

50 CRITICS DISCUSS

Allen Tate

(1899-1979)

"The editors of the magazines, who have brought out since the poetic revival, two or three crops of poets, seem content now to close the canon, and have no place for the poetry of unknown men--even if so obviously gifted as Phelps Putnam or Allen Tate--who cannot be found in Mr. Untermeyer's anthologies or among original contributions to the *Dial*."

Edmund Wilson

"The All-Star Literary Vaudeville" (1926)

The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties
(Random House/Vintage 1952) 242

"The standard of the Fugitives is high. Of the poets who have not published books, I have found Mr. Allen Tate and Mr. Robert Penn Warren the most interesting.... Mr. Allen Tate...is older than Mr. Warren, and his work is quite mature. There is something too much of Eliot in 'Causerie II' and an image from Valery at the end of the 'Ode to the Confederate Dead'; but even where Mr. Tate is imitative he possesses a strange originality, a special vein of macabre imagination, a deeply stained color, of his own. What commends our admiration in these two longest of Mr. Tate's poems is his capacity for sustaining phrasing--there are no lapses and no blanks, no stop-gaps. But though, line for line, these poems are amazing, they seem, in some way, as wholes, to lack emphasis, to fail of cumulative effect (the 'Causerie' especially, the 'Ode' somewhat less).

In the case of Mr. Tate's shorter poems, however, these objections do not hold. "Mr. Pope," 'Death of Little Boys' and 'Idiot' are like elaborate oriental ornaments which have been produced at an immense expense of materials, patience and cunning skill. We can have them around us and pick them up to examine them again and again, and we find that we do not get tired of them: they are as intricately patterned as cloisonne vases, as heavy as little bronzes (they differ in this from the inveterate lightness, sometimes flimsiness, of John Crowe Ransom). We admire the silver wire embedded in the blue and green enamel and the beautiful polish and glaze; we consider the precious alloy that has gone to make the grotesque image."

Edmund Wilson

"The Tennessee Poets" (1928)

The Shores of Light (1952) 194-95

"Tate...is a Catholic by intellectual conviction (though not by communion), he is Southern Agrarian by social background, he is a man of letters trained in the Late Romantic or Symbolist tradition--and these are three positions that cannot be reconciled anywhere short of Nirvana. The South, for example, was not in its great days hospitable either to Romantic poetry or to any other forms of creative literature...it was and remains hostile to Rome. Today if Tate carried his praise of traditional religion to the logical point of joining the Church, he would be alienating himself from his own people.... He would be forcing himself to reject many poets whom he still admires, with a divided mind. It almost seems that his essays are being written by three persons, not in collaboration but in rivalry (and we are given occasional hints of a fourth, a disciple of Schopenhauer rich in Yogi wisdom and prepared to reject the whole world as a realm of unmitigated evil)."

Malcolm Cowley

New Republic (29 April 1936) 348

"Mr. Tate's method [is]...a method of unrelenting definition and redefinition which makes for criticism that is at once stimulating and exhausting. For it is one of the tacit assumptions of this criticism that the critic must never permit himself to become emotional, even when he is dealing with emotional subjects, and the reader must respond by pretending to remove any such suspicion from his mind. He must meet the

critic on his own plane of dialectic logic, however difficult that may be, and in Mr. Tate's case it is very difficult indeed."

William Troy
Nation (10 June 1936) 747

"Let us return to certainties and pieties which can enlist our allegiance; let us revive the magic power inherent in tradition; let us rebuild the foundations of our ruined faith. This is substantially Tate's credo, and it is, what he intended it to be, 'reactionary.'... Whether or not Allen Tate is entitled to speak for the South, he does not represent the advanced thought of his time. He is a sectional prophet, a provincial thinker... Because his call to tradition is no more than a repudiation of the present and a nostalgic flight to the past...and because he has lent himself to the service of economic obscurantism, he is guilty of that treason of the intellectuals which is so alarming a symptom of contemporary thought."

Charles Glicksberg
Sewanee Review (Summer 1937) 294-95

"As an example of 'obscure' poetry, though not the most extreme one, I cite Allen Tate's 'Death of Little Boys'.... There is evidently a wide difference between Stevens and Tate, as poets. Tate has an important subject, and his poem is a human document, with a contagious fury about it: Stevens, pursuing purity, does not care to risk such a subject [in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds"]. But Tate, as if conscious that he is close to moralizing and sententiousness, builds up deliberately. I imagine, an effect of obscurity; for example, he does not care to explain the private meaning of his windowpane and his Norwegian cliff; or else, by some feat, he permits these bright features to belong to his total image without permitting them to reveal any precise meaning, either for himself or for his reader. Stevens, however, is objective from beginning to end; he completes all his meaning, knowing these will have little or no moral importance."

John Crowe Ransom
The World's Body
(Scribner's 1938)

"It is only fair to add that Tate occasionally forgets himself and writes a good poem. 'Shadow and Shade' and 'The Cross' are two of the great lyrics of our time, though something short of perfection, and there are other poems containing beautiful passages."

Yvor Winters
"The Anatomy of Nonsense"
In Defense of Reason
(Swallow 1938, 1943) 531

"Led by Allen Tate, the Southern agrarian writers, in rejection of the cosmopolitan city with its commercial overtones as not the proper home for art, returned to the agricultural South, in an endeavor there to find what roots they had in the American past with historical American tradition. They sought to live a simpler life, one more integrated with a culture. Not all of them, like Allen Tate, emphasized the beauty and greatness of the past; not all of them wrote an 'Ode to the Confederate Dead.' All of them had, however, come to the belief that a poet must have roots and must draw his sustenance from a sense of literary and historical tradition.

And most of them saw in socialism only a furthering of the controls already exerted upon the individual by society, and in particular upon the artist, and therefore opposed it as an even more strident materialism than that which existed in the large cities. They sought to re-create the gentility of art and to explain the vulgarity of much American writing in terms of the vulgarity that the industrial age itself had created... Soon Allen Tate and most of his followers, who, like him, had been part of the earlier Bohemian tradition of the twenties, returned to the East and to the center of the publishing world, there to become the editors of the avant-garde magazines."

George K. Anderson and Eda Lou Walton, eds.
This Generation: A Selection of British and American Writing from 1914 to the Present
(Scott Foresman 1939, 1949) 195

"Allen Tate is a poet who seldom achieves Frost's perfection of style, but he has other qualities. He is too intelligent and cosmopolitan to find in his region, the South, the absolute satisfaction that Frost discovers in his attachment to New England. Indeed, he remains unreconciled to pretty much everything: our literature, our civilization, our wars.... If, then, Tate lacks Frost's repose, he also lacks his complacency. If his work is a perpetual experiment, a poetry labored out of intractable material by the naked will, it is invariably *interesting*.... And it is Tate, not Frost, who influences the younger poets."

F. W. Dupee
Nation (21 April 1945) 466

"Allen Tate, an outstanding product of the assumptions of modern criticism and practitioner of its methods, in *Reason in Madness* attacks the social sciences as the fundamental menace, as well as modern criticism itself, which he calls 'the historical method,' and in which he lumps, along with history, the use of the physical, biological, social, and political sciences in criticism.... The [Henry] James tradition of critical self-revelation has been continued in a number of poet-critics of our day. Outstanding among them are Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom.... The trio of living Americans who excited [Yvor] Winters most were Williams, Crane, and Tate... By 1943 Tate was 'surely' one of the major talents of our time..."

Allen Tate has continued a number of Ransom's tendencies (some of which, Ransom has acknowledged, he helped to originate) as well as developed some of his own. Working from Ransom's 'aesthetic of regionalism,' Tate has attempted some specifically regional criticism, interpreting, say, Emily Dickinson's work as primarily a product of New England. He has not, however, developed the tradition much in a specifically literary direction, and a large proportion of his two collections of essays and reviews, *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas* (1936) and *Reason in Madness* (1941), is devoted to social, political, and educational problems. He has developed a program calling for 'reaction' and 'violence' (although in fairness it must be admitted that his 'violence' seems to be less machine guns in the streets than a verbal violence) and he has announced his opposition to science, positivism, and scientific criticism in even sharper terms than Ransom's. Again like Ransom, the comparatively small amount of close technical reading of poetry he has done has been on a high level."

Stanley Edgar Hyman
The Armed Vision: A Study in the Methods of Modern Literary Criticism
(Random House/Vintage 1947) 19, 29, 77, 85

"Increasingly over the past quarter of a century, the name of Allen Tate has come to stand for a singular integrity of outlook. At all times he has given the impression of a poet who knows his own mind and intends to use it in his poetry. In consequence, he has been accused of a certain coldness; but hardly a line of Tate is not informed by passionate sincerity, though it may be controlled by a fine irony or educed by emotions which many readers outside the South of his fathers find inexplicable."

Gerard Previn Meyer
Saturday Review of Literature (20 March 1948) 24

"Allen Tate's poems are beautiful examples of what a hard, select intelligence can press out of rather deadly insights--but insights that are self-consistent and profound.... In his poetry, Tate traverses a hall of metaphysical fears and memorial pieties, at one end of which is The South and at the other The Abyss.... Tate's finest poems...are fruitless lyrics, and they impose astringent judgments upon the world and time we inhabit. Our nature as Americans is a divided nature, and if we listen carefully we may learn from this Tennessean accurate symbols of the guilt that returns and returns to us."

Robert Fitzgerald
New Republic (26 April 1948) 31-32

"There are no trivia in Tate's *Collected Poems*. Every line seems to have found its inevitable final form, even if this took years of tinkering by the master workman.... Hart Crane once urged Tate to be true to 'your language' in 'so pure a way that it will be noticeable, and you will do well enough.' Today Crane's prophecy has been more than fulfilled by Tate's long aesthetic asceticism, his uncompromising devotion to language."

Peter Viereck
Atlantic Monthly (November 1948) 96-98

"Mr. Tate is an earnest and subtle critic who turns his inquiring eye on past and present literature with the pure intention of perceiving it and its problems with clarity--of noting necessary distinctions, eliminating confusion and misapprehensions, and illuminating the distinctive qualities of artistic literary expression. He is often rather like a man with a powerful pair of field-glasses reporting to his friends (who lack such aids) what he sees: his friends, not being able to see through the glasses, cannot always quite make out from his description of what he sees exactly what he is describing; but they do know that he is giving an honest and careful report of what is visible to him."

David Daiches
Saturday Review of Literature (25 December 1948) 10

"In the case of Tate, attention is given to modern man's rationalism, with its counterpart of the 'uneducated heart.' Man is a 'dull critter with enormous head'; his intellect, his sophistication, has taken on a disproportionate role. He has become critic, observer, analyst, scientist, to such an extent that a seal has been placed upon the springs of impulse, upon the myth-making and myth-believing faculties, upon the vital prodigality of the unconscious, upon the eternal child that man should always remain, upon the organic, intuitive, spontaneous sense of life...

We have spoken of reasons why modern writers find it difficult to make specific Christian affirmations.... Tate and Stevens, for example, both praise and celebrate man's life. Tate is concerned with that full richness of our human experience which science cannot lay hold of, and with the repossession of the religious and cultural values of his Southern tradition as a way of meeting both the enigmas of life itself and the bleakness of our present culture. Like T. S. Eliot in this respect he affirms tradition in reactionary wise. Spokesman of a 'fierce latinity,' he is a debtor to Christian Mediterranean culture, and though seemingly thwarted on the threshold of explicit confession, he values the Christian rites and symbols as expressions of that essential significance which a modern has such a hard time possessing. In his Christmas poems and in his extraordinary poem, 'The Cross,' he shows both how worldshaking was the coming of Christ, and what profound intimations of existence it opens up to the imagination."

Amos Niven Wilder
"Protestant Orientation in Contemporary Poetry"
Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature
ed. Stanley Romaine Hopper
(Harper & Row Torchbooks (1952, 1957) 252, 254-55

"Many of the modern critics who have been influenced by Hulme or who have taken a position sympathetic to Hulme in making metaphor the essence of poetry, have gone on, either to avow an orthodox religious position, or else to affirm the possibility and necessity for metaphysics as a science. I mention such names as those of T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Allen Tate, J. C. Ransom, R. P. Blackmur, Ivor Winters, Austin Warren, and could mention many more."

Cleanth Brooks
"Metaphor and the Function of Criticism"
Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature
ed. Stanley Romaine Hopper (Harper & Row Torchbooks (1952, 1957) 134

"[John Peale] Bishop's poetry is the collective catch-all of the chief fashions which his age made current. His derivations and echoes, as other critics have pointed out, constitute a catalogue of contemporary poets--Pound, Eliot, Yeats, Tate, MacLeish, Cummings, W. C. Williams, Wallace Stevens, Paul Valery; even perhaps Edith Sitwell and Hart Crane. Pound and Eliot predominant in *Now With His Love* (1933), Yeats and Tate more especially in *Minute Particulars* (1935)... Much of the so-called Obscurity in Modern Poetry exists, I believe, chiefly in critical discussions about it."

Robert Wooster Stallman
"The Poetry of John Peale Bishop"
Southern Renaissance: The Literature of the Modern South
eds. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. and Robert D. Jacobs (Johns Hopkins 1953) 368-70, 381

"Is not Faulkner saying that this complete vision of the men who had 'the gift of living once or dying once instead of being diffused and scattered creatures drawn blindly from a grab bag and assembled' (*Absalom, Absalom!*) is possessed only by those who have proved themselves worthy? This is like the vision glimpsed by the watcher at the wall in Tate's 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' the vision of a sacrifice beyond self, a total participations, a total involvement, not a dying by pieces nor a living by parts. Allen Tate once wrote that his 'Ode' was a poem about modern solipsism; and, in larger measure, that is the theme of *Light in August*."

Robert D. Jacobs
"Faulkner's Tragedy of Isolation"
Southern Renaissance (1953) 183-84

"Like Poe, Tate distrusts system and abstraction: The 'Nazi and Stalinist unities,' operating at a high level of abstraction, 'for some reason took little account of human nature.' With really outstanding support from the events of recent world history, Mr. Tate goes on to question the validity of the rationalistic idea of human perfectibility: 'Reason--in the sense of moderate unbelief in difficult truths about human nature--and belief in the perfectibility of man-in-the-gross, were the great liberal dogmas which underlay much of our present trouble.' Poe's own denial of perfectibility can be deduced from his frequently stated opinion that merely human effort could neither change the scheme of things nor alter human nature for the better....

It is Allen Tate's belief that poetry 'springs from the irresistible need of the mind for absolute experience, a need which cannot be adequately satisfied in ordinary experience nor in an absolute metaphysics which classifies this ordinary experience into moral states and defines it intellectually.' So far we seem to have a precise stating of Poe's own position.... Both deny to the poet any responsibility other than being a poet. Both hold the purely rational, the purely abstract world view in question, and both of them oppose utilitarianism in art. More important, both of them find an 'irresistible need' in the mind for absolute experience which poetry attempts to satisfy. But in Mr. Tate's theory the need may be satisfied 'in the absolute which poetry constructs'... Poe's absolute is the absolute of the philosopher; it is the Platonist's beauty of reality that lies beyond appearances, never to be achieved by human effort but always existing as the immutable order which lies beyond 'the things and thoughts of time.' This is the most significant deviation of Poe's theory from the operative aesthetics of the Southern Critics.'

Jacobs
"Poe and the Agrarian Critics"
Southern Renaissance (1953) 36-37, 42-43

"Certainly the political, social, and aesthetic principles of Ransom, Tate, Warren and Davidson have been abundantly put into effect by William Faulkner, and he was never a Nashville Agrarian. On the other hand, though, Faulkner has never actively attacked the Agrarians.... Allen Tate has written about Southern writers, 'the South again knew the world, but it had a memory of another war; with us, entering the world once more meant not only the obliteration of the past but a heightened consciousness of it; so that we had, at any rate in Nashville, a double focus, a looking two ways, which gave a special dimension to the writing of our school--not necessarily a superior quality--which American writing as a whole seemed to lack.' (The Fugitive: 1922-1925)."

Louis D. Rubin, Jr.
"Thomas Wolfe in Time and Place"
Southern Renaissance (1953) 291-92

"Mr. Tate...attacks the cultural results of 'positivism'.... According to Mr. Tate, the 'positivist' is marked by the 'naturalistic repudiation of the moral obligation to judge.' He uses abstraction to avoid experience of specific form; he replaces rootedness with internationalism or nationalism, being totally ignorant of the regionalism of the great historic moments, such as the period of the Greek city-state, or the Elizabethan era. He continually forces on the mind the impossible task of knowing everything before it can know anything. He is an enumerator who dissolves the valuable object into the welter of its background, influences, and sources. He takes literature to be 'merely one among many forms of social and political expression.' He substitutes method for intelligence in everything, and his activities are everywhere marked by the 'vulgarity of the utilitarian attitude'....

"Tate is one of the most influential among serious contemporary Southern authors. Internationally recognized as a poet and critic, Tate has also won acclaim as a biographer, novelist, and as editor of the *Sewanee Review* (1944-46). His appearances on the 'Invitation to Learning' radio programs during 1940 and 1941 established him as an important commentator on the classic books of Western Man.... Among Tate's most outstanding volumes are his two biographies, *Stonewall Jackson: The Good Soldier* (1928) and *Jefferson Davis: His Rise and Fall* (1929)... Along with Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom, and others, Tate was an important influence in both the Fugitive and Agrarian movements."

Richard Croom Beatty, Floyd C. Watkins, Thomas Daniel Young, Randall Stewart, eds.
The Literature of the South
(Scott Foresman 1953) 785

"In the 1920's, Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, was the center of a fruitful and significant literary movement. Headed by John Crowe Ransom...the group consisted for the most part of men who, as Ransom's students, had caught the sharp contagion of his influence. It is doubtful if, in our entire history, another college (except Harvard in the 1820's and 1830's) has graduated in one generation a 'school' of writers who have had such a strong impact upon American literature. The chief writers, besides Ransom himself, were Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, Andrew Nelson Lytle, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren....

There appeared to have been three stages of development. The group began as poets: 'The Fugitives'--as they styled themselves--wrote intellectual poetry which may be regarded as a part of the general reaction of the twenties against the nineteenth century. Though continuing to write poetry, the group turned, in 1930, to Southern economic and social questions: *I'll Take My Stand* argued for a return to agrarianism and vigorously combated the 'progressive' assumption that the true welfare of the South could be best served by an accelerated program of industrialization.

The book provoked for its authors the somewhat misleading label of 'neo-Confederates.' After 1930 the group became less unified in literary output, if not in spirit. The fugitives and agrarians of former years turned to the novel, and, to an even greater extent, to literary criticism. Many critical essays by members of the group appeared in *The Southern Review* (1935-1944), edited by Warren and Brooks, *The Kenyon Review* (1938-), edited by Ransom, and *The Sewanee Review*, edited by Tate in 1944-1945, as well as *The Virginia Quarterly Review* and other journals....

Like most intellectual writers of our time, Tate and his Nashville associates are 'reactionary' in the better sense of the word. They have sought to recover certain values of the past: the Southern cultural tradition, the religious point of view, and an intellectual fiber best exemplified in the poets of seventeenth-century England. Tate's 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' and 'Narcissus as Narcissus' afford a unique opportunity to study the work of a modern poet in the closest possible relation to the critical ideas which it embodies....

If the poetry of the Nashville writers seems hardly different in kind from the main body of modern intellectual poetry, and if the social-economic thesis of *I'll Take My Stand* seems a beautiful but ineffectual dream, the literary criticism exerted a wide influence. Through a new, close examination of the text of the individual poem, *Understanding Poetry* [1938], by Brooks and Warren worked a major revolution in reading and teaching [as did *The House of Fiction* by Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate in 1950]. The great virtue of the movement was that it redirected attention to the literature itself, which was about to be submerged by historical matter...

Allen Tate, a distinguished member of the Nashville group...was a member at different times of the English departments of Southwestern University at Memphis, the North Carolina Women's College at Greensboro, and Princeton; in 1942-1944 he held the chair of poetry in the Library of Congress. Later, he taught at New York University. In 1951, he joined the English faculty of the University of Minnesota."

Walter Blair
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
eds. Blair, Theodore Hornberger, Randall Stewart, James E Miller, Jr.

"I do not see how to avoid saying that Allen Tate is our finest literary intelligence, though remarks like this have about them what Mr. Tate himself calls 'an edifying generality': they make their subject sound remote and inhuman.... All we ought to mean by this 'edifying generality' is that the demonstrated variety and order of Mr. Tate's awareness are greater than those of any other literary man in America.... Nothing could, however, be less fair to him than to make him sound remote and awful, for no one sees more clearly than him the danger of the kind of abstraction which, existing in isolation from nature, operates like a honoric hyperbole, a device for creating false gods and imaginary ghosts."

Arthur Mizener
New Republic (13 April 1953) 18

"In Europe the usual tendency in thinking of an American writer is to regard him as a genial barbarian, talented but without critical conscience or intellectual maturity. To be very highly thought of an American writer should at least have worked in a restaurant or factory, gone to sea as a cabin boy, devoted some time to the profession of selling neckties, perhaps have hunted whales in the Pacific or killed lions in Kenya. It does not matter in the least if he has read Shakespeare or educated himself in the Greek classics.

In reality the idea that the American writers lack university education and know little or nothing of European thought, history, and literature is simply a myth. To cite only a few examples among the more notable and recent, it will suffice to point out that Dos Passos was educated at Harvard and was one of a group of exquisites and esthetes, that Thornton Wilder was educated in the Greek and Latin classics, that Hemingway himself, despite all his posing as a primitive, is a profound connoisseur of Elizabethan literature and a student of Flaubert.

If this is true of the fiction writers, it is all the more true of the poets. Most American poets today are also critics, often university professors. Far from being immediate and spontaneous, theirs is among the most difficult forms of poetry ever produced, the most dense with erudition and with thought, the most disciplined technically. Our own hermetic poets, by comparison, represent a prodigy of simplicity. It is enough to open at random a page of Eliot or Pound, to find before one texts loaded with infinite allusions, historic, philosophical and literary, which range from obscure quotations from the Chinese and Indian to close-packed references to works of the whole western tradition. Among the others, the case of Allen Tate is one of the more significant. Here we have a poet who, besides writing verse that displays a consummate technical perfection of rhythm and meter, confronts in his critical prose the most difficult esthetic problems, ranges from the political and historical sphere to the social and religious, and treats the most complex questions of philosophy and of culture.

Born in Winchester, Kentucky, in 1899, Tate belongs to that group of American intellectuals and artists deriving from the agrarian aristocracy of the South, such as John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks, who under the name of *Fugitives* reacted against the culture of the industrialized and pragmatic North, reaffirming the value of tradition, of form, and of artistic discipline. Shaping itself afresh through recourse to the classics, this movement affirmed the importance of literature as an autonomous expression of a need of the spirit. In the poetry of Tate one feels the influence of the Latin poets, especially in his spirited and stinging satire, basically political, in the mode of Perseus and Martial, no less than the influence of Dante and Donne, in his ability to sustain his verse upon a rich basis of thought. The return to the closed forms of sonnet and *terza rima* does not prevent him from experimenting in even more complex rhythms, in which the verses are linked stanza to stanza by recurrent rimes and the images are sustained by a coherent logical structure. But upon this passionately intellectual ground there developed in Tate another source of inspiration: the hallucinated world of the South, people with memories of his boyhood and with the phantasms of the Civil War.

The warm and luxurious landscape alternates, in his poems, with evocations of ambiguous states of soul in which one seems to half listening to catch the faint voices that swarm in a dusk filled with shades and specters. In this sense, Tate moves in the same sphere as other symbolist writers of the South, such as Faulkner and Poe. In 'Mother and Son,' for example, is represented with great dramatic force a troubled spirit's struggle for salvation on the brink of damnation and death. In 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' a poem

on the dead of the Civil War ('The people--people of my kind, my own / People but strange with a white light / In the face'), the prodigious formal virtuosity and the perfect accord of the images serve to focus a vision broken by infernal flashes and celestial lightnings, in which the paean of glory for the dead soldiers is linked with the sense of bodily decay and the realistic notation is made one with the metaphysical breath.

No less interesting than his poetry is Tate's vast body of critical work, which gathers into various volumes (among which the most important are *Reactionary Essays* and *On the Limits of Poetry*) essays on esthetics, critical studies, and historical depictions of culture and manners. Tate's theoretical position derives directly from that movement of thought, that in America has had its most authoritative representative in Henry James, for which literature has an autonomous validity as complete knowledge of the experience of man. This trend is clearly opposed to the other, that calls to mind Walt Whitman, which tends to see in literature above all a means of ideological propaganda: linked in part to Marxist tendencies it has today its most brilliant exponents in the critic Edmund Wilson and the poet Archibald MacLeish.

But it should be noted that the autonomy of art is not defended by Tate upon the basis of a sterile estheticism, like that of a Wilde or a Mallarme, and not even on the grounds of an abstract idealism, like that of Croce. Tate adheres on the contrary to that total conception of man of the classic-Christian tradition, which is traceable to Aristotle and St. Thomas, and which has been taken up again by the French philosopher Jacques Maritain, for whom the work of art is engrafted like an integral part in a vaster whole. Tate's polemic, extending beyond the strictly esthetic plane to that of philosophy in general, is in fact directed above all against that scientific positivism dominant now especially in the United States, which in placing man upon the purely biological plane of the instincts and stimuli, denies the spiritual world any independence of the physical. As in sociology we get then passive adaptation to environment, and in psychology reduction of individual actions to sheer physiological mechanism, so in art and history man becomes prisoner of a coarse utilitarianism, in terms of which he exists as mere Homo economics, without any respite moral or religious. Scientific methods when applied to literature reveal, in fact, according to Tate, the insufficiency of a vision of life that looks upon everything from the practical angle of experimentation and of results.

Lacking a true faith in art and thought as values superior to pure utility, even the historical and literary critic occupies himself often in a mechanical and arbitrary research into origins and influences or in a cataloguing of facts without significance. Thus Tate criticizes esthetic theories, like that of Richards, which see in poetry only a resource of emotive experience serving to order and organize the impulses for action, or of Morris, who distinguishing on the schematic level between the word as designation, that is as mere pragmatical means of determining behavior, and the word as denotation, that is as addition of extrinsic particulars to a thing already noted, destroys the unity of language as form of complete knowledge.

These false theories were born, according to Tate, of the historic breach that in the romantic period opened between science and poetry. It is then that one encounters the phenomenon of the poet who deprived of a true cognitive function, puts himself into competition with science and pretends to compensate, with intensity of sentiment and willed affirmation of the individual self, for the loss of the total vision of reality. Out of this situation there arose, in criticism also, upon the one hand the cold determination of science and upon the other the emotional and verbal impressionism which reflect the divided and distorted conceptions of art characteristic of the modern era.

What then is the criterion for making use of poetry, if not for producing it, something which is a secret of genius and of history, at least for judging it and distinguishing it? Good poetry, Tate answers, is that in which the texture of the imagery is coherent, the meanings, however multiple and ambiguous, can always be related to the central motive, and every phrase can bear the strictest logical examination, without, however, any possibility of the whole being resolved into pure thought. Experience emotional and cognitive at the same time, great poetry--says Tate--whether ancient or modern, requires for its understanding the cooperation, on the part of the reader, of all his intellectual energies.

These esthetic ideas, in many ways close to those of Blackmur, Empson, and Eliot, are amply illustrated in Tate's critical essays. Particularly important is that on Hart Crane, in which he sees the typical example of the modern romantic poet, whose sensibility without center and without object, not succeeding in

localizing itself in the external world, encloses him in pure sensation, or, if he desires to escape from it, falls into sentimentalism and into chaos. In this essay, as in the others on Donne, Keats, Emily Dickinson, and Thomas Hardy, Tate sees the author, with exemplary historical insight, as an inseparable part of the spiritual experience of the civilization in which he lives. Considering this approach, it is easy to understand how the esthetic problem became for him therefore also a political, social, and religious problem.

Modern art is in crisis, because commercialism has destroyed the spiritual unity of man, reducing his life, depleted of all moral and religious purpose, to a mere system of economic relations. Hence the artist suffers today only more intensely from the same sickness that afflicts other men too. Like the people of Eliot's *Waste Land*, he is still surrounded with the grandeur of the past, but it is only a dead tradition, in which he does not share and which does not sustain him. Having lost faith in anything greater than himself he is in danger of being only 'a cruel animal without a soul...a congeries of possibilities without order and aim'."

Francesco Mei
"Culture and Technique in Tate"
translated by Brewster Ghiselin
Il Quotidiano (July 1954)

"His primary interest is not in language as a means of 'communication'; he uses it primarily for the purposes of 'communion'... The word communication presupposes the victory of the secularized society of means without ends.... Whatever contribution the sciences may make towards our knowledge of man, it is to the poet, Mr. Tate answers, that we must go for *the complete* truth about man. The scientist may be able to tell us what man does and what he can do, but he cannot evaluate man's actions and elucidate the nature of his norms, and a picture of man that leaves out this aspect of his nature is a sadly incomplete and relatively trivial picture.... In this brave new world of science and of pleasure humanity is not destroyed by forced labor in the frozen tundras of Siberia; it is destroyed by something worse: the social engineer painlessly performs a lobotomy on it and destroys its soul...

Otherwise stated, the image of man that is created by the man of letters is not one that can be used by men who are bent on building a secularized society...the secularism of the swarm. Such a society, taking God to be a silly and burdensome superstition, will substitute the image of Man for His image and under the illusion of humanism will worship naked power. This is the society that we have already begun to rear on both sides of the Iron Curtain.... Science has indeed made a difference: it has encouraged a swarm of false philosophies which claim its authority and whose business is to destroy the once solid metaphysics in the light of which we defined our destiny.... Philosophically, ours is a bankrupt generation....

What the man of letters can and ought to give us is a picture forged in his 'conscience,' in the French sense of this word: an image forged through the joint action of knowledge and judgment... Mr. Tate is saying that art is important because human life is not capable of achieving what virtue or perfection it may achieve unless it is guided by an effective notion of the destiny of man. The poet makes his essential and indispensable contribution when he gives us 'the image of man as he is in his time, which without the man of letters would not otherwise be known'.... I suspect that the muffled despair the reader discerns below the surface of Mr. Tate's essays springs from the fact that he knows that the things he loves are doomed. But Mr. Tate is no man to take the threat lying down. Informing his criticism and giving it remarkable consistency and force, is his protest against the meaning of the present and of the probably future....

Poe possessed the angelic imagination and tired it without qualms and for this reason Poe is 'the transition figure in modern literature,' since he is the man who discovered our great subject, 'the disintegration of personality, but kept it in a language that had developed in a tradition of unity and order'.... Why *The Forlorn Demon*?... Mr. Tate credits Poe with the phrase.... I suggest, 'the forlorn demon' is the modern man of letters, doomed to inhabit Baudelaire's *fourmillante cite*. He is a demon because he has aspired to become an angel, and by doing so plunged himself into hell. But the title suggests another interpretation, according to which the demon is now the Socratic daimon, who is forlorn because we citizens of the swarming secularized city of today disregarded his prohibition and attempted to do something we have no business attempting. The demon is forlorn because in disregarding his prohibition we have betrayed ourselves and thus betrayed him."

Eliseo Vivas
"Allen Tate as Man of Letters"
The Sewanee Review 62:131-81 (Winter 1954)

"Allen had read the story ["The Enduring Chill"] to them.... When I talked to Allen he said do one thing to that story for me and I said what and he said get the Holy Ghost in the first page or two. That is very good advice and it is what I have proceeded to do."

Flannery O'Connor
Letter to 'A' (28 December 1957)
The Habit of Being: Letters
(Random House/Vintage (1980) 261

"Because of the overwhelming success of modern poetry in the style of Eliot and Pound, their followers often speak of poetry as if it had always been a rite, as it was to the Symbolists. When Allen Tate declares that poetry gives us a higher form of knowledge than science does, a knowledge that is 'complete' in itself, he is speaking of poetry as in itself a religious experience--which is what it was to the Symbolists, but is not to Eliot himself, as it was not to Dr. Johnson or to Shakespeare. Everyone knows Archibald MacLeish's famous lines" 'A poem should not mean / But be.' But since the victory of the specifically modern poetry that grew out of Symbolism, not everyone remembers that many a great poem before the nineteenth century--and in it--could both mean *and* be. The particular emphasis which the Symbolists put on the being of a poem rather than its meaning grew out of their revolt against the narrow-minded science of the mid-nineteenth century."

Alfred Kazin
"The Background of Modern Literature" (1958)
Contemporaries
(Atlantic Monthly/Little Brown 1924-62) 7-8

"I think it will become clear at some future time that Allen Tate's eminence, among his contemporaries, consists in his uncommon combination of excellences. Literary critics have frequently been bad poets; good poets have frequently been political simpletons. Allen Tate is a good poet and a good literary critic who is distinguished for the sagacity of his social judgment and the consistency with which he has maintained the least popular of political attitudes--that of the sage. He believes in reason rather than enthusiasm, in wisdom rather than system; and he knows that many problems are insoluble and that in politics no solution is final. By avoiding the lethargy of the conservative, the flaccidity of the liberal, and the violence of the zealot, he succeeds in being a representative of the smallest of minorities, that of the intelligent who refuse to be described as 'intellectuals.' And what he has written, as a critic of society, is of much greater significance because of being said by a man who is also a good poet and a good critic of literature."

T. S. Eliot
"Homage to Allen Tate"
The Sewanee Review LXVII, no. 4
(October-December 1959) 576

"The poet, the thinker, the public figure, the whole man--Allen Tate's personality is greatly distinguished in our time.... Allen Tate's mind is exceptional in its harmony... His personality is whole and undivided, and it is as steady, as it is vivid. Allen would readily have found his role in the Golden Age of Hellenism, or in classical Rome, or the Elizabethan Renaissance.... And if he had been of middle age in Virginia during the Civil War, he would have been a statesman, or a warrior, and he would have retired like General Lee afterwards to the university, but in the role of poet in residence.... Allen would have been a theologian and a poet in those Middle Ages when there was a sort of closure of the whole mind under the religious prescription.... Allen's personality was always more harmonious than mine, and unfolded more surely and happily. At twenty his mind was further on its road than mine when I had passed thirty... To the best of my knowledge there has been an excellent understanding between us for more than thirty years; and I have felt as pleased and comfortable in his company as in any which I have been offered.... When we met we started talking where we had left off before.

Mr. Tate is an eminent figure now, but when I first met him he [was] registered in my freshman writing course at Vanderbilt. I have not known another...who came and stayed with his colors flying so high.... He was a step beyond my experience...[with a] consciousness of a body of literature which was unknown to his fellow students, and to my faculty associates and myself... A new literature [Modernism] had made its brilliant beginnings, and there were advanced journals and books which were full of it if we had looked... Allen in his student days was reading Baudelaire and Mallarme.... I am grateful to Allen even more for introducing me to the critical essays of Mr. T. S. Eliot in *The Sacred Wood*, and to his poems; in that order... [He wrote to me] with as much agitation as I ever knew him to register, about a new work called *The Waste Land* [1922].... As champion of the new literature...Allen had a mission in Tennessee which he was ten years discharging, during his intermittent residence among us. Because he was young, and in his address as polite and charming as he was firm, we scarcely noticed that we were being instructed...

The Fugitive group got out a small quarterly of verse under that name for four years, but the Saturday night meetings had been going on as early as 1920, two years before publication began.... Tate was one of the younger members... I think we all coveted his judgment of our poems as being the most instant, and about the best, that we were going to find; for I know that I did; and there was as much profit to be taken when it was unfavorable as when it was favorable.... And now the Agrarian movement, at the other end of the decade.... We were engaged upon a war that was already lost. Historically, we were behind the times. But we were right in thinking they were desperately bad.... Only a poor and ineffectual remnant of Southerners still carried on the old agrarian economy, and that was not by choice.... Tate's essay [in *I'll Take My Stand*, 1930] was magnificent (as mine certainly was not). Having come into his mature poetic style, it was now that he exhibited his mature prose, and before his thirtieth year; Sir Philip Sidney had not gone faster. I think of his Agrarian essay as a fighting prose flowing with supple elegance and deadly in its ironic aim....

[Tate's vision] might go something like this: 'What Mr. Tate accepts is the ordered and individual way of life which obtained in the Western economy before the industrial revolution developed into mass production.' I admire his position very much, for it is a reasoned conservatism.... And ever after the Agrarian movement I believe that Tate and I conducted our lives in much the same fashion; in a free society we assumed the right to live simply and to keep company with friends of our own taste, and with increasingly unpopular books in the library. We lived in an old-fashioned minority pocket of the culture, so to speak.... And as for the public platform, Tate conducts himself so ably there that his adversaries are beguiled even while they are being flayed. Tate does not expect the old order to be patched up and restored to power. The new economic forces have made a fatal breach in the continuity of our national culture.... Our New Age seems to have lost those marks of a culture which go with a metaphysical taste and to have lapsed into something like a sprawling and unformed barbarism. So I have often recited Tate's position with full accord....

Allen's next decisive step was to enter the Roman Catholic Church.... The emphasis of the Church is upon morality... A miraculism of an elevated or noble sort plays constantly over the imagery or configuration of Valery's verse; while in Allen's own verse it plays too, and is even bolder.... I witnessed the zeal and devotion of the new convert. Religion is so imperative for a society that those of us who do not profess it are glad when our friends do."

John Crowe Ransom

"In Amicitia"

"Homage to Allen Tate"

The Sewanee Review 67:528-39 (Autumn 1959)

"His poems, all of them, even the slightest, are terribly personal. Out of splutter and shambling comes a killing eloquence. Perhaps, this is the romance of desperation, or rather the formal resonance of desperation. I say 'formal' because no one has so given us the impression that poetry must be burly, must be courteous, must be tinkered with and recast until one's eyes pop out of one's head. How often something smashes through the tortured joy of composition to strike the impossible bull's-eye! The pre-Armageddon twenties and thirties with all their peculiar fears and enthusiasms throb in Tate's poetry; imitated ad infinitum, it has never been reproduced by another hand."

Robert Lowell

"Visiting the Tates"
"Homage to Allen Tate"
Sewanee Review (Autumn 1959) 559

"The day I presented myself at the basement entrance of 27 Bank Street I was met with a severe and courteous formality--it was as if the eyes reflected but did not see what was before them. Later I came to recognize this as a mask to keep the world at a distance, because of the artist's necessity to be saved interruption while at work; or merely to save himself boredom, which he cannot hide. I learned this necessity for withdrawal in his house, as I learned that the artist's discipline is almost its only reward. Once a caller asked for Katherine Anne Porter at this same address and was received with grave decorum and told, with a bow, 'The ladies of the house are at the riot in Union Square.' The bow, as well as the words, was a conscious emphasis upon the irony of his situation, the common situation of the artist living in New York, belonging to no cliques, and demanding that the profession of letters be accepted as a profession. He, more than any other writer, has upheld this professionalism of letters. This attitude is obviously more French than English and is, I feel, unique in the English-speaking world, at least to the extent he carried and carries it.

Ford Madox Ford had this sense of himself as a writer, but he would have claimed not England but Europe for his habitation. Tate would see Europe for what it is historically, as it relates to our common inheritance. To hold this position has not been without its price. I have at times thought that he had advanced himself into tactically untenable positions, or used too much force upon what seemed only an outpost engagement. But in a rearguard action, after the campaign and, indeed, the cause is lost, strategy and tactics become one and the same thing; that is, 'no bulge,' as General [Nathan Bedford] Forrest called it, can be allowed to the enemy as your force retreats, lest all be swept into oblivion.

Every serious writer has one subject, I believe, which he spends his life exploring and delivering as fully as he may. Tate's subject is simply what is left of Christendom, that western knowledge of ourselves which is our identity. He may be classed as a religious writer, and that from the very beginning. The literary historian is likely to see his work as the best expression of the crucial drama of our time. 'We've cracked the hemispheres with careless hand!' Does language more poetically describe the plight of western civilization? He has many voices: verse, biography, criticism, essay, even fiction--but one language and one subject. In rereading him I was surprised to find that, even as a young man, especially as a young man in the 'twenties, he saw the religious doubt, the failure of belief, as crucial. In the same way he accepted the South's defeat not as a private or local affair but as the last great defense in a going society of those values, particularly human, we know as Christian. Even in the earlier verse such as 'Causerie' and 'Last Days of Alice' the ironic complaint derives from and hangs upon this ambiguity of belief.

In *I'll Take My Stand* it was his essay which argued the religious position. The diversity and range, certainly in the verse, can be seen in the manner he divides his collected poems into sections. Early pieces are put by the latest, but the book opens with the larger treatment of his position, the historical and cultural past, not as background but as vision immediately related to the poet and all others now living. The first section opens with 'The Mediterranean' and closes with the 'Ode to the Confederate Dead.' The final irony of the sound of nature's sighing of the leaves serves for a transition to the other parts of the book.

Behind Allen Tate lies a body of work anyone would be proud to call a life's work. And yet there is time for it to be only the great body which awaits its crown. Ours is the immortal generation. And how do I know it? I know it with my aging eyes which see now, at last, that it is not we who are getting older, but the young who are getting younger, smoother-cheeked, more innocent-eyed, so that it is a marvel to find that the sounds they are making are words, perhaps language even.

Andrew Lytle
"Allen Tate: Upon the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday"
"Homage to Allen Tate"
The Sewanee Review 67:542-44
(Autumn 1959)

"I have known and admired Allen Tate for a long time.... I think we have been romantics who have maintained the necessity of reason.... The whole concept of 'tension' central to much of Allen Tate's thought, is a romantic concept. The classicist ideal is not tension, but serene security.... I know of no critic, in America or elsewhere, who in our time has combined such sensitivity with such severity, or who has so happily married an aesthetic judgment to an ethical judgment. His critical work is replete with such antitheses, nearly applied; and...they may all reduce to one or two fundamental distinctions, such as that between the will and the imagination (or more fundamentally still, that between the head and the heart)... That, to me, is the mark of a sound critic, forever dwelling in uncertainties, forever qualifying categorical logic with intuitive *finesse*... I admire this metaphysical athlete beside me: I like the stance he has taken up and the clean way he uses his tools.... Not a stroke misguided... I cannot imitate it, though I may envy it.... Allen Tate knows that poetry survives and has meaning for survival only to the extent that it is and remains a symbolic language.... I am not sure whether in our tragic predicament Allen Tate places most reliance on poetry or on prayer, and perhaps he would say they are the same thing."

Herbert Read
"Our Cousin, Mr. Tate"
"Homage to Allen Tate"
The Sewanee Review 67:572-75
(Autumn 1959)

"All three of our men of letters [Ivor Richards, John Crowe Ransom, Tate] were faced with what had happened in English to French symbolist poetry and to its connections with modern technical society in a world which seemed to have become less and less human... The different temperament of Tate--more active, more engaged, more cavalier--responded by inventing tension, or in-tension--the relation of stress between the halves of irony and paradox--the stress by which structure is united with texture.

Similarly he has also opposed the committed operation of imagination to the operation of the unseated will, the action of the lyric to the asserted action of the allegory (though I doubt he would use now just this vocabulary for just this purpose, and I notice he does not reprint the essays where he made the original opposition). That is, he slew allegory of the kind he thought to be mechanical manipulation of figures [allegory of signs as distinct from allegory of symbols], and raised pastoral (as Empson was also to do and as, in effect, Ransom had done in treating 'Lycidas') and the pastoral he raised was the ambiguous allegory of the pastoral that suited his needs, as we see in his poem about Aeneas in Washington; it was the way that to him knowledge could enter poetry: the struggling morals of felt life....

Tate's battle was against the Richards ideas, against any ideas not found directly in poetry itself, and in the particular poem itself [New Criticism], and against any positive or organized theory of literature. In short, he made the argument that poetry should be used only as poetry--not as *pure* poetry but as the poetry of experience.... His essays make a series of opinions, organized...as near as possible on the unconscious skills of the mind, about what happens, what actually gets into, poetry, and how it was treated after it got there. It is to these skills that Tate refers, I think, when he uses the phrase historical imagination. Otherwise he makes a series of attacks on people who handle poetry in other ways, and for other purposes. Here Richards regularly turns up as the friendly enemy.... '[Poetry] is the art of apprehending and concentrating our experience in the mysterious limitations of form.... Literature is not really nonsense, it is in a special way a kind of science...a kind of applied psychology'....

This is the singular virtue of Tate that both in his verse and his criticism his mind operates upon insight and observation as if all necessary theory had been received into his bones and blood before birth. That is why what is controversial in him is so often a matter either of temperament or temper, and there is a strength to his language superior to any ideas that may be detached from it. From this one virtue stem his two talents as a critic: one, to see through or around or beyond the methods of other critics into an image or insight (for an insight is seen like an image, that it gives light) of what those methods left out; two, when he is practising direct criticism, his extraordinary skill, surpassed only by Eliot, at illuminating quotation, especially those made for the purpose of exemplifying what he calls the tension between the different elements in a poem. Anybody who writes poetry will understand what he is up to, even if disagreeing; anybody who does not write poetry will feel as if he did. Tate is the man who is concerned with poetry as it always was. His taste is deep; hence the love at the bottom of his contentiousness....

For Tate, in his later essays, the curse of dissociated thought, and unrelated meditation, has been given the name of Angelic thought or imagination; which is thought freed from the senses, as if original, and freed from *Common things*; and is thus the opposite of Dante who saw Agape with Eros as a common thing in Beatrice's eyes--an *Incarnation* with which Tate has been increasingly concerned almost as if it were a *Logic* of the life of the senses, as what he learned at school gave to the mind a vital *Order*. These between them make available to the grasping sensibility *Experience*. In all this he sees the need for incubation and preparation by *Prejudice*, which is but the idiosyncratic learning one captures and inherits from the *Historical Imagination*, where fate and purpose are seen to mingle and impose their *Will*. From these, taken all but the first in their order, he sees communication become *Communion*. Thus in the centre is Experience that in the end may be understood by *Love*, for through the Love of God we learn to love our mortal neighbors. This is the Discovery the man of letters makes, when he thinks of San Giovanni in Venere."

R. P. Blackmur
"San Giovanni in Venere: Allen Tate as Man of Letters"
"Homage to Allen Tate"
The Sewanee Review 67:614-31 (Autumn 1959)

"It is splendid to think another good poet has lived to be sixty years old, for the real ones do grow in grace as they go on--I am remembering Hardy, Yeats, Frost, Eliot,--so I wish my old friend joy of his years in health and just the right degree of disturbance, upset, uproar, and controversy that he can best thrive on to write his poetry. Many happy returns of the day, with my love."

Katherine Anne Porter
"A Sprig of Mint for Allen"
"Homage to Allen Tate"
The Sewanee Review 67:546
(Autumn 1959)

"Among the Fugitives it was Allen Tate who first came to know Eliot's poetry and who has ever since held most to his example. Tate's most famous poem, written in its final version at mid-career...echoes 'Gerontion': 'What shall we say who have knowledge / Carried to the heart? Shall we take the act / To the grave? Shall we, more hopeful, set up the grave / In the house? The ravenous grave?'"

This passage occurs toward the end of 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' and represents Tate's growing sense of history and its authority over the present. The poem has a rigid formality which characterizes Tate's work on the whole--little of it any ease or warmth or intimacy, an intense self-consciousness in manner which is hardly gentled by an ironic self-deprecation. The mood is the only one appropriate to the epoch; in Tate's opinion, moreover, it is one which is possible only to a traditionalist, who at least can know what is not there.... Here is a characteristic pronouncement:

"First, there is the religious imagination, which can mythologize indiscriminately history, legend, trees, the sea, animals, all being humanly dramatize, somehow converted to the nature of man. Secondly, there is the historical imagination, which is the religious imagination *manque*--an exercise of the myth-making propensity of man within the restricted realm of the historical event.... Men...can no longer see themselves under the control of a...deity.... The third stage is the complete triumph of positivism... In our own time, we get...just plain everyday history.... A traditionalist's definition of myth emerges: the historical imagination oriented toward the religious, not the positivistic. The definition is probably a valid one..."

Tate's is an overbearing, presumptuous, and curiously unhumble poetry, since the personae which its author assumes appear to grant him not a poet's, or even a seer's--a Tiresias's--perspective but a god's (or half-god's) omniscience. His protagonists seem always to be speaking down from the Cross... The poet would lose himself and his reader in the occasion; his means of losing himself is his craft. The craft is characterized by a tightening of the prosodic reins so great as to evoke for the reader an almost unmediated hysteria. The poet cannot afford to let go....

Tate is, like his master Eliot, an allusive poet. But unlike Eliot, he will not yield to the force of the allusions; he will not allow them their integrity, however much he appears to want to; he will call them down in a forever last judgment on himself and his readers. He is 'metaphysical'; but his conceits are exercises in mortification, not discipline; and they yield no deeply ordered insights. He is the poet of the counter-current *in extremis*. Poems like these have their own kind of integrity, the effect of which is to demand of the reader that he be a helpless observer, even of his own damnation. Too often one says of Tate that he is like the boy who cried: Wolf! Wolf! Only he cried: Apocalypse! Apocalypse!.... [Tate was not crying Wolf, in effect he was anticipating apocalyptic terrorism--European fascism, Nazi genocide, the outbreak of World War II, Communist mass murder and the nuclear age.]

Unlike Eliot, he has never been able to rest assured in even the small triumph that is the Christian's when he can being himself to take a compassionate view of his humanity. The problem for Tate is to make poetry a discipline whose authority does not derive from the power of a merely poetic sensibility.... Tate, unlike Eliot, has been too much of a traditionalist to become cosmopolitan, a citizen of the world.... His honesty puts him *in extremis* and makes him sound as much like a man delivering a jeremiad as a proper poet--a Mather writing in the style of a Calhoun and a Poe....

He voted to award Pound the Bollingen Prize in 1949 solely, as he said, because Pound had done much to preserve the 'medium,' 'the health of language.' Tate had by then resigned himself to the inevitable fact that 'in literature as in life nothing reaches us pure.' Now for him Christian Truth has become almost exclusively the truth of Original Sin."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 320-26

"The Fugitives turned their major attention to the new literature and the more precise critical theory which came into notice after World War I. From their deepened interest in southern history and culture came the symposium *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), to which Tate contributed 'Remarks on the Southern Religion.' Tate married Caroline Gordon, the novelist, in 1924; they were divorced thirty years later. He held Guggenheim Fellowships in 1928 and 1929, taught English literature at Southwestern College, the University of North Carolina, Columbia and Princeton Universities, was southern editor of *Hound and Horn* (1931-34), edited the *Sewanee Review* (1944-46), was an editor for Henry Holt and Co., and on the faculty of the University of Minnesota.

Tate is known equally for his poetry, in which he has combined a classical severity of form with a deeply felt, often religious symbolism, and for his criticism. His essays show a remarkable range; Latin literature, the modern poets, and especially Edgar Allan Poe have attracted his attention. His best known poem is the much anthologized 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' although others, such as 'The Mediterranean,' 'Seasons of the Soul,' 'Sonnets at Christmas,' 'Death of Little Boys,' and 'Mr. Pope,' are widely known.... He edited several anthologies and (with Francis Cheney) *Sixty American Poets, 1896-1944* (1945) and *Language of Poetry* (1960), a critical and bibliographical checklist issued by the Library of Congress."

Max J. Herzberg and staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 1115-16

"Alan Tate...was born in Kentucky, and was educated at Vanderbilt University, where he was one of the founders of *The Fugitive* (1922-1925). Later he became editor of *The Sewanee Review*, a literary magazine that transcended its origins. An avowed believer in sectionalism, Tate's critical acumen ran parallel to his predilections in *Stonewall Jackson: The Good Soldier* (1928) and *Jefferson Davis: His Rise and Fall* (1929) Before he was sixty Tate was the author of sixteen volumes of poetry, criticism, biography, and fiction.

At the outset, with *Mr. Pope and Other Poems* (1928), Tate revealed a mind in which 'a fierce latinity' mixed with a Gothic strength attains a strange efflorescence. Tate said that his method consists in playing the role of a hawk, 'gradually circling around the subject, threatening it, filling it with suspense, and finally

accomplishing its demise without ever quite using the ultimate violence upon it.' Sometimes, however, in his circumlocutory or circumambient manner, the poet is likely to leave the climax unresolved, and the reader is uncertain whether, in spite of Tate's hawklike swoop, the capture is always accomplished. Discarding the metaphor, the poem sometimes suffers from a critical introspection at war with the lyric impulse.

Tate's later work established him as one of the country's most distinguished poets and critics. *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas* (1936), *Reason to Madness* (1941), *On the Limits of Poetry* (1948) and particularly *The Forlorn Demon* (1953) are the work of a highly acute and probing sensibility. The particular estimates (as in the tribute to Hart Crane, the delicate analysis of Emily Dickinson, and the balanced appraisal of Ezra Pound) are generous as well as just.

Collected Poems (1959) and a selected *Poems* (1960) are cumulative proofs of Tate's power as creator and critic. Energetic in its technique as well as its teaching--much of Tate's life was spent as a teacher in various universities--the writing is both violent and disciplined, dramatic and moral, a belief 'in the innate evil of human nature' (as he wrote in *The Fathers*) 'and the need to face that evil.' There is unquestionable authority in such single poems as 'The Mediterranean,' 'Mother and Son,' 'The Cross,' 'The Swimmers,' and 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' one of the most remarkable poems of the period. The Bollingen Prize for poetry was awarded to Tate in 1956."

Louis Untermeyer, editor
Modern American Poetry
(Harcourt, Brace 1962) 536

"Tate called his first volume of essays *Reactionary Essays* (1936), indicating by that title the positive standard he made of a principle usually associated by modernists with inhibition and conservative negation; he called his second book of criticism *Reason in Madness* (1941), making its theme the opposition of moral order to eclectic license or utilitarian materialism in contemporary literature....

Tate argued: 'Only a return to the provinces, to the small self-contained centers of life, will put the all-destroying abstraction, America, safely to rest.' Such a line of argument separates the Nashville agrarians from Middle Western regionalists like Sandburg and Lindsay, who were largely followers of Whitman. Another feature, which distinguishes them from any recent talents in New England, is that for many years, beginning with their magazine the *Fugitive* (1922-1925), they worked together as a group and issued such joint pronouncements as *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). Some of the values that they held in common were their preference for the concrete and the localized as against the abstract and the generalized; and when they spoke in philosophical terms they dwelt on the necessity to offset the domination of a dehumanized scientific rationalism by the richer resources of imagination. Their politics were devoted to the preservation of tradition, and seeing the local menaced by the national, particularly through industrialization, they protested against the machine and against money values as the causes of modern rootlessness. Tate called himself a 'reactionary'...

Allen Tate, growing up in the period when Eliot's criticism was making its first impact, shows in much of his verse the kind of intellectualization from which Eliot's richer lyrical impulse saved him, the intellectualization of a mind in which the analytical function outruns the creative. Despite Tate's objection to the limiting abstractness of so much modern knowledge, many of his poems are conceived very abstractly.... 'I often think of my poems as commentaries on those human situations from which there is no escape.' In 'The Last Days of Alice' he presents his version of the difficulty of belief in a mathematician's age; in 'The Wolves' he probes to the sources of recent neurotic fear. In his best known poem 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' he deliberately contrasts the 'active faith' of the Southern past with the contemporary 'solipscism...that denotes the failure of the human personality to function properly in nature and society'.... Tate's structure and rhythm have attained here a rare elevation and dignity."

F. O. Matthiessen
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
eds. Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, Henry Seidel Canby, Richard M. Ludwig
(Macmillan 1963) 1346-47

"I do not believe the judgment can be seriously questioned that, of the generation of writers who came to maturity in the late 1920's, Tate is one of the three or four most important.... Even the best criticism of Tate has been very partial, and much of that which has been written has been superficial and even banal.... There has been a great deal of irrelevant and poorly conceived commentary on Tate's career.... No man in our time has devoted himself more single-mindedly to the problems of the humane intelligence in inhumane times. He has not solved those problems, but we must ask: 'who has?'... Fugitive poet, Agrarian theorist, non-theological religious polemicist, Catholic essayist and poet: these have been some of Tate's public masks. I shall try to show that all the roles are intimately joined; but they have their beginnings in his Fugitive writing...

The search for a unity of being has often carried Tate to the past, and his customary mode of dealing with the past has been to probe what he has seen as a terrifying cultural decay. The natural language to use in discussing this motif, which is ubiquitous in modern criticism, is that of 'dissociation of sensibility'... [from T. S. Eliot] By 'sensibility' Tate means...the ability to 'see': to perceive and represent the intricate relationships between the mind and the world in concrete form.... It is this mode of perception which has become 'dissociated,' or isolated from man's total being.... [Hart] Crane is a textbook case of the dissociated sensibility... The ultimate dissociation of language from reality, sensibility from intellect, was seen in the actual practices of the French symbolists, especially Rimbaud, Mallarme, Laurantmont; or in Hart Crane; or even in Wallace Stevens. These poets, cut off from reality by the historical process, reverted to near-magical rites, chief among which is the doctrine and practice of synaesthesia: Rimbaud's 'derangement of the senses'.... Tate demonstrated that great poetry could be written after the time of Dante, that the dissociation was not an irreversible process, but another oddity appeared: the great literary situation, it seems, occurs after a tradition has actually broken up, when the poet who has sufficient aesthetic distance and discipline may probe the irony of the situation....

Poe saw at least some of the dangers inherent in the Cartesian machine; he saw the fantastic separation of the intellect from the sensibility that had become his heritage, but he was destroyed by the 'angelic imagination.' The term is Maritain's, and Tate's use of it depends upon *The Dream of Descartes*, but note the application: although Poe understood that science had forced poetry into a hard corner, he sought to escape from the corner by exalting the poetic intelligence until it rivaled the creative activity of God. Poe seeks direct knowledge of the *esse* of things; this, if we believe St. Thomas, is a knowledge not possible to man, but only to angels. In Poe's exaltation of a vaguely Coleridgean notion of the imagination, he overleaped the natural limitations of man and tried to make the poet into a demi-god. In doing so, Poe actually left mere humanity far behind; he isolated the three traditional modes of man's being--intellect, will, feeling--from each other, and perverted man into something monstrous and dehumanized....

While it is simple to assert the truism that form and content are one, behind it lies a ticklish dilemma: the relationships of the poet to the world, and idea to language.... This disarmingly simple and impossibly difficult question is at the center of Tate's poetic speculations... Tate was willing to admit, with Ransom, that free verse seemed to be a failure... Ransom undoubtedly influenced Tate, but there is an essential difference between Tate and Ransom. For Ransom, the myths necessary for poetry are never more than 'poetically' true, 'the world's body' in opposition to the abstractions of science; they are halves of a dualism. But for Tate, the religious belief is fundamental; it is not merely metaphorical....

He immediately goes on to suggest that poetry, unlike prose, is not rational exposition, but a direct presentation of perception. Such a notion placed Tate in emphatic opposition to Ransom and indeed it has continued to do so, though at many places their positions have sounded very similar. But Tate's assumptions about poetry already resembled those of the symbolist tradition and T. S. Eliot more than they did those of Ransom... Tate had read the symbolists before he read Eliot and, indeed, had been writing poetry much like Eliot's well before he read Eliot's work. As a matter of fact, it was a severe shock to Tate to discover that Eliot's work made his own look imitative, and he undertook a thorough revision of his poetic technique....

Tate was already in pursuit of an elusive unity of being in 1924. I use the traditional term 'unity of being' in a nearly Thomistic sense here.... This movement from more or less private to a relatively public language has seldom been noticed by Tate's critics, yet I believe it to be one of the crucial issues for understanding

Tate.... Again, Eliot figures large in Tate's proposal of the symbolist tradition as a continuity of the metaphysical tradition and an escape from the dilemma of form.... This is a fundamental point for understanding Tate's sensibility: to read him closely is to realize that ideas which came to him (and his generation) through reading Baudelaire, Arthur Symons, Laforgue, Eliot, and related writers have formed the axis of many of his positions.... Certainly Tate's hierarchy of values appears similar to Eliot's; Baudelaire and the symbolists are viewed as the recovery of a tradition which should have been maintained in the first place.... He has taken a Coleridgean psychology of the imagination, Baudelaire's mystical notions of the poetic mind and its access to *correspondences*, symbolist and metaphysical poetic practices, and based them explicitly on a religious metaphysic to a degree no one else, to my mind, has attempted before. Eliot has, to be sure, followed a similar path. But there is no place in Eliot, it seems to me, where he attempts precisely what Tate tries to do in *The Forlorn Demon*...

The poem ["Correspondences"] was a translation from *Les Fleurs du Mal*... Many commentators have shown the importance of the poem; it would not be too much to call it a primer for fledgling symbolism, with special attention paid to the devices of synesthesia.... The poem and its doctrinal background sketched a unified cosmos which manifests itself symbolically, to which the poet has a special mode of access. Such a notion, of course, has its origin in mystical tradition; it depends heavily on Swedenborgian and theosophical sources... It is a long way from the mysticism of Baudelaire's *correspondences* to this Christian view of symbolism through analogy.... The Vorticism group in London--Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, T. S. Eliot--had been utilizing the French tradition for some time, and for the same reasons that Tate later turned to these ideas and techniques: they seemed to offer an escape from the confusion of formal anarchy and sterility... These ideas complemented a type of poetry remarkable for its unexpected metaphors, synesthetic techniques, and extreme rigor of composition...

Tate was constantly concerned with the poetic order; but gradually, one can see a complementary theme entering his writing. This theme is an extension of Tate's continuing obsession with unity. By 1930, he was convinced that poetic order could not be divorced from the more general conceptions of metaphysical and social order. It was, possibly, twenty-five years before Tate found the larger unity to support his poetic order [Catholicism]. Yet he constantly struggled for it....

Tate's mind is one which habitually polarizes experience and then, not content to remain in dualism, attempts to mediate between the poles. The polar terms of his dialectic have shifted through the years, but the habit has persisted. And in the late 1920's and early 1930's the polarization takes, I believe, the form of a poetic order somewhat tenuously related to a social order: two faces of the same obsession with the necessity of unifying twentieth-century experience.... By limiting man's knowledge to abstractions the post-renaissance mind has dehumanized man and committed him to a form of living death: 'for abstraction is the death of religion no less than the death of everything else.' The motive at the bottom is, certainly, religious. Here is the familiar theme in Tate: the opposition of a mythical and poetic order of cognition to the faceless abstractions and operational concepts of the sciences....

The charge, presented in various ways, that Tate has 'isolated poetry from life,' or presented a doctrine of 'life for art's sake,' while certainly not incomprehensible, will not stand much examination. Still less, it seems to me, will Alfred Kazin's assertion that Tate made of literature a series of 'isolated ecstasies' bear scrutiny.... At times his reverence for the poem is almost mystical... Tate's 'aestheticism' is not the reduction of life to the elusive pursuit of beauty and the willed neatness of iambic discourse. The aesthetic order is, for Tate, an independent order and the one in which he is most interested. It is an order of being that cannot be reduced to other orders of being.... The point which Tate made at great length throughout his early critical work had two facets, though it remained a single point: (1) poetry was the unification of experience within the enigmatic dynamics of form and (2) the forms of the poet's art could not be frivolous or eccentric if great poetry was to result. Form had to depend on the poet's ability to perceive human experience whole... Tate, in his early writing and throughout his career, has elevated the problem of form above all other issues....

In 'Poetry and the Absolute' the Baudelairean suggestion that the poet had a unique access to the world through correspondence is transmuted into Tate's suggestion that the poet's unique access to the world is through form.... The poetic absolute is *created*, not ontological; it is a matter of *form*: experience is formed

into an achieved and permanent order.... Tate, then, believed that in the form of the poem there was a created unity, a union of the human and the perceived world. But *not*, he was careful to emphasize, a metaphysical unity: this is the romantic and sentimental notion that the poet may become one with the universe....The poem...is a genuine perception and a genuine knowledge of the world. But it is entirely different from other types of knowledge. It does not depend on logical dialectic.... This point of view depends on a metaphysical or religious absolutism; to insist on the unity of the poem in isolation from a world order is to make the poem exotic.... This, I believe, is the strongest point of Richard Foster's criticism of Tate (and other critics)....

Tate's claims for the 'knowledge' offered by poetry compare in strength to the claims of the medieval Christian philosophers for the truth obtainable by the sanctified mind fortified by *ratio aeterna*. This Scholastic language is formidable... Tate's claims for poetic knowledge have tended toward the grandiloquent; they are nearly Scholastic in their aura of epistemological certainty. The trouble is that Mr. Tate asserts his certainty and does not bother with the careful Scholastic argument.... Tate has repeatedly suggested that poetry is knowledge of the world by actually embodying the world. The poem is *analogical* to the world. That seems, certainly, to be the burden of Tate's various formulations; that, through the mysteries of form, the poem is an actual world, though different from the world.... Still, I believe some irritation must almost inevitably occur at the disparity between Tate's large claims for poetry and his failures to make those claims explicit.... I believe that we shall find that much of Tate's vagueness is the result of the fact that his poetics originates in paradox; the solutions which he has presented have been solutions of the surface: the paradox remains and provokes us to uneasiness.... Tate has...repeatedly insisted that the language of the poem is the poem; he has attempted to anchor criticism in the direct scrutiny of style. But he always moves beyond; he always attempts to find the permanent basis of style....

In one of his recent essays, Allen Tate characterized a mode of perception typical of the most distinguished American poets of the twentieth century: the 'aesthetic-historical.' The mode is distinguished, Tate said, by an attempt 'to get out of history what Herbert or Crashaw would have expected only from God.... Mr. Tate...seems to have looked for virtues in history which are properly found only in God.... [Tate] would say: 'For poetry, of all arts, demands a serenity of view and a settled temper of the mind, and most of all the power to detach one's own needs from the experience set forth in the poem'.... One must have...some public myth in order to dramatize and externalize private meanings'.... Tate, in the company of Ransom, Donald Davidson, and others, set out to discover a myth to sustain poetry. The result of the cooperative search was the myth of the ante-bellum South.'... Tate saw [Jefferson] Davis as the symbol of the South's failure: the fatal separation between action and politics, intellect and emotion, that would not let him make up his mind as to the South's true role in the war. Davis is, finally, like that anonymous Southerner standing at the gate of the Confederate graveyard in 'Ode to the Confederate Dead': he received too much of the world on the ends of his nerves, and had not assimilated a tradition which might have bulwarked him....

Tate's search for a traditional society depended on a personal perception of the truth of what he called Eliot's major premise: the disintegration of the integrity of the individual consciousness.... One can see Tate putting together the diverse aspects of the theory into a working unity: the opposition between the industrialized and romantic North and the agrarian and classical South; the loss of tradition; the impact on the artist.... *Stonewall Jackson* and *Jefferson Davis*. Together, they form much of the substance of Tate's agrarianism and regionalism, and have important implications for his aesthetic theories and attitude toward history.... In his desire to extol the traditional society, has Tate not placed himself in an impossible situation, even to defending chattel slavery?... Tate was a young writer, seeking to shock the prevailing liberal view that the old South could have no merit at all because it has slavery. People under attack tend to overstate their case. Tate does so here....

Several things are clear: Tate disliked New England mysticism, and the ideas he supported had included a strong leaning toward an aristocratic oligarchism. It is true that the South had slavery; its economy depended on it. Yet this should not, Tate believed, blind us to its other merits. Though it would have been better if the slave had been a free peasant, the South was making the best of its heritage. At least the South knew freedom; 'Commerce and industry required a different kind of slave. He would be a better slave; he would have the illusion of freedom'.... Tate was defending...nothing less than what he saw as the very

dignity of man and a social order which would support a great literature. Myth-making is an arduous business....

Tate's point was that the idealized traditional society maintains a unity between life and the means by which it is supported. This is an important concept in Tate's 'agrarianism'; it is perhaps what he has most in mind when he calls the ante-bellum South a classical culture.... My suggestion is this: that Tate's sensibility is fundamentally religious, and that his major developments, both as a poet and as a critic, have been worked out of a religiously conceived matrix of ideas. I make the assertion in spite of the fact that many writers have believed that Tate's views on religion have been purely metaphorical, and have little to do with religion as such. While this view may seem plausible, it seems to me far more likely that Tate's view of history is a religious view of history, and has always been so; it is not accidental that Tate said at the Fugitive reunion in 1956 that he had not been so interested in agriculture as such as in a religious humanism.... I believe his dialectic depends, finally, on religious ideas and that his career should be understood, in a large part, as a progressive clarification of those ideas....

This feeling for unity has always stood in a vital relationship to the rest of Tate's thought; its growth has been the main source of energy in his career. It originated, I have claimed, in Baudelaire and similar sources; it proceeds into a rather loosely defined mysticism; it finally becomes a form of Thomism, which encompasses both the aesthetic and the cultural order. The label we might place to it is the search for unity; its nature is finally mystical and religious; it qualifies Tate's aesthetic theory, his social theory, his traditionalism. 'Religion and the Old South' is a sort of microcosm of all Tate's critical writing at this time... Order in poetry depends on an ordered mind; an ordered mind depends on a stable society; and the whole series finally depends on an ultimate unity of being... His writing has been that of one who looks for unity in a grossly disunited world.... The same persistent demand for unity and order [that] led him dangerously close to locating salvation in an historical tradition...led him dangerously close to locating salvation in the writing of poems....

Allen Tate's poetry and criticism have now been discussed for some thirty years; they have provoked both the admiration and the indignation of reviewers, literary historians, and critical essayists.... The critics who have complained through the past thirty years of the difficulty of Allen Tate's poetry, his hard and unmelodic line, or even his 'nostalgia for the Old South,' have more often exhibited their own shortcomings than Tate's. And it is just as typical that even those who admired Tate's poetry have often found it easier to write honorific generalizations than to criticize. Hart Crane, though no critic, was still representative of the type when he once reproved Tate for the obscurity of 'The Cross.' The poem is not in the least obscure: it was Crane's ignorance of traditional ideas, images, and language which betrayed him. At least Crane's difficulties were with a particular poem, and any poem may hold more problems for some readers than others. More disturbing is the numb misunderstanding, the uncritical praise or disapproval, which Tate's style itself has often received.

A little research will shortly bring the conviction that some words are almost inevitable in nearly any review or discussion of Tate's poetry one is likely to find. A short catalogue might read: 'obscurity,' 'intellectuality,' 'dryness,' 'stiffness.' Of these, the first is unjustified, the second is vague, and the last two are meaningless tactile imagery. All might be called criticism-by-epithet, and such criticism affects a pseudo-precision which, when pressed, says nothing. It seems to me that this is so obviously the case with the bulk of the writing on Tate's poetry that there is little need to spend time in writing a polemic on the subject or in surveying representative inanities offered as criticism, though I will mention some in the course of this chapter. There have, of course, been a number of intelligent essays written on Tate's poetry, and I shall have occasion to mention them, but they have been the exception rather than the rule.

The reason so much of what has been written on Tate's poetry is inadequate is that it either by-passes the language to get directly at the 'experience' behind it, or it dismisses the language with emotive catch-words which have no referents. Though the formalist or objectivist position has obvious dangers, it is correct at least this far: whatever merits or defects a poem may have *must be in the language*. For purposes of argument, let us say the poem may embody an unlimited range of interests and involve many orders of experience, but once they get into the poem, they are there as language. And so, in the rest of my study, I

want to look quite directly at the language of Tate's poetry, or at least as directly as my talents and prejudices will allow....

The poem is at once the perception and the contemplation of experience; poetry is a knowledge of experience by being experience: experience with all of its contingencies and ambiguities made permanent through the recondite workings of form. Tate will have nothing to do with poetry as a detached commentary on experience.... The full poetry of experience which offers us a whole object is 'a unity of all the meanings from the furthest extremes of intension and extension.' That, finally, is the meaning of the poem: its extensions into the external world, embodied in the full language of our internal perception. Both are at once present; they are not separable. We must have both the extensional meaning and the intentional meaning, which become one meaning: the created object which is the poem....

The problems presented by Tate's mature poetry are persistent rather than transitory, and the only concessions I have made to chronology are in those places where something significant may be learned from it. This is most obviously the case with Tate's very early poetry, with which I shall be concerned only to establish some necessary points, and with some of the later works in which there are significant modifications of the style.... I do not refer to Eliot and Crane to establish a hierarchy of influence, but to show some of the complexity involved in answering questions about the origin of Tate's style.... Perhaps it is the very difficulty of the subject which has led some to entertain notions of an a priori correct style, and I am certain that such notions lie behind much of the confusion and nonsense which has been written about Tate's poetry....

The peculiar situation we must face in reading Tate's poetry is that his successes and failures are intimately joined.... No poet's work is completely successful, and many of Tate's poems are failures. But it is nearly as important to understand his failures as his successes, perhaps more so in the case of Tate than with most poets.... In many of his poems one can find good lines lying next to poor ones; though this is indeed the case with many of his second-rate poems, this is no matter for great concern. The same thing might be said of any poet who has ever written. I have something more fundamental in mind: the failures in Tate's verse are often indissolubly connected with a constitutive principle or mode which operates in all his poetry.... This is by no means a disabling criticism, though it is a serious one which requires consideration. I do not imply that there is some elusive quality which, when grasped, will invalidate a whole body of poetry. Some critics, complaining of Tate's 'obscurity' or 'intellectuality,' have done precisely that, but they are wrong....

Almost all of Tate's earlier themes are in these later poems, most of them brought to the pitch of desperation by a cultural and historical crisis, by the difficulty of maintaining the integrity of personal vision. And his style, though significantly modified, is still the unique fusion of the abstract and the sensible characteristic of Tate, though in the later poems there is less of the heavily Latinate vocabulary as the historical myth grows more and more implausible. Always an economical poet, Tate's language is more spare and elliptical than ever before; it presupposes his earlier work and should not be read in isolation. The style culminates in 'Seasons of the Soul' which, as one of his two or three finest performances, I have chosen to examine more fully."

R. K. Meiners

The Last Alternatives: A Study of the Works of Allen Tate
(Alan Swallow 1963) 10-30, 33-36, 38-39, 43, 60-64, 74, 76-81, 97-99, 101-02

"There is, indeed, another view of Tate, Tate as professional southerner, born too late to be a Confederate soldier and regretting it all his life, continuously refighting the Civil War in his imagination, and employing his talents to glorify a way of life that scarcely existed. This view is of value because it asks to be corrected, and that is what I propose to do....

Tate was the first undergraduate at Vanderbilt to be invited to join the Fugitives, a Nashville group of devotees of poetry and philosophy.... He struck [Malcolm] Cowley as having the best manners of any young man he had ever met: 'He used politeness not only as a defense but sometimes as an aggressive weapon against strangers'.... The Fugitives, though not as avant-garde as their contemporaries in New York, were at least committed to a new poetry, and one would have expected them to receive *The Waste Land*

cordially; but roughly speaking only the younger Fugitives, led by Tate, were enthusiastic. Ransom actively disliked the poem.... The room in a university dormitory that Tate shared with Warren and with Ridley Wills was decorated with scenes from *The Waste Land* which Warren drew by erasing lines of soot from the dirty plaster....

As Tate saw the matter, the religion of the self-sufficiency of political man, the notion that man can fulfill his destiny solely through his political institutions, went into action during the American Civil War and won decisively. It has been winning all over the world ever since, though (I say this on my own) the greatly increased power of a barbarian version of it has tempered and gentled the American version. Among the Twelve Southerners, Andrew Lytle, Tate, and Warren had wanted to call the Agrarian manifesto [*I'll Take My Stand*, 1930] 'A Tract against Communism,' but they were a minority; Yankeedom was enough of a Goliath for these Davids to take on without throwing the Bolsheviks into the bargain. The religion of the self-sufficiency of political man was not a Yankee or even an American invention; but, according to Tate, the North really believed in it and the South did not. The South was defeated, Tate said, because it did not possess 'a sufficient faith in its own kind of God'....Tate's way of writing history is the same as Gibbon's, the same as Milton's in the last two books of *Paradise Lost*, and the same as St. Augustine's in *The City of God*. Civilizations rise and fall as they hold fast to or lost an active faith....

In Tate's two biographies Jackson is shown to be as fanatical as [John] Brown but he was a 'good soldier,' subordinate to Lee, and Lee in turn subordinated himself to President Jefferson Davis, who represents for Tate everything wrong with the South.... He treated Jackson and Lee as if they were secret weapons too terrible to use. He conducted the war as if he wanted to lose it, or if not lose it at least keep it going until the Old World came to his aid. As if Europe cared a straw about the society which Tate described fairly as 'feudal but without a feudal religion, and hence only semi-feudal.' Europe, even Catholic Europe, had been busy for some time defeudalizing itself. Why should not the South do the same? The Agrarians could not stop this process, nor did they want to restore anything unrestorable. 'I never thought of Agrarianism as a restoration of anything in the Old South,' Tate has said. 'I saw it as something to be created...not only in the South...but in the moral and religious outlook of Western man'...

In Tate's poems alone one can discover his distinctive set of mind, the extraordinary combination of insights and attitudes that sets him off from his contemporaries. The poems he wrote between 1922, when *The Fugitive* began, and 1938, when, with the publication of *The Fathers*, the first phase of his career was complete, are not a special version or combination of Ransom, Eliot, and Hart Crane, the poets Tate resembles most, but something separate and equally valuable. Let me say first that there is little sweetness in Tate's poetry of this first period... There is sweetness everywhere in Ransom, there is some in Eliot, too, there is even some in Crane (as in 'Black Tambourine'), but nothing quite like this in the earlier Tate. Or rather, there is little warmth as a quality perceived apart from an object, little warmth of 'personality' or 'participation.' Tate in this respect is a little like Dr. Cartwright of *The Fathers*: 'just a voice, in the *ore rotundo* of impersonality, no feeling but in the words themselves'....

The fame of Tate's essay 'Tension in Poetry' (1938) has partly obscured the physical and psychological fact of tension in many of his poems. By psychological tension I mean a resistance to surrendering, developing out of an inclination to surrender, some kind of integrity. Physical union is simply a quality of Tate's usual poetic language: 'a certain unique harshness of diction and meter,' as Delmore Schwartz said, 'and an equally curious violence of imagery and sentiment.' In the poems you find the very words *strain, tense, tension, taut, right, systaltic*, and the meter is not so much crabbed as tightly wound. Hold Tate's earlier poems across the room, as it were, and the aggregate seems as taut and tense as the long elastic cord under tension that you find under the outer covering of a golf ball. 'Elegy,' 'The Paradigm,' 'Ode to Fear,' 'Ignis Fatuus,' 'The Eagle,' and 'The Subway' all have this quality'....

Though Tate himself warns us in 'Tension in Poetry' that 'no critical insight may impute an exclusive validity to any one kind' of poetry, that essay is not as good a guide to Tate's poetry as Delmore Schwartz's essay of 1940. Schwartz showed how closely Eliot's tribute to Blake's honesty applies to Tate: 'One of the essential facts about Tate's writing is the tireless effort and strained labor to be honest as a writer.' His taut mode is a result of the effort to avoid the dishonest relaxation of a Stephen Vincent Benet. 'It was not possible,' Tate said in 1955, 'that I should think Stephen Benet, an amiable and patriotic rhymester, as

important as Hart Crane, an imperfect genius whose profound honesty drove him to suicide after years of debauchery had stultified his mind.' In his relaxed mode, Tate follows the advice Crane gave him, that he should not 'strain' to sum up the universe....

Tate's social criticism is loosely described as a 'refusal to accept the modern world,' and this is accurate if by the modern world we mean a place where the perfectibility of man in the ordinary secular sense is taken for granted. Tate's social criticism is always saying something like this: 'If the social engineers get everything they want for us we shall not have the society I like.' The society he likes Ransom describes as 'the ordered and individual way of life which obtained in the Western economy before the industrial revolution developed into mass production.... And ever after the Agrarian movement I believe that Tate and I conducted our lives in much the same fashion; in a free society we assumed the right to live simply and to keep company with friends of our own taste, and with increasingly unpopular books in the library. We lived in an old-fashioned minority pocket of the culture, so to speak.' It will never be a majority culture, and Tate would probably not like it if it became one.

Tate proceeds to specific literary judgments with an absolute minimum of critical theory. 'Poetry,' he says, 'is neither religion nor social engineering'; it is all the possibilities occupying the space between. Poet have no gift to set a statesman right, but neither should they invent parables that try to compete with the New Testament ones that describe the kingdom of heaven. Both temptations are there, and they are the most successfully resisted if the polar nature of the extremes is understood. 'Tension in Poetry' finds an analogy in language itself, in the scale between extensive and intensive meaning. The rationalist poet, whose chief temptation is to set a statesman right, 'begins at or near the extensive or denoting end of the line'; the romantic or Symbolic poet, whose chief temptation is to write new parables, begins 'at the other, intensive end; and each by a straining feat of the imagination tries to push his meanings as far as he can towards the opposite end, so as to occupy the entire scale.' Tate does not show us the system working for whole poems, but only for passages--touchstones."

George Hemphill

Allen Tate

(U Minnesota 1964) 5, 7, 9, 15-18, 20-22, 32-33

"In the 1925 poem Allen Tate inscribed to Robert Penn Warren and titled 'To a Romantic,' Tate had characterized the essential element in romantic naivety as the ignoring of death: 'You think the dead arise / Westward and fabulous.' Determined not to be romantic himself, Tate built his famous elegy around the conflict between anti-romantic knowledge, identified with 'indefeasible' objects, and 'romantic' feelings. 'What shall we say who have knowledge / Carried to the heart?' the speaker asks toward the end of the poem, when the feelings have finally been subdued by the knowledge. The speaker says nothing after this, except to wonder whether he should set up the grave in the house--which would seem to imply the idea that the romantics were unacquainted with death..

[John Crowe] Ransom described the poet as wanting to 'see' the world better--more sharply, precisely, realistically, he implied. Tate's 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' is characterized by the density of its visual and auditory imagery. Ransom thought the world the poet would 'see' would be 'thick' and 'stubborn.' Tate's 'Ode' presents a world which the speaker in the poem can make nothing meaningful out of at all, or in which he can discover no meaning acceptable to his feelings. Ransom warned against 'heart's-desire' poetry and described 'true poetry' as 'the act of an adult mind...and...a fallen mind.' What this last qualification was intended to mean is not clear to me, but Tate does end his poem with a reminder of the Fall, alluding to the serpent and the Tree of Knowledge, which has diminished to a mulberry bush; and the 'adult mind' and the 'heart's desire' fight it out all the way through the poem.

In the passage from *The World's Body* quoted above, Ransom did not specify that 'true poetry' must be characterized by 'paradox' and 'irony,' though an ironic attitude is implicit in what he says about the poet and the world he gives us knowledge of. In Tate's 'Ode,' *everything* is ironic and paradoxical--'bones' are 'verdurous,' 'felicity' is 'grim,' 'sacrament' is 'casual,' 'chivalry' is 'furious,' 'speculation' is 'mute,' 'eternity' is, after all, only 'seasonal.' It is irony that dictates the choice of 'rumor' to describe the all-too-clear message of the falling leaves, 'immoderate' to describe the heroic past and its vision, and 'gentle' to describe the green serpent. Every flight is followed immediately by a descent; everything suggests its opposite. We are

likely to feel, before the end, that such an inveterate clash of opposites justifies H. D.'s harsh condemnation of this mode in *The Walls Do Not Fall*.

The reader whose feelings have not been totally benumbed by the violence of the wrenching they have been subjected to will find, I think, that the ending lifts the poem above simple irony, though the largest ambiguities remain unresolved. *Is* speculation a curse that 'stones the eyes,' destroying 'vision' and leaving only the infeasible objects, all of them spelling death and only death? If we *were* to 'set up the grace / In the house' and live with the knowledge of death, *would* 'vision' be recovered? What do the wind-driven leaves of autumn's desolation say to us, and what shall we say of them? The poem does not end with 'We shall say only the leaves / Flying, plunge and expire' but goes on to suggest that we are our own victims, much as Eliot's Prufrock, who knew too much, had been. The poem protects itself against the doctrinaire reader who would want to dissolve its ambiguities.

The 'Ode' is Tate's single masterpiece, but the rest of the poems in the slender volume that collects most of his work, *Poems, 1922-1947*, are nearly all what we may call 'accomplished' poetry. The range of feeling is narrow, whatever the subject, and 'romantic irony' is never absent for long. As a result, the poems tend to run together in the mind to make one continuous poem in which one listens for the Word no longer heard and tries to look but cannot for the darkness, knowing the feeling of being 'subterranean / As a black river full of eyeless fish / Heavy with spawn; with a passion for time / Longer than the arteries of a cave.' Nearly all of the poems could end as 'The Meaning of Death: An After-Dinner Speech' ends, 'We are the eyelids of defeated caves.'

We are then--so far as we are the caves as well as the lids--in total darkness, presumably. But if the lid should open to admit the light? The possibility had always hovered in the background of Tate's dark early poetry, and in 1953 it seemed to have been realized. In that year the *Sewanee Review* published what it described as 'Part VI of a poem of some length, now in progress.' 'The Buried Lakes' is a dream allegory, in the form used by Chaucer and Dante, celebrating 'light Lucy, light of heart,' the poet's 'Lady of Light.' Written in Dante's *terza rima*, it is sometimes obscure, chiefly in the privateness of its personal references, but never obscure in the way of paradox and irony.

The poem was written after the poet had remarried and been converted to Roman Catholicism, after years of half-hearted Anglicanism. It marks the end of a style based on exploiting the conflicts between feeling and thought produced by 'the modern temper.' Eliot had renounced the style thirteen years earlier and H. D. had denounced it in 1944. No outstanding poet under sixty has found the style useful for what he had to say since Tate turned away from it in 'The Buried Lake'."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets from the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 540-43

"Since the publication of *Reason in Madness* in 1941, Tate has been recognized as one of the most important contemporary critics. His name has been variously associated with the movement of 'Southern Agrarians,' some years ago, and more recently with 'New Criticism.' He has worked closely with poet-critics, such as John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, like them approaching the literary text with careful concentration and producing precise and illuminating interpretations. But Tate has always maintained a degree of independence from 'schools of criticism.' His collection of critical essays, *The Forlorn Demon*, 1955, published after his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1950, reflects new influences. Delmore Schwartz writes, 'Almost throughout the book Mr. Tate has drawn upon Catholic and Thomist doctrine to organize his impressions and deepen his perceptions in a new way--a way which makes possible a great range of sympathy, a mature lucidity and a prose style which is varied and powerful.'

The Forlorn Demon is a collection of Mr. Tate's essays on the literary imagination written between 1947 and 1953. As in his earlier critical writings, he examines the relationship of ideas to experience. His test of a literary work would be the question: 'To what extent has the idea been visibly embodied in action possible to man? This led him to the idolatry in the modern mind and the idolatry of 'pure experience.' Although Mr. Tate ranges over the literature of the past, he is concerned, even in his remarkable essay on Dante, with the present. For criticism, he holds, has a present function or none at all.

Similar growth and development have been observed in Tate's recent poetry. Vivienne Kock suggests that his latest poems are making a complete break from the Southern schools, from traditionalism and classicism. She says: 'He is producing the most enduring, vital, and original poetry that he is capable of writing.' Especially significant, she finds, is his poem, 'Seasons of the Soul,' published in *Poems: 1922-1947*, which are 'religio-purpose, tragic, sensuous, lyrical and deeply compassionate.' Of this collection of verse Frederick Morgan wrote in the *Hudson Review*, 'Mr. Tate has done more than add a few very good poems to his language; this poetry has attained the stature at which it must inevitably be assessed in its totality, at which even the less successful poems take on importance for the understanding of the whole.'

The Southern poems alternate between satire, directed against certain groups or types among his contemporaries, and completely objective presentations of subject matter. The poems concerned with religion reflect the difficulty involved in accepting the Christian faith. In his essays, of which there are six volumes, the latest being, *Collected Essays*, 1959, Tate has made plain that his primary preoccupation is with poetry and with the difficulties which confront the serious poet of our time. Many of these difficulties he charges to our system of progressive education, which is rapidly making us a nation of illiterates. The tabloids, the movies, the illustrated magazines, radio and television are all involved in this indictment. To state the issue in different terms, it is very hard for people to apply their minds to poetry since it is one of our assumptions that our intellects are for mathematics and science, our emotions for poetry. His position is that poetry gives us knowledge that is fully as valid as what science affords, although of a different order....

In considering the themes and techniques of Tate as a major poet and critic, many things must be considered, is the judgment of Cleanth Brooks. The nature of his ideas, the permanent attitudes developed, the origin and influence of his work. His early poems and essays, while necessary reading for anyone who would understand the scope of Tate's work, are not too important, but his early works are interesting because they display with clarity and stable characteristics Tate's avid search for a poet's stability in the modern world. Quoting Mr. Brooks: 'The search has led him into many positions, fugitive, poet, agrarian, theorist, non-theological religious, polemicist, Catholic essayist and poet.'

In his critical articles, editorials in *The Fugitive* as early as 1922, Tate was beginning to display his thoughts that would color his entire career. In the first essay, entitled 'Whose Ox?,' his language was somewhat precocious, but illustrative. Tate writes: 'It is agreed, we assume, that the aesthetic problem confronting the poet is eminently practical--versification, diction, composition, in a word mechanics, the elusive enemy that captures and subdues.' In discussing the dilemma, in 'The Future of Poetry' the merit of free and traditional verse, Tate inclined to the idea that free verse seemed to be a failure; later, he altered his view to include modern verse as seemingly insignificant, but he did not disown 'modernism' as such. He felt that the modern poetry of T. S. Eliot and Hart Crane possessed remarkable vitality in spite of its difficulty. He insisted that poetry must be knowledge and appeal to the emotions.

One guide for Tate's critical works is that it moves to the center; for every poetic problem he has ever considered finds its illumination in the perception of the center of things. The chief issue for him has remained the unity of being. The most interesting version of his theme, 'the unity of being,' is found in his later work, one of the most provocative books of criticism of our time, *The Forlorn Demon*. The first five essays are the crucial portion of the book. These essays, particularly the last three, have been taken by various critics as Tate's 'conversion' about 1951 when Tate published the pair of essays on Dante and Poe, on the symbolic and angelic imagination, respectively. Many contemporary critics, not interested in Tate's inner life, styled his new vocabulary Tate's Catholicism. Nevertheless, he disassociates himself from various themes, and slants his writings mainly toward history. But Mr. Meiners insists that there is a difference in his writings now from his earlier writings. Tate was always convinced that modern man had been deprived of the necessary dimension of culture and experience; he now locates the loss in language and this is singularly precise, poetic and philosophical.

A careful reading of 'The Cross' will prepare one for an extensive examination of the 'Seasons of the Soul,' one of Tate's really major poems. 'The Cross' was written in 1928, long before Tate's prose demonstrated much concern with Christianity, and before a religious sentiment appeared in his writings. Its essence is a religious historical poem, and it almost perfectly manifested the quality of Tate's career, and

shows his primary concern for religious history--he must be understood as a basically religious writer. Continuing with Mr. Meiners' criticism, the poem is concerned with man's religious predicament and its historical consequences. Once a man or culture has obtained a knowledge of Christianity, that knowledge cannot be ignored except at a great peril. Since the subject of the poem is just this, it is not surprising that Tate should use religion, even theology, in the poem. The meanings of these terms are clearly defined in the understanding of the poem. Tate clearly states that our civilization will again see problems of history and religion converging.

There is a sense of urgency in all that Tate writes, and he is capable of extravagances, but not of triviality. Few have so consistently focused their readers to face the last alternative. He says: 'The true goal of the man of letters is nothing less (as it is nothing more) than culture itself.' Hence, Tate's honesty and vigor give him the right to be styled, 'The Man of Letters in the Modern World.' We shall quote a few lines of his poetical criticism concerning Emily Dickinson as found in his *Collected Essays*, 1959: 'Great poetry needs no special features of difficulty to make it mysterious. When it has them, the reputation of the poet is likely to remain uncertain. That is still true of Donne, and it is true of Emily Dickinson...her poetry is rich with profound and varied experience.'

Furthermore, he questions where she obtained this experience. He answers this query by stating that when she enclosed herself in her upstairs room she mastered life by rejecting it. Moreover, he cites Miss Dickinson's 'The Chariot' as a perfect illustration of her mind. Likewise, he emphasized it as being one of the greatest poems in the English language, because every image in it is precise and fused with the central idea, the gentleman's death is taking the lady for a drive. The framework of the poem is the two abstractions mortality and eternity--a fusion of sensibility and thought."

Sister Mary Carmel Browning, O.S.U.
Kentucky Authors: A History of Kentucky Literature
(Keller-Crescent 1968) 206-09

"Tate's best criticism, like that of Johnson, Coleridge, Arnold, and Eliot, is in itself literature of great moment and must be taken accordingly.... Tate's criticism...has a diamond-like brilliance and density. It is cut and polished almost flawlessly, and therefore the reader must find it difficult to see within and to get at the essential nature of that brilliance.... He is not a new critic in the strict sense of the term (as he has insisted all along)... He is, quite simply, what the occasion demands... He has the enormous advantage of a classical education, a far-ranging mind, and an incisive wit.) I often get the uncomfortable feeling when reading Tate that he sprang into the world, like Athena from the head of Zeus, with a fully-formed intelligence and style. Skeptics should read 'Emily Dickinson' which he wrote in part at the old age of twenty-nine.).... Herbert Read calls Tate a 'metaphysical athlete'... One aspect of his typical address to the audience is facetious self-mockery... Mr. Tate would have us follow the way of the symbolic imagination as represented triumphantly by Dante, not the angelic as seen in Poe...

There are three myths which Tate has used metaphorically to define the South. The first is the obvious one--that the Old South was a medieval society patterned after the feudal autocracies of the Middle Ages; the second pattern of likeness he remarked (some thirty years after writing 'Religion and the Old South') in 'A Southern Mode of Imagination' is the parallel with Sparta--and, more clearly, Republican Rome; the third, mentioned casually in the obituary on Faulkner in 1962, is still farther back in history--the Greco-Trojan myth. This last parallel takes us a good deal further than the first two, at least to the extent that we have often encountered the others.... Tate sees Faulkner's principal subject--and that of his contemporaries--as the Greco-Trojan myth. The "older" culture of Troy-South was wiped out by the "upstart" culture of Greece-North. [So] the Yankees were therefore to blame for everything--until...the time of the first World War. This myth, inadequate as it may appear to the non-Southern reader, has permitted a generation of Southern novelists to understand and to dramatize (that is, depict in action) much of the Southern historical reality.' [quoting Tate] Needless to say *The Fathers* is, among other things, one of the most powerful fictive embodiments of this myth so transformed. This view of the South provides the foundation for Tate's many trenchant observations on its literature. As Hugh Holman has remarked, 'almost every idea which has proved fruitful for the serious critic [of southern literature] is at least adumbrated' in [Tate's] *Collected Essays* of 1959....

Tate is perfectly aware of the failings of the Old South, yet it remains his chief model for his whole life --and one much closer in time and more palpable than, say, Yeats's Byzantium... Andrew Lytle has said that it is 'simply what is left of Christendom'.... He has smitten...enemies of culture and civilization, much as Arnold and Eliot did in their separate ways.... What Tate characteristically does as critic is to select a passage in the work under consideration and show us, by and through it, the elements of that fiction which are typically overlooked (or avoided) by other critics, regardless of their persuasions. The trick here is to find the precise passage--one that illuminates the text as a whole but does not blind the reader with its dazzling virtues.... For poetry of the highest order--of the 'creative spirit'--he selects quotations from Shakespeare, Donne, Dante; for the same kind of poetry, poetry exhibiting an equipoise of tensions, he chooses these poets and adds others, notably Yeats and Eliot. This is Tate's forte--not long and detailed exegesis of whole poems or short stories or novels (although some of his commentaries are indeed brilliant ---the readings of 'Ode to a Nightingale' and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and his analyses in *The House of Fiction*). What he had done in part is improve upon Eliot's practice of quotation (which he, in turn, got from Arnold and Pound). But there is more involved, and Tate generally has a sharper historical perspective and is less inclined to pursue abstractions....

Tate always knows a technical convention when he sees one, just as he knows a departure from, or a modification of, that convention: hence we get the metaphysical conceit, a subtle poetic equivalent of the Euphuistic sentence which derived from an elaborate pattern of courtly behavior. The conceit was also forced into being by the fragmentation of the Elizabethan world picture, as Tate has shrewdly observed. The guarded style and the verbal shock of modern poetry similarly arose in this century out of the failure of such conventions, both social and artistic. Allen Tate constantly discovers the informing conventions of the artist and therefore enlarges the light of our seeing beyond the page in front of us.... [His prose] style, although it meets Tate's standard of being as plain as the nose on one's face, is often poetic in its tone and cadences, in the rightness of its language and nuance."

George Core

"A Metaphysical Athlete: Allen Tate as Critic"

The Southern Literary Journal 2:138-47 (Autumn 1969)

"All that Allen Tate, as poet, critic, and novelist, became in future years is foreshadowed in his origin, his birthplace, his education, early friendships, and his early verse. The purely 'dramatic' beginnings of the poems I have examined here (and the aesthetic behind them) are subsumed in the performance of Tate's maturity, in his markedly Southern works and his later, more explicitly 'religious,' compositions. He has been one man (and one poet) all the time."

M. E. Bradford

"Origins and Beginnings"

Rumors of Mortality: An Introduction to Allen Tate

(Argus Academic Press 1969) 3-17

"It is said that, along with Ezra Pound, Allen Tate is the greatest of living American poets.... His cultural world is double-stitched. One thread secures him to Europe, the other to the defeated South, so that his poetic imagination redounds with an exquisite metaphysics blended with generals, region, and the Confederate flag. Within this farrago, however, we can discern a great intellectual (after the model of Eliot who for a time constituted his god on earth), encumbered with a weighty tradition, fixed in his illustrious position of an authentic conservative, and favored (O rare occurrence) with an inexhaustible sense of irony... He embodies a solitary alternative which for Europeans is provocative: he is a magisterial poet perpetually discomfited by the global power of his country.... His quarrel...is a profound murmur which gives an inkling of something even deeper--a stone dropped into a well to measure the depths of an abyss....

Tate's rebellion has nothing of the surly tone of the contemporary world. Armed only with the grandeur of his despair and the grandeur of his language, he is exposed to the scornful incomprehension of his younger colleagues. Furthermore, that lofty rationality which governs his poetic discourse (a discourse simultaneously politic and civil) ultimately yearns to turn into a saving spirit of conciliation.... We come now to the heart of the matter. In a world preoccupied with collectivism, Tate's poetry is dramatically tensed to defend individualism. In a rather leaden society governed by a myth of science, his poetry conducts a fearless campaign against science, producing from that irony a measure both musical and

fabulous. In an apathetic agnostic period he is not ashamed to recommend a Christianity to be lived as intellectual anguish. (Tate became a Catholic when he was fifty.) One has to admit that rarely does America produce a personality that is persuasive chiefly because it is out of joint with the times."

Pier Francesco Listri
"An Encounter in Florence"
La Nazione (22 July 1970)

"Allen Tate merited the public honors; in fact, had merited them long before they came. Before he was twenty-six he had written one of the permanent poems of his century. Before he was thirty he had written an indispensable essay on Emily Dickinson. Before he was forty he had written a novel that over the years not only has justified the early praise it received but has come to seem better and better.

The last three divisions of this volume of essays take cognizance of the astounding diversity of Allen Tate's achievement. But in a last analysis the divisions are an Aristotelian nicety, an arbitrary convenience. His work is really all of a piece. It has all derived from the same energy, the same insights. It has all has a single aim. When I try to explain that aim I am drawn toward a quaint analogy or a metaphor whose coordinates are very distant from each other. There used to exist in elementary courses in physics an apparatus intended to instruct students in principles of pressure. Consisting of a sealed jar nearly filled with liquid, it had some provision for pumping air into the space at the top.

As the air pressure was increased, from the bottom of the jar would rise a little imago--an ivory-colored homunculus, one thought at first. Then, as it rose higher one saw that it was a representation of a medieval Satan. The synergy of Allen Tate's poetry, fiction, and essays has had the aim of applying pressure--think of his embossed, bitterly stressed lines, his textured metaphors--until it brings up before our eyes a blanched parody of the human figure, which is our evil, the world's evil, so that we begin to long for God. That has seemed to him a worthwhile task to perform for modern man threatened by such fatal narcissism, such autotelic pride that he is in danger of disappearing into a glassy fantasy of his own concoction. We shall need his help for a long time to come."

Radcliffe Squires, ed.
Introduction
Allen Tate and His Work: Critical Evaluations
(U Minnesota 1972) 8

"Tate's argument is briefly this. When a society forms one more or less homogeneous unit, such as New England did in the years of the 'puritan theocracy,' there is general acceptance of the 'great idea,' the system of values, around which that unit is structured. This is good as far as the customary life of the members of the society is concerned, because it gives 'an heroic proportion' to their every act: their daily lives demonstrate a dependence on the 'great idea' and in return draw meaning and substance from it. It is not so good, however, for the creation of a genuinely critical literature, which can only be critical if its allegiance to the 'great idea' is incomplete. As Tate puts it, literature 'probes the deficiencies of a tradition,' and this is only generally possible when a relatively homogeneous society is breaking up.

Before the process of breaking up has begun in earnest, there will be a strong tendency to identify with the tradition rather than analyze it, and test one's self against it; and after it has broken up there will be no tradition left to analyze. Only at a crisis point in history, when one definite form of society is disappearing and another is emerging, can writers as a group employ their inheritance as a 'source of ideas' and metaphors and still be sufficiently detached from their inheritance to be critical of it. Then only is it possible for the poet or prose writer of average ability to use his tradition rather than be used by it, and contribute to a broader literary 'renaissance.' This condition, in which a real dialectic can be said to exist between a 'system of ideas' and an accompanying 'sense of the natural world' that that system does not encompass, is one that Tate sees existing in England at the end of the sixteenth century, and just after; in New England, of course, by the middle of the nineteenth century; and, he might have added, although he leaves it implicit, in the American South in the period immediately following the First World War....

His central argument is clear and, seen within the context of that literature to which he himself contributed, quite effective and stimulating. For, as he suggests, the primary result of the metamorphosis of the American South after the First World War was to send its writers back to an analysis of their own history and tradition."

Richard Gray
The Literature of Memory: Modern Writers of the American South
(Johns Hopkins 1977) 8-9

"Tennessee author, began his career as an editor of *The Fugitive* (1922) and also showed interest in regionalism through his contributions to the symposia *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), *The Critique of Humanism* (1930), and *Who Owns America?* (1936), and in his interpretive biographies of Stonewall Jackson (1928) and Jefferson Davis (1929). He is best known for his poems, published in *Mr. Pope and Other Poems* (1928), *Three Poems* (1930), *Poems, 1928-1931* (1932), *The Mediterranean and Other Poems* (1936), *Selected Poems* (1937), *Winter Sea* (1944), *Poems, 1922-1947* (1948), *The Swimmers* (1971), and *Collected Poems* (1977).

His metaphysical poetry is distinguished by a neoclassical polish and satire, achieving sharp contrasts through use of archaisms verging on the baroque. He described his technique as 'gradually circling round the subject, threatening it and filling it with suspense, and finally accomplishing its demise without ever quite using the ultimate violence upon it.'

His criticism has been published as *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas* (1936); *Reason in Madness* (1941); *On the Limits of Poetry* (1948), including essays from the preceding volumes; *The Hovering Fly* (1949), literary essays; *The Forlorn Demon* (1953), 'didactic and critical essays'; *Collected Essays* (1959); *Essays of Four Decades* (1969); and *Memoirs and Opinions* (1975). *The Fathers* (1938) is a novel set in pre-Civil War Virginia.

His anthologies include *American Harvest* (1942), edited with John Peale Bishop, a collection of creative writing, 1920-40; and, with his former wife, Caroline Gordon, he wrote the text *The House of Fiction* (1950). Tate edited the *Sewanee Review* (1944-46) and taught at the University of Minnesota (1951-68). His correspondence with Donald Davidson was published in 1974 and that with John Peale Bishop in 1981."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1983) 745

"George Hemphill has remarked that Allen Tate's 'way of writing history is the same as Gibbon's, the same as Milton's in the last two books of *Paradise Lost*, and the same as St. Augustine's in *The City of God*. Civilizations rise and fall as they hold fast to or lose an active faith.' This theme of active faith is central to Tate's work, arising from his prolonged contemplation of the decline of Western civilization as exemplified in the demise of the American South.

The southerner, Tate maintains, has lacked an adequate faith. He has been unable to 'fall back upon his religion simply because it was never articulated and organized for him.' His alternative is to invent a faith through political means: 'He must use an instrument, which is political, and so unrealistic and pretentious that he cannot believe in it, to re-establish a private, self-contained, and essentially spiritual life.' The southerner can be comfortable as neither believer nor unbeliever. He is forced into a trap, the only escape from which is the invention of a past that never existed.

This dilemma is at the heart of one of the most difficult poems Tate ever wrote. Published in 1935, 'To the Romantic Traditionalists' has been avoided by most of Tate's critics. Its difficulty stems from an ambiguity so radical as to render its plain sense virtually inaccessible. Nevertheless, it is an extremely important poem for an understanding of Tate's intellectual struggles, for it was written at a crucial moment in his career, midway between his secular and religious stages of development....

An initial interpretive question about the poem arises from its title: what or who are the 'romantic traditionalists'? Both the adjective and the noun recur frequently in Tate's works. He has published poems such as 'To a Romantic Novelist' (1925) and 'To a Romantic' (1925) in which he speaks of the progressive modern who rejects the past altogether and denies that it has meaning. 'To a Romantic' ends, for example, with an image of the dead as ghosts who 'arise / Westward and fabulous.' This variety of romantic turns his eyes toward a future that he sees as stretching infinitely 'into the vagrant West'--like Tennyson's Ulysses. But the West is also the place where the dead reside, according to folklore, and the young romantic with the 'iron mood' of Ozymandias (an ironic allusion to Shelley) has cast his idealistic eyes not upon unending horizons but upon the 'doors to a narrow house.' 'To a Romantic' and 'To the Romantic Traditionalist' share a similar irony and at least one common image (that of the dead bored with the living), but the earlier poem does not give many clues to what Tate is doing in its successor ten years later. It does not explain how a romantic can be a traditionalist.

Indeed, the linking of 'romantic' and 'traditionalist' in the title of the poem is virtually oxymoronic, if one bears in mind Tate's definition of traditionalists, in his essay 'Liberalism and Tradition,' as 'those who believe in the value of tradition.' Yet the two terms can be reconciled, for Tate apparently means by 'romantic traditionalist' something on the order of 'idealizer and idolizer of the past' and may be referring specifically, though not at all exclusively, to the modern southern idealist, the sentimental traditionalist of the twentieth century who romanticizes history.

The poem is not immediately clarified, however, by an explication of its title. The verses that follow are a bewildering tangle of 'I,' 'We,' 'You,' and 'They,' and the literal sense of the poem hinges critically on a proper interpretation of each pronoun.

I have looked at them long,
My eyes blur; sourceless light
Keeps them forever young
Before our ageing sight.

You see them too--strict forms
Of will, the secret dignity
Of our dissolute storms;
They grow too bright to be.

The poem is addressed to the romantic traditionalists of the title, who are referred to as 'you' in the poem itself. The poet and his like-minded contemporaries (avant-garde in language and style but believing in the value of tradition) are referred to consistently as 'we' and 'us.' The remaining third-person pronouns must refer, then, to those men from the past who are idealized by the addressees of the poem. Both the poet and his romantic-traditionalist contemporaries see the same figures, but they regard them in utterly different fashions. The poet asks for a description of them:

What were they like? What mark
Can signify their charm?
They never saw the dark;
Rigid, they never knew alarm.

The romantic sees the figures as larger than life, as fearless, immaculate, and possessed of a changeless perfection. They are veritable gods, Olympian in their separation from the decadent present. Objects of worship, they have turned into bloodless abstractions.... But they are not the actual men and women who have lived before us, they are vague projections of our own desires, 'strict forms / Of will.' In an ironic query, the poet wonders what might be the response of these distant figures to a request for their portrait:

Are they quite willing,
Do they ask to pose,
Naked and simple, chilling
The very wind's nose?

Have these great men of the past given their consent to this glorification of their persons, or have they been transformed into such aloof images by idolatrous successors?

In an essay of 1934, 'Three Types of Poetry,' Tate speaks of the 'romantic will' in terms that clarify the first six stanzas of the poem. He paraphrases Hart Crane's verses to Pocahontas: 'The poet confesses that he has no access to a means of satisfying his will, or to a kind of vision where the terms are not set by the demands of the practical will. He returns to a fictitious past. There he is able to maintain, for a moment, the illusion that he might realize the assertion of his will in a primitive world where scientific truth is not a fatal obstacle.'

Tate then points to 'a special property of the romantic imagination' that 'has no insight into the total meaning of actual moral situations; it is concerned with fictitious alternatives to them because they invariably mean frustration of the will. This special property of escape is the Golden Age, used in a special fashion. The romantic poet attributes to it an historical reality.' The more one gazes on these historical fictions, the more they become pure abstractions of the will, divorced from time and 'forever young / Before our ageing sight.' The 'sourceless light' of their self-contained perfection makes them dazzle our eyes until they lose all relation to contingent existence and 'grow too bright to be.' We may ask, 'What are they like?' but they have become so archaically brilliant through the romantic imagination that we are incapable of knowing them for what they truly were.

The only escape from the cycle of solipsistic projection that the romantic will creates is a refusal to participate.... If modern poets speak constantly in fragmented and satirical lines of man's failures, it is because they cannot accept the romantic image of the past as true to reality. In 'Three Types of Poetry,' Tate argues against his friend Edmund Wilson that the refusal of certain contemporary poets to take either romantic or scientific points of view is no escapism but commitment. If the 'cold freeze' of these Golden Age figures, this 'immaculate race,' is not a scene that the poet cares to rehearse, he must ask if the men of the past are 'willing..to pose' in all their naked essences and submit to his scrutiny. He will greet them in the 'contemptuous verse' that their 'perfect eyes' seem to provoke.

In order for the Golden Age figures to take on the plausibility that a real tradition requires, they must be made to enter into the bloodstream of our present existence rather than stand aloof from it. The poet imagines them as asking him the great romantic question 'How to live?' One is immediately reminded of Stein, in Conrad's *Lord Jim*, who answered that one must submit 'to the destructive element.' This, too, is the poet's response:

They ask us how to live?
We answer: Again try
Being the drops we sieve.
What death it is to die!

Tate would agree with Stein that one must submit to the realities of the present. The past lives only in us. Its continuation into the present is a matter of selection by the living, and so men of the past must be constantly absorbed into a new identity, must die again and enter into the life of the present.

One way of understanding these strange lines is to see in them a reference to tradition as a sacrificial experience. Martin Heidegger has spoken of a 'listening to the tradition that does not give itself up to the past but thinks of the present.' In Ezra Pound's 'Canto I,' the past is presented as an evocation of ghosts from the underworld through the sacrificial offering of blood. Pound's Odysseus beats back all but Tiresias, who alone can tell him what he needs to know about himself. Even Antikleia, Odysseus's mother, must be kept back from her son until Tiresias has spoken. Odysseus must hold the dead in check and not be overwhelmed by them if he is to learn how to live the remainder of his life.

Likewise, German critic Walter Benjamin has spoken of the constant need to make new what remains from the past: 'The genuine picture may be old, but the genuine thought is new. It is of the present. This present may be meager, granted. But no matter what it is like, one must firmly take it by the horns to be able to consult the past. It is the bull whose blood must fill the pit if the shades of the departed are to appear

at its edge.' While doubtless agreeing with such conceptions of tradition, Tate would go a step further, for he sees that the present is not merely meager but dead. It has been sucked dry by an illusion that has drunk all its blood, like the empty men of the later poem 'Jubilo.' In 'To the Romantic Traditionalists,' the sacrifice is ineffective.... The Golden Age figures are depicted as vampires who have fed to satiety on the present; they are like the 'sleepy dead' of 'To a Romantic.' But if the men of the past would be bored with us, Tate implies ironically, their nods could be answered in kind by the 'yawning' grave. Therefore, the poet chooses to concentrate his attention on the 'turned sod' of the grave. By refusing to take these romanticized figures as real, he kills a past that has its immortality in the present will alone. The grave is the most effective refutation of the romantic will. If such a perfection has never existed in the past, then it can never exist in the present.

Tate opposes memory, which, as he was to say later, 'has its own life and purposes' and 'gives what it wills' to the personal will. Once memory is destroyed, there is no point in imposing identities upon places: 'No need to name the spot!' In such a condition, 'All places are equally the wrong places,' as Tate once wrote to Donald Davidson. What the poem shows is that there is a force which the will cannot control. The romantic traditionalist attempts to overcome this obstacle by projecting his desire upon an epoch beyond anyone's experience. This divorce of past from present in the narrow vision of scientific method and liberalism or the worship of primitivism by the romantic is a form of death. History must feed the present, not feed on it. Since the romantic dream has no place for the present, the present has no place for the dream. It will die completely, and these vain figures of the personal will show 'What death it is to die!' These brilliant but empty figures will vanish without a trace, as though 'history had no name.'

The worship of the past creates golden ages that never existed; the worship of the future creates utopias that will never come into existence. Both attitudes are built upon a lie that emerges from a diseased imagination. When grasped analogically, these images of the past or future can contribute to an understanding of human history and destiny. Viewed as true pictures of the human order, complete in every detail, they are worse than misleading; for their shadowy darkness, like the images of Plato's cave, is perversely taken to be light. The truth about man must include the literal, if unpleasant, fact of his limitedness in time, space, and vision. The false imagination--Tate later calls it 'angelic' or 'unliteral'--promises liberation but succeeds only in producing enslavement.

Thus, while other twentieth-century writers have spoken of 'the necessary angel' or 'the right to dream,' Tate has written both of 'the limits of poetry' and of 'literature as knowledge.' He refuses to make claims for the imagination that it cannot sustain, but he insists on defending the uniquely vital kind of understanding that only poetry can provide. He is, in fact, one of this century's great defenders of the poetic way of knowing, yet he never severs the imagination from its roots in culture, history, and the human condition. Unlike those supposedly wise in the ways of the heart but innocent of the world, Tate has immersed himself in a study of the social and economic relations that set the stage for human action. Nevertheless, he has not forgotten the inescapable origin of all human action in myth, ritual, and belief. Without them, men must perish as surely as did the American South.

In Tate's view, then, the true traditionalist is a radical, even a destroyer, for he responds to his dilemma in the present by 'cutting away the overgrowth and getting back to the roots.' A sacrificial violence may be the only means for saving a moribund culture. One year after he wrote 'To the Romantic Traditionalist,' Tate cast the insights of his poem into another form as a prose defense of poetry. The concluding paragraph of the 'Preface' to *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas* identifies this kind of romantic as a bad reader of literature:

There are all kinds of poetry readers. The innocent reader and the reader till lately called the moralist, who is not the social reader, are different from the critical reader, and they are both incurable intellectual. Their heads buzz with generalizations that they expect the poet to confirm--so that they will not have to notice the poetry. It is a service that the modern poet, no less amiable than his forebears, is not ready to perform: there is no large scheme of imaginative reference in which he has confidence....

The innocent reader lives in the past, he likes to see in poetry, if not the conscious ideas,

then the sensibility of a previous age. Our future sensibility the social reader, wise as he is, has no way of predicting, because he ignores the one source of that kind of prophecy--the present--grasped in terms, not of abstraction, but of experience.... The poet--and it is he who is the crucial reader--is aware of the present--any present, now or past or future. For by experiencing the past along with the present he makes present the past, and masters it; and he is at the center of the experience out of which the future must come.... The greater poets give us knowledge, not of the new programs, but of ourselves.

The romantic traditionist, like the 'innocent reader,' lives in the past and hopes to recover 'the sensibility of a previous age.' His opposite is the modern liberal whom Tate depicts in 'Eclogue of the Liberal and the Poet.' In his rejection of the past, the liberal corresponds to the 'social reader.' Like the Syracusan of 'Epistle: To a Syracusan Much Too Late at Rome,' he pursues a 'busy quest' that is an attempt to replace myth with technology, augury with statistics. The 'Eclogue,' however, presents the liberal as a kind of sentimentalist who has replaced 'place' (Europe) with 'face' (emotions), 'hope' with 'soap.' In a parody of John Denham's 'Cooper's Hill,' Tate suggests that these rhymes are 'not tired' but 'expired,' like the tradition of rational clarity they represent. Liberal optimism, shaken by the violence of twentieth-century wars, has turned place into 'the big weeping face / And the other abstract lace of the race.' The liberal and the romantic traditionist are both worshipers of an abstraction that they have taken for reality. In their loss of a sense of analogy, they have been forced to base their metaphysics on mere feelings. The definiteness of place has been replaced by the vagueness of sentiment. Paradoxically, it is the poet, the 'critical reader,' who refuses to base his art on feelings alone and seeks to remain 'at the center of experience' from which come both past and future.

It is this center of experience to which Tate returns repeatedly as the norm for the imagination. Its mode of presentation is symbolic; and its reach, as Tate says, 'is perhaps no longer than the ladder of analogy, at the top of which we may see all, if we still wish to see anything, that we have brought up with us from the bottom, where lies the sensible world.' The principal means of attaining this vision is a device that Tate, paraphrasing Erich Auerbach, calls *figura*, 'the symbolic dimension rooted firmly in a literal image or statement that does not need the symbolic significance in order to be immediately understood.' Auerbach gives an extensive description of the 'figural interpretation' of reality. It establishes, he points out, 'a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life.'

It is the symbolic imagination, source of the figural interpretation of reality, that informs the intelligence of the critical reader. *Figura* remains always in the concrete realm of person and action. It eschews abstract categories or reduction to a lowest common denominator. Experience is given meaning not by the imposition of an intellectual program but in terms of another experience. A historical person draws his significance not from the place in a grand scheme but through his relationship, in time, to another person. The virtue of the figural method of interpretation is that its terms are composed of human realities, even when its goal resides beyond them. This, then, is the center of experience to which Tate returns repeatedly as the normative way of the imagination. He does not simply extol the imagination as the highest human faculty. He is careful to discriminate among its verities and identify those that lead to that personal wholeness he refers to as 'salvation.' The symbolic imagination offers the richest and most complete way of understanding, uniting high and low in a single experienced complex.

Opposed to the symbolic imagination are what Tate calls the 'unliteral or roundabout imagination,' on the one hand, and the 'angelic imagination,' on the other. The three kinds of imagination bear an obvious relation to Tate's earlier description of the three varieties of reader and the trio of romantic traditionist, liberal, and poet. The unliteral imagination is the way of a naively applied scientific method. Tate discerns its operation in much modern literary scholarship, of which a notable, if eccentric, example is John Livingston Lowe's famous 'roundabout' study of Coleridge. The unliteral imagination never encounters the true object of its attention, it mistakes something else for the reality supposedly under its scrutiny. The angelic imagination, in contrast, lies at the opposite pole from the unliteral. It goes straight to the heart of the matter--to pure essence without recourse to the bodily senses, as an angel is presumed to know things through his special, unmediated intuition of reality. But the angelic imagination suffers from 'an incapacity

to represent the human condition in the central tradition of natural feelings' and entails 'the loss of the entire order of experience.'

Although Tate clearly preferred the way of the symbolic imagination, he saw his own modern cast of mind as uncomfortably prone to the unliteral and angelic temptations of the romantic. One of Tate's most startling *tours de force* is his essay 'Our Cousin, Mr. Poe,' in which he applies a figural interpretation to himself and explores the origins of his own spiritual dilemma in the romantic imagination he inherited from the nineteenth century. Tate describes Poe as a writer whose 'relationship, almost of the blood...we must in honor acknowledge: what destroyed him is potentially destructive of us.' What distinguishes Poe from authors like Hawthorne or Melville, whose 'large, articulate scheme of experience...we may partly sever from personal association, both in the writer and in ourselves,' is the 'wilderness of mirrors' with which this 'cousin' surrounds us. In him 'we see a subliminal self endlessly repeated, or, turning, a new posture of the same figure.' Such a figure appears often in Tate's poetry; the best example is the form that the poet glimpses in the mirror of 'The Maimed Man,' a 'forlorn demon' that is not exorcized until the last lines of 'The Buried Lake.'

The importance of 'Our Cousin, Mr. Poe' resides in its method. An indirect confession of its author's own inadequacies, the essay is, at the same time, a perfect--though negative--example of figured interpretation. Tate insists, before embarking on his investigation of Poe, that 'in discussing any writer, or in coming to terms with him, we must avoid the trap of mere abstract evaluation, and try to reproduce the actual conditions of our relation to him' This warning is equally relevant to the student of Tate. What this essay provides is an invaluable model of a kind of criticism not much practiced in our time and never applied to Tate himself. Tate modestly suggests that his main literary forebear is Edgar Allan Poe. I would claim for him a more appropriate figure in St. Augustine.

In the following study, I hope to show that Tate shares with Augustine more than a common tradition. Tate's poetry, taken as a whole, depicts the same action of conversion that Augustine describes in *The Confessions*. The major Augustinian themes of history, memory, confession, and the two cities are all prominent in Tate's mature work and are present even in his earliest writings. Like Augustine, he knew that he was born into a declining world. The temptation for a sensitive person, faced with this knowledge, is to turn inward. Thus the most popular stance among poets of the last few decades is the so-called confessional posture. But the Augustinian perspective represents a turning inward in an entirely different sense. Tate has written, concerning the modern practice of confession, that 'it is always a question whether one's egoism can be made to look unique, or anything but conventional and boring.'

He speaks of being incapable of letting himself 'indulge in the terrible fluidity of self-revelation' for fear of having 'to tell what was wrong with me.' Certainly, he never proclaims, as he accuses Andre Gide of doing, his 'intellectual virtue.' Nevertheless, he does reveal his own faults and limitations, if only indirectly and dramatically. This kind of self-revelation has its roots in Augustine, who, according to Robert J. O'Connell, 'looks on the stuff of his own life as food for probing reflection, and finds it not untypical of what the mass of mankind has known. So, he prods our minds to ponder a series of his own life experiences, of the sort, he is confident, that we will recognize as our own, or so very like our own as to spark in us the recognition he hopes will dawn.' Tate's poetry reveals not his personal life but a kind of *figura*--Mr. Tate, our cousin, our double, our brother.

Poe and Augustine, then, are opposed *figurae* of Tate. Poe is associated with the narcissism of the mirror, Augustine with the outward gaze of the window. The 'hypertrophy of the three classical faculties: feeling, will, and intellect' in Poe is countered by Augustine's trinity of memory, understanding, and will in the unified soul. Poe's unhistorical imagination, finally, is confronted by Augustine's vision of the two cities and his analogical theory of reality. Though little is said of Poe in this study, I hope that these contrary figures will be understood as main contenders for the soul of the modern poet. Poe longed for cosmic annihilation. The author of *The City of God* moved away from the fragmentation and brutality of his civilization without forsaking the present. He sought a society built on the heart, a stable community of men directed toward a common, transcendent goal. Tate found in Augustine's example a means of carrying out the mandate that is the subject of all his writings--the task of preserving from the ravages of a civilization in collapse those elements of permanent value.

The nine chapters of this book are an account of this quest for order, presented in terms of its main themes and in an approximation of chronological order. The first five chapters describe Tate's encounter with and consideration of the claims of science, tradition, heredity, sexuality, and history on his loyalties. Without rejecting any of these models of order outright, Tate recognizes their radical insufficiency as a basis for a modern faith, even when all of them are embraced at once. The last four chapters are about the transformation these models undergo as Tate begins to recover that unique but decisive shirt in Western intellectual sensibility toward a new order I call the 'Augustinian perspective,' where society and self, world and mind, time and eternity, and memory, understanding, and love are grasped as complementary aspects of that reality to which the poet, as defender of the center of experience, is committed....

[Tate] is...identifying the prime failure of himself and his contemporaries as a narrowness of vision. Modern man, as he notes from the beginning of his career, has become abstract, visually exclusive, and bound to the letter of the word. He is incapable of seeing beyond a single level of meaning because his imagination has lost this perspective that memory supplies. Evidence of this blindness is prevalent throughout Tate's poetry, but it is especially prominent in 'the image of woman that all men both pursue and flee.' Feminine figures in his first poems--the Duchess of Malfi or the degraded women of "bored and Choresis," 'The Flapper,' and 'Hitch Your Wagon to a Star'--are ineffectual wraiths rather than images of hope. The woman who refuses to stoop to modern folly, like the young virgin of 'Parthenia' or the older one of 'To a Prodigal Old Maid,' remains a puzzle rather than an inspiration. The girl in 'Mary McDonald,' 'Resurgam,' or 'Credo in Intellectum Videntem' is mysteriously inaccessible. The poet may 'take her Image to a secret place,' as Tate puts it in 'Eager Youths to a Dead Girl,' but he can find no fulfillment, spiritual or erotic, in her person. Only in a translation of a fragmentary poem by Sappho, 'Farewell to Anactoria,' is there an image of femininity untouched by modern irony.

These negative or incomplete images of woman continue to appear in subsequent verse. 'Inside and Outside,' 'The Robber Bridegroom,' 'Last Days of Alice,' 'Mother and Son,' and 'Sonnets of the Blood' offer weak, perverse, or overbearing and masculine depictions of women. With the exception of the dead woman in 'The Anabasis,' one looks in vain for a figure embodying positive feminine virtues. Two examples of the poet's inability to create such an image are particularly striking because, among the earliest poems, they represent fairly ambitious attempts at overcoming these failures. Tate tries to find in each of them some pagan image of life and fertility that remains meaningful in the modern world....

Tate's commentary is an exploration of what the poets have said about us and a testing of the truth of their claims. He suggests that what Landor, Whitman, and Sandburg have had to say about nature is no longer true, if it ever was. The lady that is nature has changed from a 'Thou' to an 'It' in the modern world; we have all but destroyed her. But the Lady of Light who stands to guide us on the other side of darkness is eternal: 'Love is not mere love, whatever mere love may be; it is love gathering from the flying dark'."

Robert S. Dupree

Allen Tate and the Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry

(Louisiana State U 1983) 3-15, 190-91, 241

"If we move back to the 1930s...during the height of the acrimonious debate, nearly every major novelist, poet, and critic was drawn into combat. The scene was like an octagon at war with itself. There were the theoretical Marxists (Farrell), the Stalinists (Gold, Hicks), the vague Communist sympathizers (...Dos Passos, Dreiser), the John Reed Clubbers (who split off, forming *Partisan Review*), the Trotskyites, the humanists (More, Babbitt), the aesthetes (Eliot, Wilder, Burke) [This critic is an Atheist who here demeans the Christians Eliot and Wilder by reducing them to "aesthetes."], the independent leftists (Wilson, Porter, Farrell doubling), the Southern Agrarians (Warren, Tate, Ransom).

Once the Communists relented and tried to broaden their appeal, they became an umbrella for nearly all these groups except for the Southern Agrarians (who yearned after an antebellum South), the humanists (whose appeal was for a highly structured past), and the more recalcitrant of the aesthetes (who embraced Modernism in literature, which was often reactionary politically). The aim was to gain a united front of literary talents against capitalism." [This critic is an urban Leftist, a Postmodernist opposed to Modernism

who considers pastoralism to be "reactionary" and falsifies the politics of writers including Hemingway, Tate, Porter, and Wilder. He falsely implies that all the best writers were "against capitalism."]

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 80

"Allen Tate, poet, biographer, and essayist, was an influential man of letters from his twenties at Vanderbilt University to his death... Tate entered Vanderbilt in 1919 and roomed with Robert Penn Warren; they both came under the influence of the poet John Crowe Ransom and the group known as the Fugitives; their journal, *The Fugitive*, printed Tate's first poems, and Tate himself edited the journal from 1923 to 1925. Tate and other southern writers, including Ransom and Warren, published a collection of essays, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and Agrarian Tradition* (1930), defending the antebellum values of an agrarian South against the industrial values of the North. Tate's biographies of Stonewall Jackson (1928) and Jefferson Davis (1929) were also implicit arguments for the preservation of southern culture.

It has always been true that the aristocratic South has been more hospitable to belles lettres than the Puritan North, where intellectuals preferred theological or philosophical prose to novels and poetry. The leisured class of the South (made possible, of course, by slavery) sponsored an aristocratic culture, centered rather in law and letters than in religious disputation, and allying itself more with the aristocratic literature produced in England than with the polemic literature of dissent. Tate's poetry is in this sense aristocratic: Its models come from the Latin literature he studied at Vanderbilt. His poetry is often latinized in diction, measured in rhythm, intellectual in content, and historical in emphasis. Though he turns to local color in some southern poems like 'The Swimmers,' even there the fundamental emphasis of the poem is intellectual and moral rather than sensuous.

Tate's long life was spent chiefly as an essayist (he wrote for *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *Hound and Horn*, and the *Sewanee Review*) and professor (he taught from 1951 to 1968 at the University of Minnesota). He was friend and mentor to both Hart Crane and Robert Lowell, and his influence can be seen in Lowell's early poetry. Tate preferred a literature of ideas in which propositions were stated, explored, defended, and summarized in a lofty diction. He believed, with Aristotle, that poetry is more philosophical than history; he thought it should express large moral truths, drawn from history, perhaps, but broadened into universality. At the same time, he wanted a complexity in poetry, a constant tension and historical irony, that would save the ideas from platitudinousness.

He found a poetic ideal in Eliot and imitated him as a poet and as a critic. Like Eliot, Tate adopted in his criticism a tone of dry instructiveness, but his criticism lacks the passion that animates Eliot's views. Together with Ransom [and Caroline Gordon], Tate founded the New Criticism (Ransom's term), which aimed to change the way in which literature was taught; instead of spending time on historical and biographical data, the critic should direct readers or students to look at the qualities of the work itself--its tensions and ambiguities, its complex of positions, its structural completeness. As a movement that turned attention back to the art object, the New Criticism was immensely valuable.

But Tate could not envisage a poetry other than the metaphysical poetry he admired, imitated in his own work, and fostered in his pupils. He disliked Robert Lowell's abandonment of strict forms and classical reticence when *Life Studies* (1959) appeared. Strict in conscience, intellectual in temperament, severe in criticism, Tate lacked the freedom and play of imagination that mark the great poet. As one of the exponents of the New Criticism, with its emphasis on the artistry of the poet visible in the text, he helped turn American criticism away from its former uncritical reliance on biography and the history of ideas. He remains, with John Crowe Ransom...one of the founders of contemporary southern poetry."

Helen Vendler
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1709-11

"A lonely child, with an outsized head, Tate read voraciously, early developing a fascination with poetry His father was a cold, aloof, perhaps psychologically crippled Kentucky lumber entrepreneur[who] slowly dissipated the family holdings and, in a severe blow for young Tate, lost his business and fortune about 1915, just before Tate had to enter college.... In 1916 he began violin lessons in the Cincinnati Conservatory (his brother Ben became a successful businessman in Cincinnati).... He grew up with no religion at all, but he attended Catholic schools and his father was a lapsed Catholic.... Both parents tried to avoid each other as much as possible. Tate, the youngest of three sons, became an emotional captive of an exceedingly neurotic mother... She lived in the past, a romantic past largely made up of her avowedly patrician ancestors, and, indeed, she did descend from several distinguished Virginia families.... She was related to the Lewis family (of the Lewis and Clark expedition)...

By the time he enrolled at Vanderbilt, [Tate] was surely the most precocious nineteen-year-old on campus.... He enjoyed challenging his professors... He shocked more conventional students by his boasts about atheism and radicalism. He joined the Fugitive group, not as a deferential undergraduate but as a cocky, at times arrogant protagonist.... Tate soon made T. S. Eliot his hero and celebrated formal experimentation. An irritant as much as a companion, he strained the tolerance of the group, but his radical proclivities alone made possible a wide-ranging discussion of modern poetry.... Tate was an *enfant terrible*, a slim, wiry, intense, large-headed prodigy out of Kentucky...youthful rebellion joined with a sympathy for poetic expression...a somewhat obscure high priest of poetry as contrasted to [John Crowe] Ransom's role as lucid philosopher....

Tate graduated from Vanderbilt in August 1923, magna cum laude.... He hoped to enter a graduate program in classical studies in the fall of 1923. Then came a bitter disappointment. Penniless, he had to have a scholarship. [Edwin] Mims, as chairman of the English department, refused to recommend him, and this doomed his chances at Vanderbilt and probably lay behind his subsequent failure to win a fellowship at Yale in 1924. Tate never forgave Mims. Actually, Mims agreed to write the letter if Tate apologized for several irreverent acts during the previous years. Tate had teased and ridiculed Mims unmercifully....

[At Vanderbilt, Ransom] and Tate shared several critical doctrines and would soon be identified as two of only four or five major architects of a New Criticism [Caroline Gordon was one of them].... Tate and Ransom [agreed] that criticism should be objective, and that art, or literature, or at least poetry constituted a type of truth.... Tate, as he grew older, craved certainty as he moved toward conversion to Catholicism.... He spent his adult career in fighting what he saw as a one-dimensional, naturalistic view of man. He wanted the unified authority of a universal Church. Much more passionate than Ransom, more moralistic but less philosophically pretentious, he wrote much more sensitive and brilliant evaluations of other writers but was never as theoretical.... His depth...his integrity, was always beyond question.... [Tate] deservedly ranks as one of the ablest critics in American literary history....

Tate argued that only new poetic techniques could serve the cause of the South he came to admire, a South that once embodied a deeply traditional culture. The literature of the lost cause, of moonlight and magnolias, or of local color, was not only false to the fact and exploitive of the South, but was a literature produced for northern markets. The older poetic techniques, tied to Victorian sensibilities, were inadequate for the task of rescuing the real South. Taking most of his cues from T. S. Eliot, he thus made the technical cause of poetic experimentation one with the largely political cause of restoring a traditional, religious society. Had the Fugitives written the sentimental, undisciplined, indulgent, moralistic poetry craved by [Edwin] Mims, they would thereby have joined the progressive [liberal] New South crowd, or those who had already capitulated to alien values.

Implicit in this argument was the need for contemporary poets to express, as honestly as possible, the typical experience of moderns, an experience of confusion, rootlessness, and alienation.... Tate never repudiated this view, although as a seeker after redemption he later tried, as did Eliot, to uncover a philosophical or theological ground behind all the modern confusions. He never made a mythical South a subject of his poetry. Unfortunately, his most famous poem, in a sense his 'Waste Land,' and a poem he spent a lifetime perfecting, 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' seemed by its very title to deny this. The title was ironic. The poem was not really an ode at all, but a devastating commentary on the alienation of modern humanity from its past....

Tate talked of a 'conservative' revolution and a new, planned society, not the planned economy of social scientists... The object was to throw the North out, not keep blacks down.... Tate wanted to entitle [*I'll Take My Stand*] 'Tracts Against Communism,' a misleading theme endorsed by few others except Lytle, although to Tate it expressed the strongest argument of the book--that industrialism and communism shared the same social values, and the book was against these values'.... [Tate] echoed the outlook of [anti-Communist Senator] Joseph McCarthy...[and] supported a loyalty oath for Tennessee... He pointed out that no one could prevent desegregation... He lamented Confederate flag-waving and invocation of state rights only on race issues... No good would come from violent resistance. The South should take over the process of desegregation and do it 'with order and dignity.' Tate...was in favor of Negro rights, but felt the court should have begun with Negro voting rights, not school integration. The Negro had to get the vote, let the chips fall where they may. Maybe the blacks, where in a majority, would impose a new segregation and the whites would have to move. So be it....

Tate saw the Old South as only one exemplification of a traditional, religious society, and in many ways a flawed exemplification. He wanted to emphasize, not the historical South, but certain religious values that found lodgment in that South.... As he reflected on the embryonic 'southern movement,' he told Ransom that it needed a central or master idea, a type of doctrinal authority, which he wanted to locate in the Christian God and the Roman Catholic Church.... Tate, embittered by his experiences at Vanderbilt...fled to New York City by 1924 and at first rejoiced in a type of liberation. He was, as always, ambivalent... He soon felt rejected by the South as a whole, for the rest of his life denied any great artistic tradition in the South, long nourished an image of southerners as parochials...and so rejoiced, where no one asked if you were a virgin or drank liquor, that he vowed never to return to Nashville....

His intellectual quickness and his unselfish but demanding interest in the writings of everyone else gained him almost immediate respect.... Tate became, in effect, the unpaid literary agent of all his former Nashville friends, happily finding them publishers or placing articles for anyone who asked.... Even in Bohemia he kept intact his image as a very civil, polite, Virginia gentleman. He came dressed in a suit and with a cane to his first party in Greenwich Village. But his self-conscious identity as a southerner led to no overt defense of the South. In fact, at first, just the opposite--he clearly saw himself an exile from the provincial, philistine, and hypocritical South of Eddie Mims, a South that had rejected Tate....

In September 1928, Allen and Caroline Tate moved to Europe for his Guggenheim year. For two months they stayed in London. Tate met every important literary figure but rejoiced most in getting to know his hero, T. S. Eliot. Then, in Paris for the winter, they met all the American literary expatriates or visitors. They were able to live free in Ford Madox Ford's apartment.... Tate admired--and partied a bit--with Ernest Hemingway, somewhat reluctantly paid his obligatory respects to Gertrude Stein (he thought she was a fake)... By 1929, while in France, he was close to converting to Catholicism (he postponed this until 1950)... In the summer of 1930 the Tates moved into a historic refurbished farmhouse on the south bank of the Cumberland River, just across and upriver from Clarksville, Tennessee, and only forty miles from Nashville. Since Tate's brother Ben bought the farm, Caroline soon dubbed it Benfolly, a name that gained national fame among writers in the depression.... The Tates would live here for the next two years and then intermittently through 1937.... The agrarian brotherhood gathered whenever possible at Benfolly....

If their apartments in New York had been a way station for young writers, then Benfolly was a resort. It became a depression mecca, a place of hospitality, fellowship, and brilliant conversation for dozens of writers, some famous, some obscure. Each spring and again in the early fall it operated almost like a hotel, with all the rooms and beds filled with guests. Some, like Ford Madox Ford, brought a wife and stayed the whole summer. Warren and his wife, Cinina, came whenever possible. Others, such as Hart Crane, Edmund Wilson, Louise Bogan, Katherine Anne Porter, Stark Young, Howard Baker, Phelps Putnam (all guests in 1931), plus spouses or mistresses, a wandering philosopher from Ohio State, even a sculptor sent by Ransom to do Tate's profile, came and stayed for days or even weeks. In the final summer of 1937, when the Fords were in residence and the house already full, a youthful, rebellious Robert Lowell came, as he said, to learn to write [in preference to Harvard]....

Tate...moved to Princeton in 1939, then to the position of poetry consultant to the Library of Congress in 1943, and finally in 1944 accepted the editorship of the nearby *Sewanee Review*.... Tate, in an editorial in the *Review* [took] a much more generous view towards blacks...than [his friend Donald] Davidson, and in particular...defended equality with separation as a protection for blacks.... The postwar years remained turbulent ones for Tate. He and Caroline could not live together in harmony, yet could not live apart. Tension and a divorce at the end of the war led to a reunion, remarriage, and desperate efforts to preserve the marriage. In the midst of this effort, both moved toward conversion to Catholicism."

Paul K. Conkin

The Southern Agrarians

(U Tennessee 1988) 14-16, 25-26, 42-44, 51, 71-72, 81, 92-93, 111, 136-37, 157, 160-61, 164

"The reputations of the scholars who have chiefly shaped our thinking about Southern literature--Allen Tate, Hugh Holman, Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Lewis P. Simpson, to name a few--rival the reputations of many of the artists about whom they write.... [The] 'notion of a regional renaissance was a brainchild of...Allen Tate' [who] 'used the term in 1936 and again in 1945 when he declared that the Renaissance was over'.... Slightly modifying Allen Tate's well-known theory, then, we might explain what I am calling the real beginning of the Southern Renaissance this way: With the women's movement of the late nineteenth century, Southern women began to enter the modern world--but gave a backward glance as they stepped over the border; that backward glance introduced the Southern Renaissance... [Ellen] Glasgow, according to many critics, lacks either modernity or merit or both. Allen Tate once described her as 'one of the worst novelists in the world' and her prose style as 'abominable'."

Carol S. Manning, ed.

"The Real Beginning of the Southern Renaissance"

The Female Tradition in Southern Literature

(U Illinois 1993) 37, 39, 50, 53

In 1959 Allen Tate felt his generation's break with the past most sharply.... He thought that...traditional Southern rhetoric was being diverted into an altered 'mode of discourse.' The traditional mode...had been rhetorical, based on Aristotelian categories of meaning... After about 1920, however...intelligent young Southerners...turned to another Southern verbal tradition--'Was it not said that Southerners were the best storytellers in America? Perhaps they still are,' he claimed. Looking further back, Tate saw forerunners for this change. Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* was 'the art of the rhetorician applied to the anecdote...the minor secular myth which just succeeds in skirting the suprahuman myth of religion,' he declared, and *Huckleberry Finn* was 'the first modern novel by a Southerner'...

Tate saw in Southern fiction (by white writers) of his time the first widespread intimations of a genuinely artistic Southern use of myth. These writers had reached back into the past for that myth because they had a past that applied to their present. The moral complexities of the Southern slaveholding system, the rebellion that stirred in white Southerners' hearts as the country drifted toward the Civil War, and the thorough social and moral upheaval that occurred after the war all had provided intellectual precedents for the post-World War I Depression Era malcontents' very modern sense of guilt and alienation. Holman, Rubin, Tate (as well as other critics) agree that a profound change took place in Southern literature around 1920, a shift from two dimensional, sentimental, primarily rhetorical works to a literature of universal significance."

Jan Cooper

"Zora Neale Hurston Was Always a Southerner Too"

The Female Tradition in Southern Literature (1993) 60-61

"Most literary scholars, whatever other theory they may advance, agree with the central premise articulated by Allen Tate in his 1945 essay, 'The New Provincialism,' that it seemed after World War I the South paused, just before moving into the modern world, to take a backward glance, to see what life had been like, and to measure its present and future against its past. The focus on the Southern past, so central in the works of Faulkner, Warren, and Tate, concentrates typically on slavery, the Civil War, and the tragic blend in nineteenth-century leaders of guilt, courage, moral blindness, and honor."

Peggy Whitman Prenshaw

"Southern Ladies and the Southern Literary Renaissance"
The Female Tradition in Southern Literature (1993) 78

"The literature of the American South is--or, perhaps, more aptly, has until fairly recently been--distinct and distinctively a regional literature, a product of a regional consciousness that Allen Tate describes in 'The New Provincialism': 'that consciousness or that habit of men in a given locality which influences them to certain patterns of thought and conduct (and, he adds elsewhere, 'a quality of judgment') handed to them by their ancestors. 'Without that regional consciousness, says Tate, 'no literature can be mature.' According to the South's proponents in, for example, their famous manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), and according to many of its fictional recreators and critics in the twentieth century, the values inherent in the Southern tradition--place, past, community, and especially family--are enormously important features of the regionalism Tate and others describe; taken together, they form an image of an ideal life and understood mythically, they become enabling acts for poets and fictionalists."

Joan Schulz
"Orphaning as Resistance"
The Female Tradition in Literature (1993) 89

"Allen Tate, Ransom's junior by eleven years and his onetime student, shared some of the older man's dedication to form; but he avoided, at least partially, the temptation to see poems as perfectible objects and throughout most of his career used the crafting of poetry as a device for self-scrutiny and by extension, for exploring the human situation--in short, as a means to knowledge. The result was a more varied body of work than Ransom's and one that in its succession of revisions reflected the tortuous course of a restlessly questing mind.

The successive versions of Tate's best-known poem, 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' which he worked at for a decade (1927-37) before letting it go, provide a notable illustration of the use he made of poetic activity. In all the versions of it he dramatized the plight of contemporary man--in the poem symbolized by a southerner like himself--as he attempts to come to terms with his realization that all human dreams of permanence, order, and meaning in the world are at best illusive fictions in a Heraclitean universe in which death is the only certainty.

His best poems, and his work as a whole, do much the same thing, as Tate himself seems to have realized when two years before his death he put together his work in poetry in *Collected Poems 1919-1976* with all the items carefully dated. The first three sections of the volume contain, in chronological order, the sixty-three poems by which he is most likely to be remembered, among them 'Death of Little Boys,' 'Mr. Pope,' 'The Last Days of Alice,' 'The Mediterranean,' 'To the Lacedemonians,' 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' 'Seasons of the Soul' (perhaps his masterpiece), three parts of a long poem (never finished) in terza rima, and two moving tributes to the wife and children of his old age, all but the last five written between 1925 and 1950. These are followed by his six translations from Latin and French verse (not in chronological order) and a concluding section of forty-six early poems, chronologically arranged, most of them previously published.

Tate's production of poems waned after 1950, but with this last comprehensive collection he demonstrated his consistent commitment to Modernism, his mastery, and eventual transcendence, of techniques learned early from the work of T. S. Eliot, his respect for form in the face of a chaotic world that he never repudiated, and his abiding belief in the superior power of symbolic language to reflect and explore the complexity of human existence. Above all, he showed that poetry had been the medium in which his deepest convictions--about history, the American South, literature, and religion--had been generated.

For the average reader, Tate's larger body of work in prose is more accessible: biographies of Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis, a major novel, *The Fathers*, written in the wake of his passing engagement with agrarianism, and a succession of essays that contain some of the finest literary criticism written in America. He remained a poet and a southerner to the end, but the vision of the human situation that he developed in his career as a 'man of letters' transcended its regional beginnings to a degree unequalled by

any other southerner of his time, save perhaps Robert Penn Warren, Tate's youthful roommate at Vanderbilt....

Allen Tate, a Kentuckian, had many of Ransom's capabilities and tendencies, but there were important differences. He shared Ransom's concern for wholeness...and like Ransom he was preoccupied with religion throughout most of his career. But whereas Ransom for all his professed distrust of abstractions had indulged in abstraction freely, Tate even in his most theoretical essays managed to keep particularity in the foreground. Moreover, Tate like Ransom was only theoretically an Agrarian. He knew nothing of farming and he had no taste for gardening. His admiration for the agrarian South was essentially patrician, something he inherited from his Virginia-born mother. He had Ransom's feeling for the situation of the upland farmers of Tennessee and Alabama. Like Lytle his self-conscious southernness had been fueled by exposure to an unsympathetic Northeast--in Tate's case, one of much greater intensity and longer duration--but being patrician, he adjusted more readily to alien northern ways, particularly to the residue he found there of European customs and modes of behavior.

His ideal even at the beginning had been that of a man of letters in the modern world, a world that included England, France, and Italy as well as the American South. Still, Tate's instinct for the particular led him to establish his permanent posture in the region in which he was born. The two biographies he published (on Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis) were early manifestations of that direction in his development, as was the projected biography of Robert E. Lee, never finished. So was his protracted examination of the dilemma facing the sensitive modern, which took the form of a contemporary southerner desperately trying to wrest an identity from a past he had been taught to revere as heroic; when he saw that past repeatedly disregarded by forces at work to replace it with something crassly materialistic, he leaped to the defense. Characteristically, once there he found himself more often than not leading a charge.

When in 1933 it became clear that the Agrarian brethren would never focus upon a practicable strategy, Tate abruptly turned to fiction, at first writing sketches modeled after the two main branches of his family and then a full-length novel, *The Fathers*. 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 of many that southerners faced, then and increasingly in the years to come. It was also a universal dilemma that recurs among thoughtful people whenever 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 in a world of communities understandably indifferent....

In some accounts of the New Criticism, the role of Allen Tate has tended to be undervalued, but time may well correct that. Granted that Tate was Ransom's pupil and his junior by eleven years, it was Tate who as one of youngest Fugitives first nudged his mentor in the direction of Modernism, and thereafter by conversation, correspondence, and close association in their Agrarian enterprise provided the whetstone of intelligence on which Ransom during the Vanderbilt years sharpened and shaped his own views of literature and criticism.

Their personalities and mode of life could hardly have been more different. To most observers Ransom's life, private as well as professional, was orderly and conducted within the bounds of received convention; Tate's by contrast was chaotic, combative, and marked by passionate pursuits that the pragmatic Ransom must have regarded as unfortunate distractions. Nevertheless, in full maturity both men were committed to the same view of literature and the same view of the poet's role in society. Wherever these matters were concerned they stood on the same ground, but Tate explored that ground more thoroughly than Ransom and extended the scrutiny to the surrounding terrain with a skill and vivacity that guarantees the best examples of his critical writing a permanent place in American letters as creative works in their own right.

Tate published eight books of essays during his lifetime. The first six of these were *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas* (1936), *Reason in Madness: Critical Essays* (1941), *On the Limits of Poetry* (1948), *The Hovering Fly* (1949), *The Forlorn Demon: Didactic and Critical Essays* (1953), and *The Man of*

Letters in the Modern World (1955). In 1959 the publisher Alan Swallow brought out Tate's *Collected Essays*; but that volume, gratifying to Tate though it may have been, was for his purposes inadequate both in comprehensiveness and form. Accordingly he prepared a second volume, *Essays of Four Decades*, published in 1968, which presented all the critical writing that he considered worth preserving, with the various items grouped to suggest such coherence as collectively they might possess but, as in the collection of poems that he would publish nine years later, with dates for each to enable historically minded readers to see more readily the progressive development and intersection of his views.

On reading these essays, in whatever order, the figure of Montaigne almost automatically comes to mind. Like the composition of his French predecessor, Tate's are registers of a personal pursuit of knowledge rather than strategic reports of previous reflection. 'I published my first essay twenty-five years ago,' he wrote in 1953. 'Since then, year after year, I have been conducting an unfinished education in public.' Then in the brief preface that he provided for the 1968 collection, he confessed that his primary reason for writing had always been to find out what he could about the topic at hand, 'the enlightenment of a possible reader always being the secondary reason.' In range Tate's curiosity was minuscule compared with that of Montaigne, but within its limits, it was remarkably broad.

His main concern was language, and in particular the language of poetry, which he believed had been threatened, all but fatally, by a 'dissociation of sensibility' that had begun in the late Renaissance as mathematics and empirical science assumed their dominance over men's minds. The phrase and the diagnosis it implied had been Eliot's originally, but Tate quickly adopted the latter, as did Ransom. Eliot had noted that some seventeenth-century poets resisted the trend, notably Donne, Marvell, and the lesser known Bishop Henry King. Thereafter, he said, poets had fallen into the habit of thinking and feeling by turns and increasingly disregarded their primary function, which was that of 'amalgamating disparate experience.' Tate in the discursive manner of a zealous amateur went on for forty years exploring the evidences of that continuing dissociation in the broad fields of history, politics, and religion, especially the last of these. In dealing with any particular period, he almost invariably focused on the poetry, noting that even in the worst of times one or two reactionaries had usually managed to resist the trend and keep alive the poetic function of language.

Among the British authors he examined at some length were Samuel Johnson, Donne, Keats, Hardy, Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Herbert Read; among the Americans, Poe, Emily Dickinson, Hart Crane, Ezra Pound, Archibald MacLeish, E. A. Robinson, and his own friend John Peale Bishop. At one point he also took a careful look at Longinus, and more than once he called attention to the exemplary poetry of Dante's *Commedia*. A single conviction dominated and guided all his explorations. For him as for Ransom, any literature worthy of the name of poetry, whether in verse or prose, exhibited a use of language in which the tangible and the intangible, the sensible and the abstract modes of perception, were presented as one, undivided and indivisible.

In modern times the fragmentation that had multiplied in the wake of the original split made reconciliation of these two modes all but impossible. The solution, he believed, if there was to be a solution, would lie in the preservation of language with all its communicative and creative functions intact: the one communicative device by which the human race as a whole can articulate its manifold perceptions and symbolize the synthesis that is reality.

Unlike Ransom, Tate maintained a lingering hope that religion might somehow perform the same trick. He lamented the absence of an effective religion in southern culture, which in spite of the protests of his colleagues at Vanderbilt had continued to disintegrate along with the rest of contemporary society. For a time he looked back nostalgically to the illusive unity of medieval Christendom and midway in life joined the Catholic Church, but in the end he concluded that the language of poetry, broadly conceived and produced in full awareness of its complex function, provided the only real hope. 'The end of social man,' he wrote in the essay that he placed first in his final collection, 'is communion in time through love, which is beyond time'; to the preservation of that communion, he declared, the man of letters in the modern world must dedicate himself....

By 1940 most writers, including several who had taken their angry stand as Agrarians--Ransom, Tate, and Warren--were no longer concerned with perpetuating a cold war with the North and East. Even so, they were unwilling to accept the stereotypes by which liberals in all parts of the country had continued to characterize the South and define their relation to it. In their view, the 'decent folk' of the region in post-Civil War years had in many respects made the best of a bad situation that was not of their creation, and the best solution in those years following reconstruction had been a temporary continuation of peonage in the form of sharecropping.... Many of the South's authors...left the region to spend all or part of their careers elsewhere, among them Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon, Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom (though for different reasons), Katherine Anne Porter, Carson McCullers, and after the war William Styron, Ralph Ellison, Randall Jarrell, Ernest Gaines, and A. R. Ammons....

In 1943 Brooks and Warren brought out their *Understanding Fiction*, which extended the revolution in teaching they had begun with *Understanding Poetry* five years before; and in 1950 Tate and his wife, Caroline Gordon (1895-1981), published a similar but more sophisticated text, *The House of Fiction*.... [There was] a postwar shift away from self-conscious Jamesian formalism as prescribed (though not always practiced) by Tate, Gordon, Brooks, and Warren.... Poets of this new postwar--some would characterize it as Postmodern--era, no longer intimidated by the brilliance of the Fugitives' [and Modernist] achievements, have been unwilling to follow...[their] lead.... To many writers [Postmodernists, especially the Feminists] straightforward autobiographical narrative seemed more attractive and *far easier to produce* than the rigorously dispassionate presentations of action demanded by [the Modernists] Tate and Gordon and their mentor Ford Madox Ford.... [italics added]

With T. S. Eliot's announcement of his conversion in 1928, a change in attitude among the literati had begun to be noticeable, and by the end of World War II the company of publicly professing Christians included such figures as W. H. Auden, Evelyn Waugh, Allen Tate, and Katherine Anne Porter. By 1950 C. S. Lewis and Thomas Merton had achieved the status of popular apologists with many followers."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.

Twentieth-Century Southern Literature

(U Kentucky 1997) 42-43, 49-50, 58-60, 107, 151, 167-68, 174

"Anyone interested in modern American poetry would be fascinated by his career, and many readers would already know something of his achievements. If they did not know that he helped found *The Fugitive*, the first significant poetry journal to emerge from the South, perhaps they would know of his association with expatriate writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Ezra Pound. Poetry readers would recognize him as the author of 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' and other Modernist verse, or would perhaps know that T. S. Eliot once called him the best poet writing in America. Finally, there would be those readers interested in Southern history who would remember Tate as the leader of the Agrarian movement of the 1930s and as author of *The Fathers* (1938), a critically acclaimed novel about the dissolution of the antebellum South....

Attempting to satisfy her ancestral pieties, in October 1917 [his mother] enrolled him in the Georgetown Preparatory School.... Allen had entered America's oldest Jesuit school, founded in 1789... The Latin and Greek instruction, worlds apart from the casual teaching Allen received at the Cross School, was especially rigorous. Now he was expected to master Latin etymology, syntax, and grammar; to read extensively in Virgil and Cicero; to know both Greek syntax and Homeric dialect; and to be able to read with equal proficiency from *Cyropaedia* and the *Iliad*.... During the 1917-18 academic year, Allen also received instruction in Christian doctrine. The guiding principle at Georgetown was always explicit: 'There is no solid morality without religion.'... Allen's grades at Georgetown Prep were uneven.... His examinations were impressive in some areas--he scored 90 on each of the four English tests--but his miserable failure in the Latin and Greek sections ruined his overall performance....

Just before leaving for France, he told John Gould Fletcher that while he had always been 'an enforced atheist,' he was 'willing to be convinced.' It was not a belief in the afterlife he craved, but 'some ultimate discipline of the soul' for everyday life. Davidson was shocked to receive a letter in which Tate confided, 'I am more and more heading toward Catholicism... Then his mother died, and though his intellectual interests had always interfered with his ability to share her religious feelings, now especially he felt the

absence of religion in his life. His poem 'The Pit' now explored the battle between the intellect and faith--and bore a new title, 'The Cross.' It was unclear whether the cross represented a symbol of salvation or an intellectual burden to twentieth-century man. Depressed and out of sorts, Tate was looking for a philosophy to live by, an entire system of thought, with ordered and hierarchically arranged values.... He proposed writing an essay to prove that 'the old Southerners were historically Catholics all the time.'

'Agrarianism,' as the new movement would come to be called, was the natural culmination of all Tate's thought since he left the Fugitives in the early 1920s. But the idea had not crystallized in his mind until after his move to Europe and the death of his mother. What attracted him the most to the movement was that it promised to fill the voids in his spiritual life. 'I am an atheist,' he told John Gould Fletcher, 'but a religious one--which means that there is no organization for my religion.' The obvious solution was to make the South, its culture and its history, into an organized religion. Agrarianism, Tate insisted, would be 'a whole religious, philosophical, literary, and social program, anti-industrial on the negative side, and all that implies, and, on the positive, authoritarian, agrarian, classical, aristocratic.' He refused to make them mistake of the Humanists, who tried to develop a system of thought for the modern world but ignored the needs of the human spirit. 'Only God,' he insisted, 'can give the affair a genuine purpose'.... Although he had finally come to believe that 'the Old South might be made into a convenient symbol of the good life for everybody,' he had lost 'sympathy with all designs merely to restore the ruins'....

Tate's early poetry had a common theme: 'the artist with conspicuous ego encounters the woman and treats her as an object or point of reference for his own aggrandizement, a treatment which is usually violent.' [Thomas F. Heffernan, "Allen Tate in the Fugitive Years," Ph.D. diss. Columbia University, 1970] George Core points out that while Tate's 'poetry usually does not embody an emotional dimension which is equal to the burden of its ideas,' his finest poetry was rooted in 'experience' and that his later work 'regularly explored the theme of love' ['Mr. Tate and the Limits of Poetry,' *Virginia Quarterly Review* 62 (Winter 1986) 110, 109] He finally chose to return to the new series of poems he had begun in 1930. Far more autobiographical than anything he had ever written, many of these new poems revolved around Agrarian themes: the difficulty of religious faith, the problem of reconciling the past and the present, and the need of modern Southerners to understand their ancestors.

Although Tate reported optimistically that he was using the past as 'a form through which to view the present,' he later admitted that most of the poems were 'commentaries on those human situations from which there is no escape.' On one level or another, all of the poems Tate wrote during this period dealt with the spiritual crisis of modern man.... [Other themes]: America in the industrial age, fear and human mortality, female innocence and decadence, kinship bonds, loss of virginity, loyalty versus individualism, modern world in conflict with spiritual life of man, from politics to language, separation and abandonment, Southern history and traditions, writer's block...

Tate was further encouraged to write [a] memoir when several publishers, who recognized him as a man who had both made and endured American literary history, came knocking at his door. They knew Tate as a critic who had occupied the Chair of Poetry at the Library of Congress, as an editor who catapulted the *Sewanee Review* into the upper ranks of America's literary magazines, and as a poet and professor whose lengthening string of prizes included those bestowed by the Academy of American Poets, the Bollingen Foundation, and the Dante Alighieri Society of Florence. Having published more than a hundred essays and interacted with virtually every significant American writer of the century, he was easily elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Soon to become president of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, Tate had to admit that the time was ideal to write a memoir....

'Unlike Ernest Hemingway in *A Moveable Feast*,' he explained, 'I couldn't bring myself to tell what was wrong with my friends--or even mere acquaintances--without trying to tell what was wrong with myself.' Since discussing his own faults would mean facing 'the terrible fluidity of self-revelation,' he quit the memoir, having written only two parts.... In the prologue, Tate tried to show how his relationship with his parents had shaped his identity as a Southerner. He portrayed his mother as domineering and neurotic, his father as dishonorable and emotionally distant. Although his parents dragged him to one city after another throughout his childhood, it was not merely the changes of place they subjected him to that left him feeling like a transient. His parents' greatest wrong, he maintained, was to lie to him about his birthplace. Wanting

her son to be more Southern than he actually was, Tate's mother deluded herself into thinking he was born in Fairfax County, Virginia, 'among her family, who had not been wrong-sided' during the Civil War. Tate's father, unwilling to challenge his wife, did not tell him the truth until after her death. Taking a car trip with his father, Tate discovered--at age thirty--that he was born in Kentucky. Pointing to a roadside house in a small town in the southeastern part of the state, his father remarked curtly, 'That's where you were born.'

But Tate invented the story. It was he who lied about his birthplace. Long before his mother's death in 1929, he knew he was born in Kentucky, not Virginia. It is difficult to determine why he made up the story for his memoirs. Perhaps he had come to believe it himself. Perhaps he was punishing his parents again for a childhood that left him unsure of their affections and ambivalent toward the South. Indeed, the angst that their Southern mythmaking produced in him during the 1920s and 1930s was far more extreme than that generated by his memoirs. In his early life, he faced the nearly impossible task of turning a negative symbol--a group of people he referred to as 'my terrible family'--into a meaningful statement about himself and Southern culture as a whole. Fleeing from his parents while idealizing his ancestors, he had attempted, first through politics and then through art, to replace his spiritual loneliness with ideological assuredness. Rejecting the North's celebration of progress, he altered his theory of art in order to oversee the Southern Agrarian movement, a merciless public trial of modern capitalism. Yet this coordinated effort to make American values more Southern kept him from a more personal obsession, his preoccupation with revising his parents' genealogy. It was only when he produced the final chapter of *The Fathers* in July 1938, the endpoint of this volume, that he at last gained control of his family history.

In the decades after 1938, Tate, who died in 1979, was no longer consumed by Southern history. As many Tate scholars have observed, his willingness, after being freed of *The Fathers*, to become the Resident Fellow in Creative Writing at Princeton University, and later to spend the bulk of his academic career at the University of Minnesota, suggests a man no longer exclusively Southern--or perhaps a man who was not regionally minded in the first place. It is true that Tate, who went back to the South only in the twilight of his life, took more pleasure in winning the National Medal for Literature in 1976 than he did in recalling the major role he played in the Southern Literary Renaissance during the 1930s. Yet it was during the first half of his life--during the turbulent Southern period recorded in this biography--that he gained both an identity and a family by answering the question that had vexed him since his childhood. How could he be a genuine son of the South when he felt like an orphan?...

Allen hungered to read all of the 'Moderns'--and he began distancing himself from older, conventional poetry. Announcing that his new aim was to combine 'lyrical beauty and the satirical touch,' he concluded that many of the traditional rhyme schemes and meters employed by the major British poets were hackneyed and formulaic. 'Of course there is much traditional gushing in English Poetry--Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats--,' he observed, 'but I can see no reason for my being a liar even to emulate my great predecessors.' Newer poets like T. S. Eliot were more exciting to him.

In *Poems* (1920), Eliot's first collection of verse to be published in America, Allen found 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and 'Gerontion.' He was stunned by the unconventional style of these poems and decided that he had found a new mentor. 'T. S. Eliot,' he told Merrill Moore, 'had done only four or five fine poems, but in the past five or six years these few have established a school.' 'Eliot,' Allen announced, 'goes straight to the real thing; this is of course his 'modernity,' and I am with him.'... Allen traced the origins of Modernism to writers like James Joyce, whose banned novel, *Ulysses*, had created an uproar when it appeared in serial form several years earlier. By August, Allen had recast his poetic style to conform with the Modernist revolution, and Davidson had to admit that his friend's new poetry was 'quite as good, as far as method and style go, as any of Eliot's stuff.'

Allen recognized that there was a practical advantage in mimicking the Modernists. After the *Double Dealer* began accepting his verse with regularity, he concluded that they did so because the tone of his poems was 'in unison with Eliot, Pound, and Company.' He began to see himself as working on the cutting edge of a great movement that would change literary history.... The problem with Allen's deliberate conversion to Modernism was that it made the subject matter of his poetry less intelligible--even to his most sympathetic and learned readers, the Fugitives. Although Allen's friends recognized that his obscurity was due in part to the advances he was making in his poetic style, the Vanderbilt group had begun

questioning the value of poems that were unintelligible to readers. Local reviewers had attacked the first issue of the *Fugitive* for having been so 'wrapped in the mists of poetical technique' that no 'ordinary mortal' could 'be very certain what they were all about.' Another reviewer accused the group of coldness and academic stuffiness, of writing poetry that identified them as 'men who have lived their lives and experienced their emotional crises in pretty strict accord with colleges and universities and their dicta.'

Even Professor Edwin Mims warned them that their poems lacked 'humanness.' The Fugitives were still licking their wounds inflicted by such criticism, and [Donald] Davidson no doubt spoke for them all when he gently warned, 'You are getting to be too brilliant and intellectual for me, Allen--I can't follow you.' He blamed Allen's obscurity on the little Modernist magazines he had been reading: 'I fear you are stepping a little too far in the direction of Secessionism and Eliotism and Dialism.' Even Jesse urged Allen to slow down. 'May your intellectual Muse unbend a trifle in the serenity of the wilderness and forget a little sophistication,' he pleaded.

But much of Allen's obscurity derived from his conversion to Modernist principles regarding the relationship between human emotion and artistic expression. He discovered in T. S. Eliot's little book *The Sacred Wood*, first published in 1920, a passage that seemed to sum up the problems he encountered whenever he attempted to put his feelings directly into his poetry: 'The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art,' Eliot wrote, 'is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula for that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in a sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.'... Allen decided that it was impossible to write poetry without emotional detachment. Explaining his new style to Davidson, Allen wrote, 'I can't understand how emotion is put into a poem...emotion as I try to understand it psychologically, is not a real division of the mind, but only an aspect of it, inseparable from any mental state, however "intellectual" that state may seem.'

He began voicing strong objections to poetry based explicitly on the personal experiences of the poet. In the mind of the reader who demanded that poetry satisfy him emotionally, Allen argued, 'the emotional content of the poem appeals *only* because it strikes a note in the personal experience of the reader; thus it is the content and not the art which is important to such a mind.' In Allen's opinion, the Modernist poet's revolt against traditional form in poetry allowed intellectuals like himself to express themselves in a medium that more closely approximated the complexity of their thoughts.... Soon Allen considered himself a champion of Eliot's doctrine of 'objectivity in art' and proclaimed that form and design, not feelings, were the proper object of study for a poet. 'I don't think that one poem is better than another at all because of bigness of themes, i.e. philosophy... It is all style, method, diction, and a hundred other things.'

These Modernist ideas worked perfectly for Allen. His parents taught him to feel a great deal about the South, but they had never taught him much about expressing emotions directly. Now he had finally identified a way to intellectualize feelings of all kinds. It is no wonder that his poems from this period increasingly had as their protagonist an artist detached from the events, objects, and people around him. Behind the man in Allen's poems--the artist who cannot act on events but who is instead preoccupied by the way they act on him--was a child who had been subjected to the emotional unpredictability of conflicting parents. He had observed the way his father used formality to distance himself from turmoil in the family, yet he had also been frightened by Orley's violent outbursts, which were evidently not unlike those W. J. Cash attributed to poor whites of the Old South....

Mr. Pope and Other Poems [1928] contained the 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' 'Causerie,' and other poems that emerged as Tate's childhood memories fought with his Modernist aesthetics. Although angered when a reviewer for the *New York Times* identified him as Stonewall Jackson's biographer instead of as a poet, Tate had to admit that without the biography, he never would have been able to publish the poetry in the United States. Minton, Balch and Company agreed to bring out the poems only after the Jackson biography had sold enough copies to offset the financial loss of publishing the verse.... Reviews...confirmed that Tate's reputation as a Southerner was of greater interest to critics than his Modernism. Although the book was not widely reviewed and seven years later had sold only 330 copies, those critics who did review it recognized a brilliant, if troubled, poet still under the hold of Modernist ideas but captivated by Southern themes. Morton Zabel, soon to assume the editorship of *Poetry Magazine*, criticized Tate's 'tortured

syllogistic design' and his 'deliberate obscurity,' but hailed the 'beautiful solemnity' of the 'Ode to the Confederate Dead.' Similarly, John Gould Fletcher condemned the 'thwarted obscurity' and 'portentous incoherence' of Tate's modernism, but praised him as a 'considerable poet' from the 'insurgent South' who was carrying out an 'agonized search for absolute values.'

Fletcher saw what Tate himself had been reluctant to admit; that he was best when he deserted Eliot to write poetry about the historical imagination of modern Southerners. 'Whenever he deliberately narrows his range of knowledge to that of the past alone,' Fletcher elaborated, 'as in the impressive "Ode to the Confederate Dead," he is a major poet.' A year later, the Poetry Society of South Carolina awarded Tate the Caroline Sinkler Prize for the best poetry book to have been published by a Southerner in the previous year. Although Tate still viewed himself as a Modernist poet criticizing the modernization of America, he had learned a valuable lesson. Shortly after the book appeared, he concluded, 'The good in all poetry has a provincial origin, no matter how much it may be disguised. The contemporary menace to poetry lies in the complex causes that force us into an exile from which we can't return.'...

Scribner's released *Poems, 1928-1931* in late February 1932.... The new volume received mixed reviews. Critics continued to censure Tate for the obscurity of his verse and for his insistence on intellectualizing his emotions. While recognizing him as 'a sonneteer who might easily be among today's foremost,' a reviewer for the *New York Times* concluded that most of his 'lines are not readily understood.' William Rose Benet of the *Saturday Review of Literature* believed that Tate had substituted 'an obscurantist pedantry' for 'the expression of genuine emotions.' Because of his self-conscious intellectualism, Benet concluded, Tate wrote 'like a man in a library.' Similarly, Eda Lou Walton, a reviewer for the *Nation*, called Tate 'a very sterile poet' whose mind was completely separated from his feelings. She tried to reconstruct Tate's thoughts after he wrote the first draft of an emotionally intelligible poem. 'This will not do,' she imagined him thinking to himself. 'I have not given record here of the modern intricacies in this idea; I have not shown the conflicting associations it must arouse, I have not abstracted from this feeling or situation its philosophical and intellectual application.' This kind of 'clever reasoning,' Walton concluded, whether 'sound or unsound, is not great poetry.'

Part of the problem was Tate's steadfast refusal to abandon completely his highly intellectualized Modernist ideas in favor of emotionally and historically intelligible Southern themes. After returning to the South and settling at Benfoly, he had begun to feel even more comfortable with Southern themes, and his friends noticed a new voice emerging in his poetry. 'It is directer, simpler, and I think more powerful than you earlier verse,' Davidson told Tate. But reviewers believed Tate had not moved far enough. Reviewing *Poems, 1923-1931* for the *Yale Review*, Louis Untermeyer noted 'a large stride in the progress of this vigorous and versatile Southerner,' yet lamented Tate's 'perverse refusal to allow a native rhetoric full play.' Similarly, Yvor Winters, a consistent supporter of Tate's, observed that he had yet to work out his private preoccupations with his genealogy. 'We are expecting the revelation of some dark family tragedy,' Winters wrote, 'something known to the family group in question and to them only, but we suddenly find ourselves standing in the public garden.' Louise Bogan observed that many of the poems in his new volume--for instance, 'Message from Abroad,' 'The Oath,' and 'Emblems'--demonstrate a 'deep and homely pride in countryside and kin.' But poems like 'Sonnets of the Blood,' though 'in some ways impressive,' were failures because Tate was unable to 'decide between his early and later methods.' Tate found these reviews depressing and annoying....

When reviewers criticized Tate, it was to chastise him for being obscure, stylistically dense, or abstract--or to point out contradictions in his thought. He knew many of the reviewers of his book, but that did not blind them to its discrepancies. Malcolm Cowley, a personal friend and political foe, understood these contradictions best. 'I doubt,' Cowley was willing to admit, 'that any other poet in this country is a better judge of his contemporaries than Allen Tate.' But Cowley thought 'it almost seems that his essays are being written by three persons, not in collaboration but in rivalry.' Tate, he elaborated, 'is a Catholic by intellectual conviction (though not by communion), he is a Southern Agrarian by social background, he is a man of letters trained in the Late Romantic or Symbolist tradition--and these are three positions that cannot be reconciled anywhere short of Nirvana.' As a result, Tate responded to 'the civil war inside his mind by the process of reducing everything to abstractions.'

Similarly, Gorham Munson complained that 'Tate refers to religion frequently but always in terms of abstractions. We cannot locate his religion; it seems literary and is certainly peculiar.' Reviewing the book for the *Nation*, William Troy called Tate a 'hard-pressing dialectician' who had produced 'criticism that is at once stimulating and exhausting.' Yet Troy found 'a contradiction between the idea of tradition, which must be 'automatically operative' in order to be valid, and the main implication of the book, that tradition can and must be defended through political action'....

To Tate's satisfaction, he still had many admirers. Writing for the *Bookman*, J. V. Cunningham argued that 'the best poems' in the new volume [1932] 'should become the texts of the next generation as Mr. Eliot's poems were of the last.' Morton Zabel concluded that Tate was 'working toward a permanent claim' to the adjective 'major.' Despite his criticisms of the new volume, Yvor Winters still thought Tate 'the most mature poet to appear in America' since Edwin Arlington Robinson. Some of his poems 'mark the highest level to which twentieth century poetry has attained'....

Tate's despair worsened after the appearance of his *Selected Poems* [1937]... Tate's friends and many reviewers, however, recognized *Selected Poems* as the work of a major poet. 'If you don't receive the Pulitzer prize for this book,' Donald Davidson assured Tate, 'it will be only for the same reason that an Agrarian Law could not pass the Supreme Court.' Reviewers such as Cudworth Flint praised the collection as a book 'no one who cares for the health and high estate of poetry in America can afford to overlook.' Comparing Tate to Yeats, a reviewer for the *Boston Transcript* hailed the collection as 'the ultimate best of a poet whose hard and active mind makes a deep impression on the thinking of the times, and the poetry of the future.' Morton Zabel wrote in the *New Republic* that some of the poems in *Selected Poems* were 'among the finest American poems of our time.' Likewise, Carl Sandburg, who befriended Tate at the Olivet Writer's Conference, was thrilled to receive the collected poems of 'a man familiar with several lost causes, a man with imagination and music and sudden capacity for horse laughter--with enough of bitterweed and salt humor to be content if his book is highly companionable and is kept in a corner among the repeatedly used books.'

Yet *Selected Poems* failed to win Tate a Pulitzer. For all the accolades the book earned, the old charge of obscurity cropped up in most of the reviews.... A British reviewer praised Tate's 'underlying force of feeling,' but taunted him by quoting back one of his own lines of poetry: 'High in what hills, by what illuminations / Are you intelligible?' A more respectful reviewer for *Time* magazine could not resist adding that 'Tate's poems...conduce to the racking of brains in private.' Even Tate's admirers had grown impatient with the difficulty of deciphering his verse. 'Tate has been,' one observer of this impatience wrote, 'and to a lesser extent still is, the most highly praised poet of his generation with the exception of Hart Crane. It is true that more recently he has had his share of condemnation, not only from the Left, but rather surprisingly, from what one would suppose to be congenial quarters....'

Such qualified admiration may have stemmed in part from Scribner's overzealous marketing of a volume they knew would have a limited audience. (While T. S. Eliot thought it 'a volume which stands up extremely well,' he declined publishing the book in England simultaneously because of the difficulty in selling copies.)... Yet readers expecting to find a Southerner weeping below the moonlight and magnolias found instead a poet who continued to renounce direct emotional statements in favor of Eliot's 'objective correlative.'... Tate explained in the book's preface, 'my concern is the experience that I hope the reader will have in reading the poem.' Behind Tate's 'objective' verse, however, lay experiences and emotions too powerful for public revelation. (It would be for Robert Lowell, years later, to speak the truth about Tate's verse: 'His poems, all of them, even the slightest, are terribly personal.')..."

Thomas A. Underwood
Allen Tate: Orphan of the South
(Princeton/Oxford 2000) 3-5, 26-7, 63-5, 138, 154, 157, 177, 181-2, 237-8, 277-9, 324n.127,
327n.41, 443

"Underwood's biography restores Allen Tate to his rightful place as the greatest poet produced by the South and as a major American man of letters."

David Herbert Donald
Harvard University

(blurb 2000)

Michael Hollister (2021)