through the crack of her bedroom at everyone who passes in the hall. 'People got to get life where they can,' Susan says of her.... 'It makes her live.'

It makes it far worse for George Posey that, being the kind of man he is, he must live in a world made for men like Major Buchan. 'In a world in which all men were like him, George would not have suffered--and he did suffer--the shock of communion with a world that he could not recover; while that world existed, its piety, its order, its elaborate rigmarole--his own forfeited heritage--teased him like a nightmare.... It is this that so exasperates him and drives him to his acts of wanton and shocking impropriety, as it does when he participates in the elaborate Strawberry Hill-Gothic ritual of the tournament.

We know from Brother Semmes' conduct how much the serious feelings of the participants were embodied in this ritual. 'I knew,' says Lacy, 'that [Brother Semmes] didn't mind bringing [Minta Lewis] to the tournament because everybody knew that [she] was his cousin, not his choice; but he'd be damned if he'd ride, win the prize, and crown her queen.' George does ride, wins the 'small wreath of laurel that somebody must have made a trip to the Bull Run Mountains to get,' and then, on an irresistible impulse to laugh at these 'antic people,' 'as Susan learned forward to receive [the wreath], according to custom, on her head, he hesitated, looked around him, and then dropped [it] into her lap.'

Thus George, who cannot recover the existing world of custom and ceremony that would give objective existence and order to his feelings, is always trying to invent, on the spur of the moment, ad hoc, sincere gestures of his own. His feelings are always undisciplined and the only way he can attain even an illusion of self-realization is in improvised and violent action. 'He is alone,' as grandfather Buchan says, 'like a tornado.' He has nothing but his terrifying personal sincerity with which to meet experience, with the result that he cannot face death at all, makes a tragic mess of his passion for Susan, and--having shot Semmes Buchan on an impulse that astonishes even him--actually attempts to explain to Major Buchan why he did it. 'Brother George,' Lacy thinks, 'had been sincere...had been appallingly too sincere.'

Between George Posey and Major Buchan stands Susan, George's wife and the major's daughter. 'There can be no question but that Susan had been fascinated by George's mysterious power, by his secrecy and his violence,' Lacy knows (he has been fascinated by it himself), 'but...she could not have known that George was outside life, or had a secret life that no one had heard of at Pleasant Hill. To Susan the life around her in childhood had been final.' But after Susan has lived with George and his family--each of them isolated in his room and the shell of himself, hardly knowing, as George's uncle does not, whether it is night or day--she learns that these are not just eccentric old people; they are not really old at all. They are people who have dropped out of life, walked through the looking-glass and forgotten the trick of getting back, like the Alice of Mr. Tate's 'Last Days of Alice.' This discovery makes Susan determined to prevent her brother Semmes from marrying Jane Posey. She does so by allowing--in fact almost forcing--George's colored half-brother to attack Jane. As a consequence, Semmes, like a good Buchan, shoots Yellow Jim; George, like himself, shoots Semmes; and Susan goes mad.

'Why,' the narrator wonders, 'cannot life change without tangling the lives of innocent persons?' Why do innocent persons cease their innocence and become violent and evil in themselves that such great changes

may take place?' For they had all been innocent and they had all become, in different ways, more or less evil. Either because of changes in themselves that made the world unbearable to them, as with George, or because of changes in the world about them that made their heroism at best irrelevant and at worst disastrous, as with Major Buchan, or because of both, as with Susan, time has its way with them all. At the end of the novel George and Lacy stand beside the smoldering ruins of Pleasant Hill and Lacy says, 'Can't we do something?' And George says what is true: 'I have done too much.'

The Fathers is essentially a very American novel; it deals with the dilemma of the American hero in very much the same way American novels always have, but its author, if he has something in common with that hero, is not like him by any choice of his own. If he is too intelligent and unsentimental to suppose he and George Posey can ever go back, can ever recover their forfeited heritage, or even to suppose that, being what he is, he can really desire to, he is also too intelligent to think a man can commit himself wholly to the private consciousness and live without a community and its customs and ceremonies. As a consequence, if he has the American sense that the meaning of a novel, like the meaning of life itself, transcends the 'literal level of meaning' immediately implied by the realistic novel's image of life, he also knows that the best means the novelist has for embodying that meaning and giving it life is the realistic novel's conventionalized representation of nature.

The Fathers is an action of a certain magnitude that is at once verisimilar and a symbol. Because it is, its meaning does not remain some merely airy nothing that is constantly evoked by the author but never materializes, and its realistic narrative is not a photograph that exists merely to be recognized. Its meaning ceases to be imponderable, as George Posey was, and takes on the full life of recognizable action that Major Buchan had. Its motive is a meaning, and the life of that meaning is an action. It is an imitation of life."

Arthur Mizener
"The Realistic Novel as Symbol"
The Sense of Life in the Modern Novel
(Houghton 1964) 269-87

"*The Fathers* can be described briefly as two hundred pages of enveloping situation followed by a rapid sequence of events and an extreme instance of *progression d'effet* in the final paragraph. A summary statement of what happens--the narrator calls it 'the violence'--is a good introduction to the book: When Susan Posey, born Buchan, discovers what her in-laws are really like, she acts to prevent further intermarriage between the two families. She prevents the marriage of her brother Semmes Buchan and her sister-in-law Jane Posey by encouraging her husband's Negro half-brother Yellow Jim to enter the bedroom of his half-sister Jane. Jane's scream kills her mother, Jane enters a convent, Semmes shoots Yellow Jim, George Posey shoots Semmes, and Susan goes mad.

William Archer's objection to *The Duchess of Malfi*, that there are too many corpses at the end as compared with *Hamlet*, could also be made to *The Fathers*; this is a lot of violence, but two characters who survive it--George Posey and the narrator, Dr. Lucy Buchan--meet more ingenious fates. So much of the violence depends on Susan Posey that as we read or unread (*The Fathers* is one of those novels like Faulkner's *The Hamlet* that seems almost designed to frustrate first reading and reward second and third and fourth readings), we ought to look at her closely. Who is she? She is 'not beautiful' but 'lovely'; she got her looks and character from her ancestors named Washburn, early settlers in Virginia and presumably Anglican; her mother, Sarah Semmes Gore, whose funeral is the opening scene of the book, is a Presbyterian married to an Episcopalian. Susan's marriage to George Posey in 1859 seems to have been the ordinary result of propinquity and sexual attraction; she is particularly attracted by his strange and romantic impulses.

When the war begins, George Posey absents himself from Susan, not for open and honorable military service, but to be a smuggler; he buys arms in the North for the use of the National Rifles, formed by his grandfather Jeremiah Gibson and now about to fight on the Confederate side. As far as we know, George Posey is only smuggling, but Susan feels he is being unfaithful to her. She says to her brother: 'Lacy, I might have done better to marry some plain man. Like Jim Higgins. He would have been so grateful, and I should have known every minute where he was.' Higgins is her father's overseer.

The culmination of Susan's feelings against the Poseys (a family 'more refined than the Buchans, but less civilized') is her encouragement of Yellow Jim. Victimized himself by his parents and his half-brother George, Yellow Jim's victim is Jane. 'A docility of nature that made her a joy to her family' also made her a perfect subject of her sister-in-law's high-minded or Satanic malice. Jane is a 'girl wholly without imagination who, in order to create excitement that she could not find in herself, imagined that because Jim was a runaway there was something sinister about him.'

The fathers of the title are specifically Rozier Posey, George's father, a man of 'secrecy of action and brutality of character'; and Major Lewis Buchan, surely one of the sweetest products of the American imagination. His military rank came from service in the county militia in the War of 1812. He does not write his address Pleasant Hill, the family name of the place, but Burke's Station. 'Ain't that where we get out mail?' he says. He is a great reader and a unionist; he does not call those of the other persuasion 'secesh' but 'disunionist.' His great friend and spiritual adviser Dr. Cartwright, the local Episcopal minister, 'a pleasant worldling,' he praises as 'the kind of pastor a gentleman can talk to.' When northern troops are about to burn Pleasant Hill, Major Buchan has too much pride to save the place by telling them he is unionist. He hangs himself, and his body would have been eaten by hogs except for Jim Higgins.

An important part of the novel is the relationship between George Posey and his brother-in-law Lacy Buchan, Major Buchan's youngest son, born in 1845 and the teller of the story in 1911. He is a retired physician and a bachelor. Tate told Michael Millgate that Lacy Buchan was perhaps a projection of himself and that George Posey was 'a rather romantic projection' of one of his older brothers. In the last chapter of *The Sense of Life in the Modern Novel*, Arthur Mizener says that *Tate* is Posey, and he may be right. The relationship between narrator and hero is hard to pin down and yet it must be understood. Much of the enveloping situation of the novel is young Lacy's hero worship of George and the mature narrator's awareness of George's inadequacy. George is no Major Buchan. He cannot bear ceremony; he runs away from the funeral of Lacy's mother. The mating of animals embarrasses him; older members of the family excuse him by saying that he grew up in town. Young Lacy thinks George 'could never have anything to do with death,' but George has a great deal to do with death; though he says fighting is nonsense he shoots two men dead and provides weapons for the National Rifles. He thinks he cannot choose sides in the war but he does; he makes all the possible choices.

After 'the violence' he has what is possibly the briefest career of a private soldier, C.S.A., on record. He spends one night as a private, but the next day is made acting executive officer of the company he has armed. An old quarrel, the fact of his Catholicism, and his rapid rise in rank lead an old enemy of his to insult him, and he kills his enemy. He is given a safe-conduct pass and lives through the war as a noncombatant. Above all, George Posey has a wholesome but too clear-eyed contempt for the impression Lacy had, 'until manhood and education effaced it, that God was a Virginian who had created the world in his own image.' He has too much clever contempt for the southernness and simpleness of Semmes Buchan. He tells 'Cousin' John Semmes: 'Your people are about to fight a war. They remind me of a passel of young 'uns playing prisoners' base.'

Young Lacy is a hero worshipper of George, and this pleases George.... 'He motioned me to him, put his hand on my head, and smiled down at me.

"You're my friend, Lacy boy".'

Not much more than a year later, Lacy walks toward the battlefield of Bull Run and has a vision of his paternal grandfather telling him the truth about George Posey. He says George is Jason and Susan in Medea, but with the proud contempt of youth Lacy rejects the analogy. 'You know everything,' he says, '[and you're] dead--dead as a herring.'

The *progression d'effet* in *The Fathers*, the tremendous acceleration of meaning in its final paragraph, has been admired and half understood about equally. 'I'll go back and finish [the war],' Lacy says. 'I'll have to finish it because [George] could not finish it. It won't make any difference if I am killed. If I am killed it will be because I love him more than I love any man.' Frank Kermode has the briefest and best account. At the end of the novel 'we learn of the last Buchan victim: Lacy. We know what to make of Posey, but there is always more to be made; as when Lacy, in his last sentence, declares his allegiance.' The fact is, old Dr.

Buchan, the narrator, has slipped his cable. How, in 1911, can he say 'if I am killed'? The war is long over. Dr. Buchan is so carried away by the conclusion of his narrative that he thinks it is July 1861 again. He is the man at the gate in the 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' really believing that the leaves are charging infantry. If young Lacy had been killed (and he wasn't), he would have been a witness to what George believed, not to what his father believed. The Confederate dead are not, or ought not to be considered, martyrs to the Lost Cause, but martyrs to the mixed-up, arms-procuring, murderous cause of George Posey, still very much alive in 1911."

George Hemphill
Allen Tate
(U Minnesota 1964) 26-30

"Faulkner is nothing if not a romantic writer, with all that that implies of criticism and of praise. In this respect, the perfect foil to him is Allen Tate, whose one novel, *The Fathers*, appeared in 1938. Tate, primarily a poet and critic both of literature and in the realm of ideas where literature, morals and politics exist side by side, was one of the theorists of the Fugitives Group, and *The Fathers* could be taken as a dramatization in fiction of his ideas of society and tradition. It is that, but it is much more. It is a beautifully articulated novel whose author, one feels, knows throughout exactly what he is doing and saying. Tate is in complete control. He intended, he has said, 'to make the whole structure symbolic in terms of realistic detail, so that you could subtract the symbolism, or remain unaware of it, without losing the literal level of meaning...but if you subtract the literal or realistic detail, the symbolic structure disappears.' Apart from perhaps one instance where a single literal or realistic detail is allowed to obtrude too much in order that the symbolic point may be made, he achieves his intention almost perfectly, and the result is a peculiarly satisfying novel, satisfying in the classical sense that its beauties spring from the conscious observation of conscious limits.

Tate's South is not Faulkner's; it is, rather, the old South that the Sutpens and the Compsons set out to imitate, the South of Virginia, the Old Dominion. The novel is narrated by an old man, Lacy Buchan, looking back on the events of his boyhood more than half a century earlier, events that have obsessed him throughout that time.... [The] device of the narrator who participated, without understanding them, in the events...allows Tate to move backwards and forwards in time and to comment, through Lacy, on the events themselves. Lacy is at once narrator and chorus, and his reflections on the events are as important as the descriptions of them.

The action covers the period 1860-1, the months immediately before and after the outbreak of the Civil War. But *The Fathers* is not a war novel as Caroline Gordon's *None Shall Look Back* is. The theme is rather the break-up of a culture, a way of life. The war is a symbol of that break-up, but the immediate symbol, in the novel itself, is Lacy's brother-in-law George Posey, whom he hero-worships. Significantly, Posey's first, and binding, gift to the boy is a gun, which, on his first attempt to fire it, knocks him down and winds him. The order into which Posey erupts is personified in Lacy's father, Major Buchan. Major Buchan is a feudal landowner--Buchan of Pleasant Hill--who refers to his neighbors by the names of their plantations, Carter of Ravensworth, Carey of Vauclose. His life is ruled by ceremony; manners, one feels, have made the man. As Lacy says, 'Our lives were eternally balanced upon a pedestal below which was an abyss that I could not name. Within that invisible tension my father knew the moves of an intricate game that he expected everybody else to play.' Elsewhere Lacy returns to the image of the abyss: 'Is not civilization the agreement, slowly arrived at, to let the abyss alone?'

Lucy recalls 'the only time I had ever seen my father blush; someone had tried to tell him his private affairs, beginning, 'If you will allow me to be personal,' and father had blushed because he could never allow anybody to be personal.' Yet, ruled by forms though he is, Major Buchan is not merely a formal man; or, if he is, then the forms themselves have bred in him a generosity of spirit and conduct which makes it appropriate to call him a great gentleman. Thus, at his wife's funeral, it is her old Negro maid, Lucy, whom he takes by the hand to head the procession following the coffin. His closest friend is his old Negro valet, Coriolanus, who shares his study. His values are almost alarmingly uncommercial; his attitudes are entirely feudal, his life governed by obligations in which money has no part. In fact, he is heavily in debt, but would never think of selling his Negroes: they are part of the family. He believes, indeed, that he has freed them: ironically, they are sold after his death. An anti-secessionist, he disinherits his elder son for following the

Confederate cause. When the Federal troops arrive and a Northern officer gives him half an hour to leave his house before it is burnt, 'There is *nothing* that you can give to me, Sir,' he retorts--and goes away and hangs himself.

Major Buchan's very fineness of breeding makes him defenseless against a world increasingly contemptuous of the values he lives by; and it is a very considerable achievement of Tate's to render the Major in such a way that we never think of him as comic. He is touchingly unarmed against life; though he knows the moves of the intricate game that he expects everybody else to play, he is utterly lost when other people do not know them. George Posey does not know them. He too is a Southerner, but an uprooted one. Once landowners in Maryland, the Poseys now live in Georgetown. They no longer have any function in society and, George apart, have degenerated into eccentricity. And George himself, a man of violent energy, is defenseless because he has no code which can mediate between him and life; he 'receives the shock of the world at the end of his nerves'; the boy Lacy always sees him as 'a horseman riding over a precipice.'

He does not know how to behave; his conduct is a constant affront to Major Buchan, whose daughter he marries. Posey, it is plain, is a representation of modern man, who errs because his responses to life are no longer dictated by tradition. His attitude towards the Buchans and their values is expressed in his behavior at Mrs. Buchan's funeral, when he mounts his horse and rides away.... And perhaps his lack of any kind of piety is most clearly shown when, in order to buy the bay mare whose excellence enables him to win the tournament at which he proclaims Susan Buchan Queen of Love and Beauty, he sells a Negro for fifteen hundred dollars, saying, 'You're liquid capital, I've got to have the money.' 'He rode away on the back of a bay Negro,' is the comment of one of the Buchans; and their horror at his behavior is due not simply to the fact that he has sold one of his slaves but that the slave in question is his own half-brother. Nothing could be further removed from the mores of Major Buchan.

George Posey is the emblem and agent of destruction. Not, of course, the only agent of Major Buchan's destruction; the war itself would have looked after that. But, unbridled as he is, recognizing no limits, Posey is as it were the immediate domestic emblem and agent of destruction; the violence within him mirrors the greater violence of the war; and if it is the war that destroys Major Buchan it is Posey who destroys the Major's family. The action described in Tate's novel is as violent as anything in Faulkner, but the texture of the writing is anything but violent. *The Fathers* is a work of great formal beauty, the product of a most distinguished mind; implicit in it is a profoundly conservative moral and political philosophy; and, as with the best of Faulkner, we realize, having read it, that it transcends its region and the time of its setting. The South and its troubles have become a metaphor for the human situation generally."

Walter Allen
The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States
(Dutton 1965) 124-28

"It is difficult at times to determine if the novelist wants us to believe in any one cause of breakdown; often, as in the figure of George Posey in Allen Tate's *The Fathers*, it seems almost as though the collapse of forms were a matter of history itself, as though no traditional strength could have withstood the drive toward 'modernity' and the loss of formal values consequent upon its arrival....

Perhaps the novel which most closely resembled the idea and the history of a traditional society was the only one published by Allen Tate, who otherwise used poetry and critical prose to advance his purposes. *The Fathers* (1938) is nevertheless a great achievement. It is a difficult, even a thorny book, but it forcefully presents the agrarian thesis, putting the traditional man against the 'modern American.' The Buchans are of the old order, and George Posey (efficient, a man of imagination) is the new man.

The novel, as John Stewart describes it, 'is a superb example of what Tate himself later called symbolic naturalism, and what it symbolizes are the Agrarian ideas about cash-crop farming as a corollary of industrialism, the humanizing and restraining effects of a ceremonious society made up of families living in the country on their own land, the irresponsibility of capitalism, and Tate's own ideas about the trapped ego

and the violence it does when not released by traditions and protected against the surging energies of sensation and impulse'."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Art of Southern Fiction: A Study of Some Modern Novelists
(Southern Illinois/Feffer & Simons 1967) 18, 98-99

"*The Fathers*...despite the fact that it was published first in the thirties, has only just been accepted as one of the more welcome results of the Southern 'renaissance.' Some commentators have gone even further, claiming that it is Tate's most important creative work as well. Certainly, it is his most characteristic, being a distillation of his principal concerns and a kind of inventory of the metaphors that are elsewhere dispersed throughout his writing. Central to the tale is its teller, Lacey Buchan.

Buchan, now an old man, is recalling the years of his childhood and youth in old Virginia before the Civil War; and as in 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' this dramatic context of memory is important and emphasized.... The reader is once again witnessing the construction of a myth, created out of a sense of loss. The only difference is that in this case the sense is not just communal but personal, too: Buchan is close enough to the events and people remembered to feel that the radical disjunction between past and present he is describing is a part of his own history, as well as that of his culture.

This is a crucial addition to the narrative. In a sense, *The Fathers* is about the disintegration of antebellum society during the Civil War. But that is accompanied and indeed largely represented by the disintegration of the Buchan family, brought about by the intrusion of alien elements into the group. This has two important consequences. In the first place, it contributes an extra poignancy, a further touch of anguish, to the process of remembering. Lacey is talking about people whom, as he says, he 'knew and loved,' now 'scattered into the new life of the modern age where they cannot even find themselves,' and this supplies an especially urgent motive for his reshaping of the past. And in the second it enables Tate to demonstrate his idea of 'moral unity' in the actual structure of the fiction--the way in which, in a traditional society, the public and private levels of experience are integrated.

It is not simply that the personal history of the Buchan family is taken to be representative of the larger history of the South, although it is partly that. It is also that these two histories, as Buchan describes them, are so thoroughly interrelated as to be inseparable: they do not just represent each other, they affect each other as well. The Buchans as a group, for instance, are torn apart by a crisis peculiar to themselves and by the war with the North--which divides their loyalties and is eventually responsible for the destruction of their estate. The 'time of crisis' in their story concerns both their 'domestic trials' and the beginning of hostilities at Fort Sumter. At one point in the novel...he is describing what he takes to be the extraordinary completeness of life in the South before the Civil War... It is precisely [the] interdependence of the domestic and the political which Tate is trying to suggest in his telling of the tale.

The tale itself has two major characters: Major Buchan, who is Lacey's father, and George Posey. The Major is the embodiment of all the values Lacey associates with life before the Civil War, a man who is governed by the forms of his society because his thoughts and feelings have found perfect expression in them. He, in turn, invariably considers the individual quality of any other man whom he meets to be intimately bound up with his social function. The forms in which the Major has been bred are quite complicated: that is their merit, that they are subtle and indeed flexible enough to cater to any event. But at basis they are characterized by extraordinary generosity, of spirit and conduct--a self-restraint and consideration for others that another great believer in forms, Jane Austen, once described as 'delicacy.' The funeral scene at the beginning of the book offers a good illustration of what I mean by this.

The Major has lost his wife (that is who the funeral is for) and he is, certainly, crushed by his loss. The ceremony of the funeral, however, not only helps him to bear it but even gives him the strength he needs to look after the people around him--to treat the guests with the appropriate courtesy, and to make sure that none of the more intimate members of the family, including his wife's own body slave, is excluded from the proceedings. Why is this so? Because, as Tate has explained elsewhere, a traditional society of the kind the Major is taken to represent is one in which the recognition of human limits, and so of mortality, is primary. Death is accepted as 'the completion of life,' and that acceptance discovers its formal expression in the

ritual of the funeral, which at once reminds its participants of an inevitability and supplies them with a stylized catharsis--a transference of grief.

In taking part in the funeral, consequently--indeed, in assuming the role of its organizer--Major Buchan is finding an appropriate form for his own personal grief, *the* appropriate form as far as his society is concerned. He is not in any sense evading his own feelings, although to more jaundiced modern eyes it might appear that he is doing so; on the contrary, what he is doing, as Tate sees it, is to encounter those feelings and do full justice to them. Ceremony, the implication is, offers the Major the only possible means he has of understanding and controlling the more extreme pressures to which he is subject, and of doing this without denying their power. With its help, the amorphous energies of his inner life are projected into the outer, to be given shape and the release that would not otherwise be theirs.

The difference between this stance toward reality and the one attributed to the character of George Posey is radical. Posey, whose own origins lie in the city of Georgetown, marries *into* the Buchan family but he is never *of* it. In a way, he does not belong to the context of the Old South at all because, as an agent and emblem of the anti-traditional, he is all that is representative of its destruction. His responses to life are not shaped by any code, and this leaves him curiously unprotected from what Lacey Buchan calls 'the abyss'--by which he means, I think, the disruptive energies circulating in and around the isolated self that only such a code can control. Doomed to receive 'the shock of the world at the end of his nerves,' Posey's behavior is an unnerving mixture of timidity, as he shrinks from any encounter with this abyss, and hysteria, which occurs when the suppressed energies become too much for him and he must find release in violence. At the end of the funeral, for instance, he shows himself quite incapable of dealing with an extreme situation, since he does not possess the tools of manner and belief that would enable him to do so. All he can do is try to appease his incipient terror by making brutal and offhand references to the physical aspect of death, the rotting corpse and the waiting grave, and, when this fails to escape from the pressures of the event, by riding away.

Posey is, of course, far too complicated and dynamic a character to be immediately identifiable with any stereotype, but there is a sense in which his own failure to realize traditional standards invites a comparison with the familiar figure of the 'Yankee.' A telling symptom of the disintegrative state of his personality, that is to say, is his tendency to fluctuate between those twin characteristics of idealism and materialism that the Southerner loved, and still loves, to associate with his Northern neighbor. Certainly, Posey has noble ideals of human behavior, but he never quite manages to engage them with reality. His relationship with his wife, Susan Buchan, for example, is fatally affected by what Tate calls his 'too personal' attitude toward her.... Posey's love is 'too personal' because in a curious way it is too abstract; unlike Major Buchan, he can never objectify his feelings in terms of the society in which he lives. He has no ritual to supply him with catharsis and satisfaction, and so he has recourse to the kind of random violence, the incoherent gestures toward establishing a contact, which succeed only in driving Susan insane.

His very idealism about human relationships prevents him from establishing any, with his wife or anyone else, and the irony is that he then has to fall back upon money for his sense of the real; the cash nexus, it turns out, must supply him with the security and certainty he so desperately needs. By the end of the novel he has run his course, more than once, between extremities, and it surely reflects credit on his creator to say that here, at least, these extremities seem to be parts of a credible pattern of human behavior. A paradox in logic, perhaps, Posey's eventual commitment both to absolute ideas and to the statistics of the account book comes across to the reader as the product of personal necessity--belonging to a single, if disastrous, way of life.

It goes without saying, perhaps, that because Posey's life style is so disastrous, so much the result of a fatal series of errors, the moral conflict between him and Major Buchan is a pretty unequal one. We know from the start which character we are supposed to admire, and why, and consequently there can be none of that tension to be found in more conventional novels, where one half-truth does battle with another. But, even though this kind of tension is necessarily missing from *The Fathers*, there is another kind possible, peculiar to elegies, which depends upon our seeing that the moral tendencies of the narrative and its strictly historical direction are at cross-purposes, and this Tate uses extensively. That is why Major Buchan seems so helpless: because the more he behaves as he must--the weaker he appears to be.

The novel is founded on the premise that traditionalism has disappeared, lost with the passing of time; so any one of its characters who demonstrates traditional virtues, in the way that the Major does, must immediately define himself as a man swimming against the tide. And anyone, in turn, who acts in an untraditional way must appear to have the forces of history behind him; his vices, in these circumstances, become his strength. The tournament scene in Part I of the book illustrates this, for in it Posey rides to a success that virtually depends on a failure of responsibility.

In order to win the tournament--and he wants desperately to win--he has to purchase a good new mare, in order to do which he is quite willing to sell his Negro half-brother to the highest bidder. He has few scruples about this because, unlike Major Buchan, his relationship to his slaves, even when there are also blood ties between them, is defined entirely by what Tate elsewhere calls 'a system of money references that the moral will cannot control.' He simply excuses himself to the Negro by saying, 'You're liquid capital, and I've got to have money.' He gets the money he wants, he wins; and the reader cannot help feeling, as Tate intends him to, that any victory so won is more than in the tournament--with reasons behind it that have to do with more than the selling out of just one man.

The implications of this tournament scene are multiplied by the presence of several other characters who help us to locate George Posey a little more precisely. John Langton, for instance, a neighbor of the Buchans, offers a useful balance to them in that he seems to represent the worst possibilities of his society just as they do its best. Described by Lacey as 'a bold and insolent man who deemed himself an aristocrat beyond any consideration for other people,' Langton seems to have assumed all the privileges available to his caste without accepting any of the accompanying duties. He acts without any sense of responsibility to others, his every refinement of behavior being merely a symptom of his self-concern--like a man bowing to himself in a mirror. For all that, though, he comes across the reader as just plain silly rather than dangerous or perverse a person whose more violent emotions can usually find an outlet, and a relatively harmless outlet at that, in the rituals available to him. Ceremonies, like those of the hunt and the duel, make his a radically limited kind of corruption--limited, especially, when compared to George Posey, whose every passion is left to feed on itself until it assumes frightening proportions. Beside Posey, Langton may not be a particularly admirable figure--in the way, say, that Major Buchan is--but he does at least seem to be an acceptable one; and made so, we suspect, by a society that has found in its traditions a name for his evil as well as a name for love.

The traditional society, then, takes account of an extraordinary range of feelings, externalizing them, fulfilling them, and in the process making it possible for those who would normally be at their mercy to exercise some degree of control over them; that, more or less, is the message carried to us when Tate brings together John Langton and Major Buchan as the two poles of the local group. It is a message we have already heard, perhaps, in 'Ode to the Confederate Dead'; and just in case we should still miss it, not noticing Langton's relevance as a complement to the Buchan family, it is sounded again in Tate's presentation of the minor characters. The tournament scene, in fact, is one of the few occasions on which they are permitted to speak for themselves (most of the time Tate keeps our attention concentrated, in a very Jamesian way, on a limited group of protagonists), and the result is, I think, quite significant. For what they do here, effectively, is perform the function of chorus to the major action of victory and defeat--not, admittedly, by saying that much about it but simply by being on hand to act in a normal fashion.

Throughout the various contests, whether as participants or as the spectators, they behave with a grace and flexibility that reflect real credit on the code to which they subscribe, the accepted forms that have given their every step a certain shapeliness. And this, Tate seems to be saying, is the ultimate achievement of traditionalism: that quite apart from breeding the exceptional man, the Major Buchans of each generation, it enables a group of otherwise ordinary people to move easily between the 'jargon...of paddock and kennel' and the chivalry of the field. Country humor and the manners of the polite, the smell of Bourbon or squabbles over political affairs and the elaborate ceremonial that attends the crowning of the 'Queen of Love and Beauty,' the first lady of the tournament: vast and quite diverse areas of experience remain open to these people that are closed to George Posey and his kind--and thanks simply, we infer, to the fact that theirs is a traditional, which is to say a landowning, society. A relatively straightforward 'means of living' and a formal 'way of life' are both parts of their inherited environment and as such define the scope, the very considerable scope, of the life style available to them.

It is difficult to talk about *The Fathers*, or indeed any creative work by Allen Tate, without giving the impression that it is excessively abstract, more disposed toward the communication of an idea than the articulation of an experience. This is unfortunate, since, although Tate is concerned with literature as a form of knowledge, it is knowledge that, as he puts it, is 'complete' and 'of the mythical order'--that is, it is knowledge realized in a series of living contacts rather than otherwise. One reason for this is fairly clear. Tate not only has certain absolute ideas about the nature of a traditional society, he has absolute ideas about the nature of traditional art as well. Quite apart from the way in which it treats history, the material of a given experience, there is the question of the forms most appropriate to it, and of special interest to Tate in this respect is the case of the traditional *writer*.

The traditional writer, Tate argues, identifies himself as such by trying--even in an untraditional environment--to recover in his methods of expression some measure of that wholeness that is a characteristic feature of the good society. This he does with the help of what is called 'the symbolic imagination'--the faculty in man which 'conducts an action through analogy, of the human to the divine...of the low to the high, of time to eternity.' It is the business of the traditional writer, Tate goes on, '...to return to the order of the temporal sequence--to action. His purpose is to show men experiencing whatever they may be capable of, with as much meaning as he may be able to see in it; but the action comes first.' The last phrase is crucial. As Tate sees it, the traditional writer must describe ideas *in action*, and action as a complex unity. In doing this, he must resort neither to overparticularity nor to large and unsubstantiated abstractions: the aim must be knowledge as experience or the result will be failure.

It does not take an unusual amount of ingenuity, I believe, to see that this kind of knowledge is exactly the kind Tate is after in his verse and fiction. In works like 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' and *The Fathers*, absolutely everything is dramatized; there is a genuine attempt to realize the concept of traditionalism in the mode of communication as well as in the matter communicated. That is why there is so much emphasis on the act of seeing, the visualization of the idea.... Within this context every perceived object assumes significance, each element of knowledge is concretized. The graveyard, for example, appears to circumscribe the action of both the ode and the novel--not just as a setting, although of course it is that, but as an outward and visible sign of the dominant mood of elegy.

That is not all, either. For the further details of the two graveyard scenes contain within them intimations of death and life: the 'cracked paint' on the walls of the morning room in *The Fathers* is set off against the 'first shoots of April green' in the garden. The 'mulberry bush' in the Confederate graveyard offers a contrary suggestion to the leaves falling around the headstones. Out of these details emerge more complex assessments of the situations in which they appear. The counterpointed themes, obviously, are those of decay and recovery, and they point to a larger ambivalence of attitude which juxtaposes the decline of the way of life celebrated with the vitality of the tradition it represents--the death of an order with continuing possibilities for its revival. This ambivalence, as it turns out, is basic to both *The Fathers* and the 'Ode'; and the reader is obliged to acknowledge its tangibility, its felt value, precisely because he has not just been told about it. It has been dramatized for him there in the imagined scenes.

This use of imagers that beget fresh images, and so carry the argument almost secretly to its conclusion, is vital to the success of Tate's work; and as evidence of his dramatizing tendency it applies to far more, I think, than just his rendering of scene. Quite apart from this, there is its relevance to his treatment of character where what is noticeable, perhaps above all, is his scrupulous avoidance of conventional methods of analysis in favor of more figurative ones; character becomes less a matter of psychology and more a question of the kind of significant external details that the author picks out for emphasis.

Take George Posey, for example. His is a complex, personal case--as complex, say, as any we are likely to find in more conventional, psychoanalytical fiction--but it is not presented to us in conventional terms. On the contrary, what Tate chiefly relies on to explain Posey to us is a series of associated metaphors. Whenever he appears, a cluster of images almost invariably appears with him, dramatic images that are justified by their context, and these tell us all we really need to know about the way he lives and the things he stands for. Horseback riding, for instance: George Posey's life seems to be bound up in horseback riding, because as Tate sees it this activity is a significant symptom of his restlessness--and, on a more figurative level, a measure of certain more subterranean aspects of his personality as well. He rides away from the

funeral of Mrs. Buchan when he can no longer tolerate the thought of death; as a gunrunner during the Civil War he rides back and forth across the Union lines; and, of course, at the tournament he appears on horseback, the only man present wearing a mask and using a vicious curb bit. Eventually, just in case the reader should have missed the significance of all this, he has it more or less explained to him by Lacey Buchan....

The explanation is helpful, but hardly necessary. For the association of the horse with animal vitality, its journey with a flight into chaos, and George Posey himself with the febrile and isolated heroes of Edgar Allan Poe--all this has been achieved, essentially, in the actual portraits of Posey out riding, and the connections established between these portraits and the larger metaphorical structure of the book. The character has already been defined for us by imaginative reference, the meanings attached to his physical situation, and any further explanation or direct psychoanalysis we may be offered comes very close to being superfluous.

Up until now the methods of characterization I have described may not sound all that unusual; they are not very far removed, after all, from a fairly commonplace use of metaphor to convey meaning. The dramatization of the inner life goes much further than this, however, when Tate's subject is the civilization of the Old South, because in such cases the inner landscapes of his characters are not just represented by the outer ones, they are actually expressed by them. The people he portrays consequently assume the kind of status that we tend to associate with more primitive literatures, where all the drama occurs at the level of the spoken word and completed action. Why is this the case?

Why do Tate's plantation types present themselves to us in this way? Tate himself has offered us an explanation, I think, in his biography of the Confederate general 'Stonewall' Jackson, which he wrote early in his career. It is quite simply that, as he sees it, this was the way things were in the Old South--or, rather, this was the way things might have been at the best of times. Ideally, the South saw itself as a homogeneous unit, a society with common aims and patterns of belief. Its own best image of itself was as a group so closely knit and perfectly integrated that there was no need for anybody to maintain secrecy over anything; 'the man as he appeared in public,' consequently, 'was the man, his public appearance was his moral life.' So when a man like Major Buchan experiences some new mood or emotion he does not have to hoard it up in a separate corner of his being to which we, in turn, must repair if we wish to know all about it. On the contrary, it is acted out for us, in the open, in one of his casual movements--casual and yet, because of its meaning, somehow ceremonial as well--and we merely have to witness that movement in order to know his mood.

There is a perfect illustration of what I mean right at the end of *The Fathers*, when Major Buchan can no longer evade the fact that he is a defeated man, with a plantation irremediably ruined by the fortunes of civil war. He has to acknowledge a climactic change, which in turn has to be registered for the reader, and all this is done in a characteristic manner. In the middle of the day, when he should still be working on the plantation, the Major changes from his field clothes into the formal suit he normally reserves for the times when he has nothing to do. It is a simple act but an effective, almost ceremonial, one; and in a way the whole of the man and the culture to which he belongs is contained in it.

The whole of the man and culture, that is, as they are conceived of within the consciously mythological framework of Tate's writing: in the end, the emphasis has to be upon this, his strategy of using history as a moral reference rather than a process--and a reference that calls attention to itself on every page. The dangers implicit in this approach are, I suppose, fairly obvious. Tate puts himself, as a result, in equal peril of turning literature into dogma, should his message tend to restrict the medium of plantation legend too severely, or of lapsing into the kind of easy nostalgia that a book like *Gone with the Wind* typifies, if the message becomes submerged in its glamorous setting.

To preach, or to lose oneself in daydreams: both are possible temptations, but in the end Tate does not succumb to either of them. He is saved and what, I think, is responsible for saving him can be stated very quickly: it is his awareness, the astonishing degree of self-consciousness in his performance, which enables him to transform romance into idea, and idea into action. He is, it is clear, aware of *what* he is doing: he is trying to confirm the value of traditionalism. And he is aware also of *how*, precise, this should be done--by

accepting the notion of traditionalism in life as a source of imaginative assessment, a suitable catalyst for his plantation material, and then using the notion of traditionalism in art as a guide to the way in which this assessment should be delivered.

Not content to stop there, Tate even seems to be aware of his awareness, the special qualities of his intelligence that have encouraged him to find something of permanent applicability in his own past. For once, when he was asked to comment on the phenomenon of Southern literature, he replied with an essay that makes a distinction between those who have used their regional inheritance with success and those who have not. Predictably enough, perhaps, the distinction is couched in terms of a contrast between the 'provincial' or conventional writer and the traditionalist. By traditionalist here, Tate goes on to explain, he means: '...the writer who takes the South as he knows it today or can find out about it in the past, and who sees it as a region with some special characteristics, but otherwise offering as an imaginative subject the plight of human beings as it has been and doubtless will continue to be, here and in other parts of the world.' The description is a good one, offered with a characteristic air of authority--and it would surely not be to convict Allen Tate of undue arrogance to suggest that he might have been thinking of himself when he offered it."

Richard Gray
The Literature of Memory: Modern Writers of the American South
(Johns Hopkins 1977) 84-94

"When *The Fathers* appeared, Allen was irritated by the reviews, even the favorable ones. When reviewers said the novel was better than his poetry, he said it was because they were illiterate and did not know how to read poetry."

Ann Waldron
Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 182-83

"Caroline thought the novel was quite good. Nancy always thought it was remarkable, 'one of the best novels ever written,' and much better than most of her mother's novels.... In *The Fathers* Allen told the story of the Buchan family through the reminiscences of Lacy Buchan, a sixty-five-year-old doctor retired from practice. The narrative had three sections: 'Pleasant Hill,' 'The Crisis,' and 'The Abyss.'

From the vantage point of 1910, Lacy tried to make sense of his family's history and his own relationship to George Posey, the brother-in-law whom he loved. Just as Caroline had used family myth as the basis of her fiction, Allen explored his own genealogy in the novel. And like Caroline, Allen focused on the tension between pioneers and aristocrats in southern society. His tale covered the years immediately before and after the Civil War. But there the similarity to Caroline's fiction ended. Allen's writing focused on more abstract intellectual concerns; his first-person narrative depended not on scene painting and character development but on interior monologues and symbolism.

Both Caroline and Allen were ecstatic over the book's sale.... The critical response was favorable, but Allen said he couldn't take the compliments too seriously: he just didn't consider himself a novelist.... Comparing her novel [*Green Centuries*] to Allen's, Caroline pointed out how well *The Fathers* sold. It was 'higher-browed than anything I will ever write,' yet it was popular because Allen's publisher promoted it so vigorously.... 'You ought to let the book store people know that you think you have got something pretty good in me,' Caroline declared. 'I assure you that it would be quite a surprise to them'."

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 195-96, 215

"As with the 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' the setting was southern, Virginia and Georgetown at the beginning of the war and the dilemma posed there was one that many southerners faced, then and increasingly in the years to come. It was also a universal dilemma that recurs among thoughtful people whenever an established society enters into its last stage of decadence, and the past, however appealing, seems no longer able to sustain its younger, hopeful members. Tate had become an indelible southerner, and

agrarianism had helped to make him so, but he remained a southerner in the modern world, keenly aware both of his heritage and of his need to adapt it for survival...

[Tate] modeled his work on Ford Madox Ford's masterpiece, *The Good Soldier*, and astonishingly managed to produce in one effort something worthy to stand beside its distinguished predecessor. Like Ford he used a first-person narrator, presenting his story as a reminiscence of a sixty-year-old physician, Lacy Buchan, bent on coming to terms with events that had shaped his youth. Two families are involved: the Virginia Buchans, representative of a once-flourishing planter aristocracy, and the Poseys, formerly landed but now settled in urban Georgetown.

The central figure in Lacy Buchan's narrative is a young George Posey, who shortly before the outbreak of the Civil War marries Lacy's sister, Susan, and brings her to live in his moribund Georgetown establishment. George is uncommitted to either side in the conflict and seeks by largely clandestine means to preserve the integrity of his two families, but Susan, desperately unhappy in her strange situation and bewildered by her husband's unexplained absences, precipitates a series of events that ensures the destruction of both.

The crisis comes as she lets it appear that a black servant in the Posey household, actually George's half-brother, has attempted to rape George's younger sister, recently betrothed to her brother Semmes. When Semmes Buchan, following accepted custom, summarily kills the black man, George impulsively kills Semmes. Lacy Buchan is a witness to this double killing and a near-witness to the events that follow--the madness of Susan, the destruction of the Buchan family home as northern troops sweep into Virginia, and the suicide of his father. Years later he tries, never quite successfully, to make sense of those terrible times but finds at least one rock of certainty in his abiding admiration for George Posey, branded an opportunist by some for his disregard for loyalties to region and principle that others held sacred but who nevertheless remained steadfastly loyal to his human commitments.

At the time *The Fathers* was published, few were prepared to recognize that Tate had written a novel transcending his own publicly proclaimed loyalties. Some assumed that it must be read as the apologetic of an unreconstructed southerner; others that it constituted a subtle defense of agrarianism. Actually it was neither. Whatever his intentions may have been at the outset, Tate the artist, once engaged, let the work have its way; the result was a Civil War novel in which the war serves mainly as a context for a fresh examination of the human condition and situation."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 50, 68-69

Michael Hollister (2018)