

## ANALYSIS

### THE STYLES OF ALLEN TATE

(1899-1979)

## POETRY

"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

"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)

"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

"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

"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 honorific hyperbole, a device for creating false gods and imaginary ghosts."

Arthur Mizener  
*New Republic* (13 April 1953) 18

"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....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 Persius 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 paeon 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....

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."

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

"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

"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....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."

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

"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 souging of the leaves serves for a transition to the other parts of the book."

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

"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 practicing 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)

*The Sewanee Review* 67:546

(Autumn 1959)

"In 'The Man of Letters in the Modern World,' Tate writes, 'He [the man of letters] has an immediate responsibility to other men no less than to himself, for the vitality of language.' And he proceeds to suggest what 'vitality of language' means: 'the rediscovery of the human condition in the living arts.' This is, of course, a counsel of perfection, never to be followed with complete success. But it haunts Allen Tate, and his best critical work has as much of this authentic life as any prose now being written. Consider, for example, this paragraph from *The Forlorn Demon* (1953). He is explaining his title, a phrase from a poem perhaps by Poe:

To the question, What would attract the attention of demons if they lost interest in us? we have no answer at present; nor can we guess how different their personalities seem to them; perhaps every demon is sure that he is unique. Poe was certain all his life that he was not like anybody else. The saints tell us that confident expectancy of damnation is a more insidious form of spiritual pride than certainty of salvation. The little we know of hell is perhaps as follows; it promptly *adjusts* and *integrates* its willing victims into a standardized monotony, in which human suffering, its purpose thus denied, begins to sound like the knock of an unloosed piston. A famous literary critic predicted years ago that our poetry would soon echo the rhythms of the internal combustion engine, and he produced a short verse-play to prove it. I take it he meant that poetry would no longer move to the rhythms of the heart, which are iambic or trochaic, depending on whether the ear picks up the beat at the diastole or the systole, with occasional fibrillations and inverted T.-waves to delight the ear and to remind us of the hour of our death. The rapidity of a piston reminds us of a machine which can temporarily or permanently break down; but it can be exactly duplicated and it cannot die. To this god,

I believe, we owe our worship of rapid and exciting language, an idolatry that in one degree or another is the subject of most of these essays.

The vitality of this paragraph is produced by very complex tensions within and between 'demon,' 'damnation,' 'the rhythm of the heart,' and the god of the machine. Is the writer a demon, or does he have a demon who makes him (like Poe) unique and totally alone? Would it be spiritual pride to say so too confidently, a version of that 'standardized monotony' which is hell? Hell we have all about us, in our mechanized world; real poetry moves to the rhythm of the heart, delighting the ear and reminding us of death. So we might weave back and forth within the paragraph, responding in many ways to its balanced stresses and strains. The elements are made present to the imagination without loss of mystery. And together they define a human condition, and a life-seeking motive which appears to have small hope of success.

There is a further tension in the paragraph which accounts for its light tone and the anticlimactic movement of the whole: that between the writer and his audience. The writer steps forth like an urbane but remorseful lecturer; he accepts his obligation to answer, as well as he can, a crucial question. The explicit question with which he begins is partly a joke, not the main matter in hand; but it leads, on the bias, to the real question, which is deep as hell. It is, in fact, too deep for us: let us turn, quite lightly, to 'the subject of most of these essays.'

Most of the elements which compose this paragraph are old-fashioned. The writer's acceptance of his obligation to his audience, the assumption that he owes them both scrupulous thought and wit; his polite reliance upon their intelligence, are foreign to our time and place. Poe's romantic despair, bits of the classic Christian scenario, are made to interact with the gasoline engine. Questions historical and metaphysical throb at every point, but are never mentioned. And it would be silly, in this context, to impose the heavy-handed question of the 'ontological status' of the elements in play.

When Richard II, having renounced the crown, smashes his mirror to destroy the 'brittle glory' of his face, Bolingbroke, terribly embarrassed and out of his depth, remarks,

The shadow of your sorrow hath destroyed  
The shadow of your face.

To which Richard replies,

'Tis very true, my grief lies all within,  
And these external manners of laments  
Are merely shadows to the unseen grief,  
That swells with silence in the tortured soul.  
There lies the substance.

Richard speaks for all poets and all writers and artists who try to represent the human condition. But when the 'shadows' of language are cast by a real experience, the language has some share of that vitality which Allen Tate seeks. His own best prose has it; we can ask no more of any writer."

Francis Fergusson  
"A Note on the Vitality of Allen Tate's Prose"  
*The Sewanee Review* 67:579-81 (Autumn 1959)

"'Ode to the Confederate Dead'...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 if 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....

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."

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

"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."

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

"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....

*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 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 'solipsism...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...

"*Stonewall Jackson* is important for a number of reasons, the most obvious being its worth as narrative prose. The writing is firm and clean, and it bears little resemblance to those long, involuted structures typical of his early reviews. The book might also be called a primer on the traditional society....The reader of *The Fathers* should scan the pages quickly, noticing how often verbs of vision are used, how often a contrast between light and darkness is introduced, and the difference of tone where the action and characters are sharply etched and where they grow dim or opaque....Lacy insists on calling our attention to his sight repeatedly..."

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, Mallarmé, Lautréamont; 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 synesthesia: 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 Symonds, 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, synaesthetic 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 co-operative 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....

In Tate's own words, reminiscing some twenty years later, 'from Eliot I went on to the other moderns, and I began to connect with the modern world what I had already learned from Baudelaire, first through Arthur Symonds, then from Baudelaire himself.'...Though Tate's style is not a symbolist style, though he is not a post-symbolist in the sense that Eliot is, his poetry is seriously modified by symbolist principles and tones. The most obvious manifestation of this is the crackling synesthetic imagery which pervades Tate's poetry, the forceful union of opposites...Equally important, though more subtle, was the peculiar ironic tone of some of the French writers, particularly Jules Laforgue. It makes an interesting counterpoint to the more civil ironies of John Ransom...It may in general be said that Tate's mature style is hardly present at all in his early poems, or that it exists so partially in the juvenilia as to be almost unrecognizable....

Indeed, none of what appears to me to be his best poetry was written before 1925, though the verse he contributed to *The Fugitive* and *The Double Dealer* is important for understanding his poetic development. In the next five years, however, the situation was radically different. Between 1925 and 1930 his poetic maturity came with astonishing rapidity, and the two collections from this period--*Mr. Pope and Other Poems* and *Poems 1928-1931*--contain poems which are among his finest. Nothing he has written since that time, for instance, has surpassed 'The Cross' within its scope; it is his best short poem and one of the best anywhere. Since 1930, Tate's range has become broader and his style has changed and matured; but by that time he had established a full claim to critical attention....

Some critics, complaining of Tate's 'obscurity' or 'intellectuality'...are wrong. The true situation is more subtle. The fundamental mode of Tate's poetry is...the symbolic mode, which is essential to his sensibility. Although some critics would disagree, it is not the mode itself which is at fault but the way in which Tate has sometimes used it. Except in a few satirical poems, his poetry depends on a peculiarly intense sort of vision in which objects or scenes are made to yield to a more general significance, or in which ideas and themes, originally abstract, are forced to exist in a particular perception, a concrete detail, a specific sensation. But this practice accepts a fundamental risk...the action must be viewed very clearly; the detail must be first physical, then symbolic, and not the reverse....When Tate's poetry is less than satisfactory, one of two things has usually happened: either a bogus 'experience' has been worked up in the verse to give the symbolic mode materials on which to operate, or else the mode itself has become strained....

In spite of the poem's virtues...["Death of Little Boys"] I believe this is one of the clearest examples in all Tate's poetry of the presentation of bogus experience. Yvor Winters has called it 'pseudo-reference'.... The poem fails, not because it is obscure but because it is formally incomplete. The...language...only invokes a precise scene, and does not give precision....The same type of thing may be seen, on a lesser scale, in the startling metaphors which conclude 'The Meaning of Life' and 'The Meaning of Death'...They, too, typify this violation of the major premise of the symbolic mode, that the symbol must be grounded in perception....A far more common difficulty in Tate's poetry is...a straining of the symbolic mode itself. Consider the early poem 'Light'....There is much in the poem to admire and some of the constructions which seem deficient on first reading seem less so after some thought....The first three lines of the last stanza are fine writing; the 'careless energy of a dream' not only hints at the strange movement of our dreams but also gives some rationale to the strange imagery of the first two stanzas. But even with the sanction of the last stanza, I still believe the poem strains the symbolic mode...

The difficulties in the first two stanzas are more serious. Here the symbolic mode has become a mannerism, and a grotesque one....Things happen too quickly, and the imagery becomes contorted with a gratuitous violence....Again, the poem is not obscure; its fault is that the violence of the language does not seem justified by the violence of the conception. I suppose that nearly every critic who has written of Tate's poetry has commented on the 'violence' of his style: the forcing together of images and concepts with a sort of stylistic rage which would have completely befuddled Dr. Johnson....Where do we place the line between genuine wit and outrageous eccentricity? Even with the admission, however, that such matters

cannot be precisely measured, it seems possible to say that Tate has often gone over that hypothetical line into eccentricity. Such is the case, to mention another poem, with 'Idiot'...Tate is often his own best critic, and he is so on the points I have raised....It is still wise to demand some restraint. Too much criticism of Tate has implied that he has escaped from such vices as I have been describing only occasionally, that his typical style is severely flawed. This is a mistake. Perhaps the reason for such criticism is that Tate's style is very different from that of most of his contemporaries....Tate's poetry sounds very different from that of any other man. I have always found completely incomprehensible the opinion that Tate sounds like either Ransom or Eliot. Even his best poems have a certain harshness of turbulence which is foreign to the poetry of Eliot or Ransom.

Although 'harshness' seems to be similar to the words often used to belabor Tate's poetry, I do not use it pejoratively. While it is not very precise, I intend the word to indicate a special quality in Tate's work, a certain stylistic coloration, as it were, which has something to do with both his strengths and weaknesses. In part, this harshness comes from a pressure Tate exerts on his syntax....Words normally read as adjectives...serve as nouns....This is what I have called a distortion of the symbolic mode. But this is not typical of Tate, though it happens fairly often in his early poems. The pressure Tate customarily exerts on syntax is quite different....The adjectives are still adjectives, but they are totally unexpected...The effect of this type of writing is one form of the 'harshness' I have mentioned: it hammers upon our expectation, and forces us to hitch up our attention. Usually, however, the qualities I have called 'harsh' or 'turbulent' come from Tate's habitual refusal to cast his poetry into mellifluous or euphonious language, the language usually assumed to be 'lyrical.' This is partly a matter of diction....One continually has the impression that Tate has chosen his vocabulary from certain areas of the language, and has carefully excluded other areas. At one extreme of Tate's diction is a passage like the one from 'Aeneas at Washington':

(To the reduction of uncited littorals  
We brought chiefly the vigor of prophecy,  
Our hunger breeding calculation  
And fixed triumphs).

This is what might be called Tate's formal or Latin style, and the reader of his poetry must be prepared to find passages of this type: ceremonious, relatively unmodified by imagery in the customary sense, and filled with elliptical predications ('hunger breeding calculation') which demands scrutiny. To illustrate the other extreme of Tate's diction the passage which immediately follows in 'Aeneas at Washington' will serve:

I saw the thirsty dove  
In the flowing fields of Troy, hemp ripening  
And tawny corn, the thickening Blue Grass  
All lying rich forever in the green sun.

This is very sensuous, though Tate still feels at liberty to call our attention to an unexpected adjective: 'green sun.' Both the first and the second passage are very fine writing, but their qualities are very different. The passages are, in fact, nearly opposed, and it is most significant that Tate juxtaposes them in one poem. A survey of the *Poems* will demonstrate that no one of Tate's poems is written entirely in one extreme of his diction or the other.

This should not give the impression that Tate's typical poem alternates between a formal, Latinized tone and a more physical and sensuous one. Though this occasionally happens, it is far more usual for Tate to write in what I shall call, for convenience, the middle range of his diction. This phrase may be misleading, for it seems to imply a vocabulary drawn from some hypothetical middle ground between equally hypothetical extremes of abstraction and concretion. But Tate does not achieve his 'middle range' in this fashion, and indeed the phrase is much too neutral to describe his typical manner. Consider the closing lines of 'To the Lacedemonians,' a characteristic passage on modern man, the 'Yankees of the race of men':

Poor bodies crowding round us! The white face  
Eyeless with eyesight only the modern power--  
Huddled sublimities of time and space,

They are the echoes of a raging tower

That reared its moment upon a gone land,  
Pouring a long cold wrath into the mind--  
Damned souls, running the way of sand  
Into the destination of the wind!

The passage is different from both of the quotations above. This language is crowded with sensation, but there is only one image in a conventional sense in the passage, in the final lines where modern man turns into sand blowing before the wind. The rest of the passage is dense with some of Tate's most typical effects: the abstractions pulled down into experience with one decisive adjective--'*Huddled* sublimities of time and space'; the flaring adjectives--'a long cold wrath'; the play of word upon word with such emphasis that we are forced to explore implications--'Eyeless with eyesight only.' This is representative of the middle range of Tate's diction, and most of his poetry, in one way or another, occupies this range. It is characterized, in one form, by free usage of very abstract language qualified by unexpected, precise details. Or Tate will vary this, and fasten his eye on a scene, as in the opening of 'Emblems':

Maryland, Virginia, Carolina  
Pent images in sleep  
Clay valleys rocky hills old fields of pine  
Unspeakable and deep

Out of that source of time my farthest blood  
Runs strangely to this day  
Unkempt the fathers waste in solitude  
Under the hills of clay

The writing is beautiful and exact, but it has reversed the procedure: instead of a theme revealing itself in a scene, a scene is pushed toward the theme. Here the qualifications are generalizing. But it is still Tate's typical 'middle range,' which is formed by a radical synthesis of the extreme formality and the extreme sensuality to be found at either end of the range.

I do not suggest that Tate's forcing together of the general and the particular or his preference for the startling word, the unusual predication, the tangential adjective, is unique. To the extent that American and English poets have taken Baudelaire and his successors seriously, this is common property. I do suggest, however, that Tate's language, though showing some marks of a period style, is still very personal. Few poets are quite so conscious of what Tate himself has called 'tension,' of forcing the extremes of a range of diction toward a nearly impossible unity at the center. The result sometimes looks forced, for this poetry depends upon the simultaneous control of opposing impulses. This is what gives much of Tate's poetry its harsh surface; it is a poetry in which there are a great many things going on; and because there is such a great deal to control, the possibilities of losing control are correspondingly great. But, as Robert Lowell remarked, 'out of splutter and shambling comes a killing eloquence'...

It is an eloquence which is difficult to account for; but it is there, and it is inseparable from the complex style I have been describing. It is not an eloquence which occasionally appears through the style; it exists because of the style. This makes it the more infuriating when, with bland imperturbability, critics suggest that Tate should forsake his 'Latinism,' his 'intellectuality.' Thus Babette Deutsch: 'Tate is an extraordinarily patient craftsman, working and reworking his poems with lapidary care, but his economy is apt to be expensive, his intellection often excessive, and the lyricism that might redeem both insufficient.' Miss Deutsch goes on to say that Tate's poetry seldom presents such 'clear music' as the lines from 'Pastoral':

And there they were by the river  
Where a leaf's light interval  
Ringed the deep hurrying mirror;

She finds one of Tate's great poems, 'Seasons of the Soul,' 'admirably wrought' though 'too esoteric' and concludes that 'it is this tendency to intellectualization, a cold latinity, and a weak grasp of the melodic line that mark his distance from Eliot and give his verse a stiffness which though always dignified is sometimes awkward.' This means, translated, that Miss Deutsch admires a melodic line, uncluttered by too much thought. Now I hope I have demonstrated that Tate *can* write an exceedingly sensuous poetry, relatively free of Latinisms; if more demonstration is needed, consider the concluding stanzas of 'The Mediterranean,' most of 'A Dream' from *Records*, or indeed, 'Pastoral,' though it is not one of Tate's better poems. If he *can* write in such a manner, then we are forced to recognize that he has consciously chosen not to write so in most of his verse: he has deliberately accepted the burden of making experience visual in language of a special type....

When Tate fails to really unify the general and the specific and relies instead on a sort of desperate juxtaposition, his language can become 'shambling' or even a 'splutter.' But more importantly, we must not blind ourselves to the fact that his finest poems and finest lines have come from precisely the same factors. It is a matter of control; Tate's best poetry is not found in lines like the pleasantly melodic ones Miss Deutsch quotes, but where he exercises the control his particular form of 'tension' demands....[As in] 'Ode to the Confederate Dead'...'The Cross'...'The Buried Lake'...These examples show considerable variation of tone and forms, yet all are formed from the impulses I have described, and all are Tate at his best. All display a certain energetic refusal to be 'melodic'; all are difficult but none is obscure; all have that slight touch of awkwardness, if we may use the word, which comes from the clash of opposites and is not enervating but the reverse. It is grimly amusing to note the way in which arbitrary preconceptions of what a poem should be have been imposed on Tate's work....

To understand Tate's poetry or anyone else's poetry, one must approach it where it is; after one has discovered this location and described it is plenty of time to decide whether that is a good place to be. R. P. Blackmur once located Tate's poetry, in his own runic manner, as hovering about the 'unstateable tremendous,' a model of 'the uncontrollable in pseudo-control.' Another time he remarked that Tate's poetry was 'troubled by knowledge that has not quite got into it.' One suspects that Mr. Blackmur knows more than he says, and if his cryptic generalizations may be placed at a more specific level, he is probably quite right, for he is considering what seems to be the central problem of Tate's style.

Tate's style presents a specific problem; it is not mysterious and there is no need to speak of 'melody' or 'lyricism' or 'intellectuality' in dealing with it. Let us take two words, both of which describe an aspect of Tate's poetry: 'Latinity' and 'Vision.' Then, to avoid inventing more catch words, let us make these terms specific: 'Latinity' is the formal and indeed abstract aspect of Tate's language; 'Vision' is his effort to make these abstractions visible through the use of concrete adjectives, the imagery of sight, and related means. I believe we may go one step further, and make 'Latinity' and 'Vision' into formal images, that is, stylistic representations of an ideal classical order and a religious imagination. This is neither quibbling nor obscurantism. Notice how often Tate has invoked the heroic image of man, or the ceremonies of a formalized past, or how often he has used formal techniques, often ironically, which must be associated with a classical tradition. And when he uses Aeneas as a symbol, or writes his ironically formal odes, or deliberately claims the convention of the apostrophe or invocation, Tate nearly always warns us with a purposefully heightened language. With the feature I have called 'Vision,' the religious imagination at the level of style, there are similar implications. This is the need to ground order in the actual world, to visualize the abstraction, to achieve unity.

I believe, then, that Tate's style is best seen as the method by which he brings to poetic actuality his polarized vision of the world. The tension between 'Latinity' and 'Vision' is an image of the dilemma we have seen in Tate's criticism: permanent contradictions within human experience of which he is acutely aware. This necessary relation between a style and a view of the world could hardly be more succinctly expressed than by Tate's own early poem, 'Ignis Fatuus,' which has sometimes been thought a puzzling poem....The poem is both a gloss on Tate's style and strangely prophetic of his career.

The 'light' is what I have called 'vision,' the ability to 'see,' the symbolic mode which is dependent on the religious imagination. It has 'fled the world,' remaining only as a false light which, when pursued, retreats further into the distance: for the religious imagination, in our time, is difficult to achieve, and is not to be

seized by violence. Having left the world, man is isolated from nature; the light which remains illumines nothing; it is turned to eccentricity: 'the lunar interior of the night.' The 'light' is connected with the 'fierce latinity' in the third stanza; the latinity is a property of vision, of light. And conversely, the ability to 'see' depends upon order; the two are mutually sustaining....I do not wish to discuss the poem in detail, for it is somewhat strained, particularly in the last stanza. I refer to it to reinforce my view of both the nature and the difficulty of Tate's poetry, a view which seems to me to offer more possibility of judging the quality of Tate's successes and failures than previous criticism.

When the experience gets into Tate's poetry, 'Latinity' and 'Vision' are fused. When Tate fails, as he often does, to get reality into the poem, we get a sort of hollow resonance of eccentric vocabulary and arbitrary images. In other words, without some grounding in recognizable experience, Tate's formal vocabulary wars with his imagery. The result is not obscurity, and it is difficult to see how anyone could believe such to be Tate's characteristic vice. The result is a loss of control resulting in cacophony as the components of his style clash upon one another.

At its best, however, Tate's poetry has a force which is unique because of the conditions that have been imposed upon it....It is difficult for me to reconcile my experience with this style with many of the comments which have been made on it, and I think much of this is due to a failure to understand the controlling tones of Tate's work. For example, Vivienne Koch once wrote an essay which has become one of the widely read criticisms of Tate. It was an interesting essay, full of insights, yet it contained some fundamental misconceptions. Miss Koch wrote of Tate's early poetry that he betrayed in every poem 'a frankly nihilistic temper which, in its alternating violence and absolution, was a romanticism of a somewhat more fiery brand than his criticism might have endorsed.' Miss Koch argued for a view of Tate's work which has achieved some popularity: that his angry rejections of the present are one mark of a covertly romantic sensibility, that his poetry points in a quite different direction from ideas expressed in his criticism. I do not agree with Miss Koch's conclusions, but that is not the issue. The issue is: will even Tate's early poetry really admit this sort of description? Take 'Ditty,' for instance, one of the poems Miss Koch herself quotes. Is the temper 'nihilistic'?....

In my relative innocence, I would not have thought of describing the poem as nihilistic.' I should have called it ironic: a word much overworked, but the only possible word to describe a constant quality of Tate's poetry. But this is a far different irony from the youthful posturings of his Fugitive days. Tate pictures modern man who, having separated himself from nature, now finds his experience eccentric and terrifying, who has denied his specific humanity with his abnegation of the burden of consciousness.

There is, I suppose, some sort of 'rejection of the present' in 'Ditty,' but it is the reverse of nihilism. The irony here is not directed at the poet, but at an inadequate version of experience. Those who 'cover the flying dark with sleep like falling leaves' have lost their sight, the crucial perception for the human condition. Modern man has 'tucked in his eyes,' a statement which implies not nihilism, but the opposite, that the poet himself has a position, a point of view from which he views the inadequacies of modern man. One may disagree with Tate's position, but the position is perfectly recognizable as the demand for the unity of experience which I have examined at length.

The irony of 'Ditty' is in the language of the poem; it is self contained. This is generally true of Tate's work, and I can see little excuse for the bulk of that criticism which has so widely misinterpreted Tate's poetry and missed the primary quality of his work. It is not an easy poetry, to be sure, but it is certainly not opaque; it demands intelligent reading to discover the almost Joycean moments of epiphany which break loose from their contexts and open into all of Tate's major conceptions and patterns of imagery. Such reading should reveal that not even Tate's celebrated irony is his primary or controlling tone. Irony demands a deeper attitude, an angle of vision. The tone which underlies any other attitude which Tate may assume is tragic.

The word is often used lightly, but here it is used to oppose the various forms of pathos, including nostalgia. It includes the concepts of dignity and heroism, the Christian version of which is the doctrine of *imago dei*: much of the rage in Tate's poetry is directed against perversion of this dignity. It includes *hamartia*, a flaw or sin which may expand into *hubris*, insolence, or even violence, which also have their

Christian counterparts, found everywhere in Tate's poetry in the violent and sometimes obscene images of men preying upon men. It includes *catastrophe*, which is an overturning or reduction: if there was ever a post-lapsarian world, it is in Tate's poetry. Tragedy should include *catharsis* or cleansing which might be Christianized, with some stretching, into salvation. But there is little catharsis and less salvation in Tate's poetry, except as their absence is duly noted. Tate's tragic view is generally truncated, though the proper conclusion begins to be visible in his latest work.

This may sound grandiose and theological, but it all has legitimate application. Though the danger in thus forcing together classical and Christian ideas is that both may become distorted, it is unlikely that we shall understand Tate's poetry without some such synthesis. It is such an underlying sense of tragedy which gives shape to Tate's irony and satire, to the invective which occasionally enters his poetry, or to the strange bitterness that seems to tinge his world. These are reversals of or variations on the controlling tragic tone. When Tate's indignation becomes explicit, the result is satire or denunciation. It is often explosive when, writing from his sense of history and the necessity of moral unity, he excoriates some lunacy or bestiality, as in the closing lines of 'Causerie'...

More often, Tate's vision of the disparity between the ideal and the actual is modulated into irony similar to that in 'Ditty.' Sometimes this is merely the forcing of a word or phrase into one of his characteristic puns or ambiguities. In 'Last Days of Alice' the cat grins his 'abstract rage' in an abstract world. Alice 'gazes learnedly down her airy nose' like Narcissus into a looking glass world which reflects nothing but himself; the pun on 'airy' refers to both the vapor-thin world we share with Alice and the strange snobbery which makes us proud of it. Many times Tate's irony is even more indirect and subtle. There is, for instance, his use of formal irony. With no announcement, he will appropriate a conventional form or device and put it to a use which deliberately strains the convention. The 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' is the most famous example, but there are others, such as the forcing of Walt Whitman into *terza rima* in 'False Nightmare' or the use of invocations in 'Seasons of the Soul.' As a matter of fact, one variety of irony or another is quite a permanent feature of Tate's work, an implication of his awareness of tragedy: the two go together.

To insist that Tate is a tragic and ironic poet is perfectly just, and it does not imply one of the fatuities still occasionally heard: that Tate, born out of his time, is so disgusted with the culture that he 'rejects' the modern world. The picture this arouses is that of Adam Stanton in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, who wanted to throw the world away because it would not conform to his ideal. But Tate is not Adam Stanton, notwithstanding those reviewers, like the gentleman Howard Nemerov charitably refused to name, who have believed that 'it is much easier to discover what Tate is against than what he is for' and that Tate is 'recusant to the wholeness of humanity....' The statement is flummery; the attitude, wherever it has appeared, is trifling. When I call Tate a tragic poet I do not imply that he is a Sophocles or a Racine, but I mean to indicate several characteristics which any adequate view of tragedy must include. One of these is a powerful, definite affirmation; without affirmation, there can be no tragedy.

John Crowe Ransom recently mentioned this matter, and he remarked that if the statement 'Mr. Tate does not accept the modern world' is inverted we get something like '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.' To put it another way, mature irony or satire does not generate itself; the negative virtues of irony exist only as the implication of positive affirmation. What Tate has affirmed, to shift Ransom's emphasis, is a Christian view of man. This is not vague: it is the belief that man is both Ishmael and dignified; that he is the chief glory of creation though fallen; that he is created in the image of God. This position is implied in Tate's work long before he professed Christianity, and this is what he affirms even in those works where he speaks of the near-impossible difficulty of the religious vision.

To be sure Tate has seldom--at least in his poetry--approached this position directly. But nothing less will account for the quality of his irony or his tragedy than the immense gap between the Christian view of man, which was presumably realized at least somewhat more completely at an earlier time, and the pathetically small remnant of that view still active in our society. Nearly every line he has written is a small testimony to both to both Tate's affirmation and the difficulty of that affirmation. We should notice that Tate's failures as a poet have never been in the direction of triviality, but in the opposite direction: he tries to force the large vision. Whatever the dominant tone of the moment may be, Tate is simultaneously aware

of the great themes and the jeopardy in which they have been placed. This might be illustrated by referring to many of his poems, including 'Ode to the Confederate Dead.' But since so many writers, including Tate himself, have commented on that poem, I shall refer instead to 'The Oath'....

'The Oath' might be called a poem dealing with the possibilities of tragedy. Potential heroism is here, symbolized by the portrait on the wall, the bullet-mould, the powder-horn: all the remnants of heroism. Though the theme in 'The Oath' depends upon smaller and less conventional symbols than 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' the situation is very similar. In both poems the objective setting suggests ritual, the grand manner, a tradition transcending the present moment and personal whim; in both poems these larger dimensions are dissolved into the narrower limits of personality. The protagonist of 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' cannot 'see' the heroes of the past; here the scene hesitates between light and darkness and, as in *The Fathers*, what is not seen clearly is uncertain and ambiguous. Major Bogan's portrait is partly shadowed, and the two friends themselves sit in the twilight:

There's precious little to say between day and dark,  
Perhaps a few words on the implacable will  
Of time sailing like a magic barque  
Or something as fine for the amenities....

This is not only the report of desultory conversation and long silences between two old friends on a winter evening; it is a question of whether the 'implacable will of time' has left modern man anything to say about those quaint barbarities of the past, so different from modern barbarism.

Conversation seems to be all that is left to the living. It is the faint sense of animation which keeps them from being literally dead, as Major Bogan's eyes glance down in scorn. The darkness gathers as they continue to talk:

Then Lytle asked: Who are the dead?  
Who are the living and the dead?  
And nothing more was said.  
So I, leaving Lytle to that dream,  
Decided what it is in times that gnaws  
The aging fury of a mountain stream.  
When suddenly as an ignorant mind will do  
I thought I heard the dark pounding its head  
On a rock, crying: 'Who are the dead?'  
Then Lytle turned with an oath--By God it's true!

They are fine lines, though 'the dark pounding its head on a rock' seems forced in spite of being prepared for by an earlier personification I have not quoted. But the conclusion, nowhere stated, is obvious, as Cleanth Brooks has said. It is implicit in the scene's contrast of the fierce life-in-death of the ancestors and the death-in-life of the living, in the metaphor of time, as a mountain stream, wearing itself out to listlessness and death: in this gray world, it is 'we' who are dead.

Sometimes approached historically, sometimes through more direct meditation upon moral and religious issues, this awareness of the tragic disparity between the ideal and the actual is present, in one way or another, in every poem Tate has written. In his poems we, modern men, are measured against the religious and moral standards which have formed our history; we are shrunken and incomplete. We eagerly cooperate in our own destruction, tormented by furies we do not understand because we have denied ourselves the power of understanding. The best that can be said is that

the heart  
Of man has a little dignity, but less patience  
Than a wolf's, and a duller sense that cannot  
Smell its own mortality. ('The Wolves')

But Tate knows that the dignity is there, however corrupted. This is what saves him from either pathos or simple negation. This is the acute, personal force which drives through his poetry.

I will conclude this general account of Tate's style with some reference to his later poetry, by which I mean *The Winter Sea* (1944) and subsequent work. Though I have intentionally avoided much consideration of development in my account of Tate's style, there is enough difference in this later poetry to call for some special attention.

On first glance, it seems very different from his earlier work, both thematically and stylistically. I believe this impression is a superficial one which will not stand much examination. Vivienne Koch says that *The Winter Sea* 'projects an almost complete break with Tate's earlier work in the forthright abandoning of the tendency to allow 'philosophic metaphors' about tradition to determine the structure and content of the poems' and that 'the only echo of the past to be found...is the concern with childhood guilt noted in 'Sonnets at Christmas' [which] now advances into a more elevated symbolic use in 'More Sonnets at Christmas' and in 'Seasons of the Soul.' This is, at most, a half truth. Insofar as Miss Koch's comments on 'philosophic metaphors' implies a shift in Tate's style, she is correct, but the later style is in no sense a break with the earlier. Furthermore, Miss Koch's feeling that the past in these poems is entirely personal is incomplete and ambiguous; her ascription of an elementary sort of 'romanticism' to Tate depends, to a large extent, on the reasoning which led her to confuse this point. The past is still in Tate's poems, and though the personal aspect is emphasized it is not only personal: the idea of tradition, and even the Old South, are still there, though in a special way which I shall deal with, particularly in my comments on 'Seasons of the Soul.'

The most notable difference between these later poems and the earlier work is seen in the prosody. Many of the poems in *The Winter Sea* employ a very short line with an extremely rapid movement. The basic line is iambic trimeter, freely varied with trochaic substitutions and two beat lines which quicken the pace. In the best of the poems--'Winter Mask' and 'Seasons'--Tate uses an intricate ten-line stanza with an extremely subtle refrain. Tate had used a short line earlier, as in 'To the Romantic Traditionists,' 'The Eagle,' and 'The Anabasis,' but never before with such freedom and vigor. Certainly one cannot measure the value of poetry in line lengths, but in compressing his line Tate also managed to loosen or relax his language. Since this might be considered a vice, this should be defined: in the better late poems there is almost none of the nervous agitation which occasionally marred his earlier work.

Many writers have made similar comments, often suggesting that Tate is heavily indebted to William Butler Yeats in this phase of his work, a debt which Tate thoughtfully documented in his 'Winter Mask.' I have not been very interested in the question of influence but it should be pointed out that Tate's interest in and usage of Yeats does not by any means enter his poetry only with the poems in *The Winter Sea*. Howard Nemerov was correct in saying Tate's themes resemble those of Yeats more than any other poet, and even the language of his earlier poetry shows a good deal of affinity with Yeats: compare Yeats's 'The Magi' with Tate's 'The Twelve.' In Tate's late poetry the direct influence of Yeats becomes, undoubtedly, very large. Tate's short line and refrain owe much to Yeats, but the style is so characteristically Tate's that there is no mistaking it:

Towards nightfall when the wind  
Tries the eaves and casements  
(A winter wind of the mind  
Long gathering its will)  
I lay the mind's contents  
Bare, as upon a table,  
And ask, in a time of war,  
Whether there is still  
To a mind frivolously dull  
Anything worth living for.

('Winter Mask')

The winter wind is Yeats's wind and it blew around Yeats's tower, but here it blows through Tate's world. It is a world rapidly heading 'towards nightfall,' when one cannot see and is well on the way to being dead. Thus, 'in a time of war,' Tate leads every stanza to the inevitable question which is inflected and varied as the refrain, but remains the same question: is there anything worth living for?

It is a terribly bleak world, and it is easy to believe that Tate's tone is one of simple despair, but such a conclusion would be mistaken. The war made profound impressions on most men, and few of them were poets, but I think it had a special sort of impact on Tate's work. It was about this time that Tate, in his essays, was dismissing the possibility of the historical myth and admitting the modern world to be hopelessly provincial. I would not say that the war was the active cause of Tate's loss of faith in history and society, for the tendency had been growing in his work for some time. But the war seems to have been the final symbol of how far the dehumanization of man had progressed. He looks at the world, compares it with the ideal of order and unity for which he had attempted to find historical images in the classical and Southern past: the distance between the two produces the mordant irony of 'Winter Mask' or the direct, bitter satire of 'Ode to Our Young Pro-Consuls of the Air.' The 'Ode,' as well as other poems in the book, is very topical, heavy with references to specific individuals and the situations of the war years. Some critics do not seem to have recognized that a typical poem is not automatically trivial or that some of the best satirical poems in English are occasional: Tate's satire is personal; it is not petty. But it is probably too bitter for many readers, who may dislike hearing the American war effort, personified in young aviators, addressed in terms such as 'O animal excellence, / Take pterodactyl flight.' It may even be unAmerican to write:

Take off, O gentle youth,  
And coasting India  
Scale crusty Everest  
Whose mythic crest  
Resists your truth;  
And spying far away

Upon the Tibetan plain  
A limping caravan,  
Dive, and exterminate  
The Lama, late  
Survival of old pain  
Go kill the dying swan.

This is violent, but it is fine satire. When Tate excoriates the 'gentle youth' flying off in his 'reptilian bomber' in sublime assurance that the American cause is just and that the 'German toad' must be crushed he is not writing subtle treason for the sake of a cultural ideal. This is no more than the other side, the political side, of the coin from where he views himself, in the first of 'More Sonnets at Christmas':

Ten years ago His eyes, fierce shuttlecocks,  
Pierced the close net of what I failed: I feared  
The belly-cold, the grave-clout, that betrayed  
Me dithering in the drift of cordial seas;  
Ten years are time enough to be dismayed  
By mummy Christ, head crammed between his knees.

The passage is strained, too heavily loaded with images that crowd out the visual basis of the preceding image. Nevertheless, though the 'Sonnets' are extremely personal, and though Robert Lowell was correct in saying that all of Tate's poems are 'terribly personal,' there is more here than personal failure, personal guilt, or personal religious problems. Nor is the image of the both fetal and desiccated Christ a rejection of Christianity: it is a comment on western man committed to violence. Tate has his eye on a culture, both general and personal, which is unleavened by the Christianity upon which it is ostensibly built and, more particularly, which has lost the Christian vision of man as a person created to love, to suffer, to sin, or to die, but always as a *person* with personal dignity.

Instead of this, what Tate sees is 'The American people fully armed / With assurance policies, righteous and harmed' battling 'an enemy in remote oceans / Unstalked by Christ.' At Christmas, in wartime, it is difficult to pray to Christ, who allegedly thought man worth dying for to redeem, when the war-prayer which Tate sees on the collective lips of the American nation is so different:

Then hang this picture for a calendar,  
As sheep for goat, and pray most fixedly  
For the cold martial progress of your star,  
With thoughts of commerce and society,  
Well-milked Chinese, Negroes who cannot sing,  
The Huns gelded and feeding in a ring.

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.

I have presented a general account of Tate's style in this chapter, but no general account is ever completely satisfactory, and in the next chapters I will concentrate more narrowly on some representative poems. My purpose is not to celebrate the ritual joys of explication but to avoid the peck-and-snatch treatment Tate's poems have usually received. I have not talked of Tate's latest poetry, but this is intentional: though my general comments on the poetry will apply to it, it presents some problems outside the scope of this chapter, which I will reserve for the final judgment of Tate's achievement."

R. K. Meiners

*The Last Alternatives: A Study of the Works of Allen Tate*  
(Alan Swallow 1963) 10-30, 33-39, 43, 60-64, 74-81, 84, 97-99, 101-27

"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 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. Poets 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

"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

"Growth and development have been observed in Tate's recent poetry. Vivienne Koch 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 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."

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

"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)

"In his prose Tate's word is the same as in his poems--why, forty years ago he admonished us: 'all the books of a poet should ultimately be regarded as one book--it was to this end that he worked.' And the word I take him at is that *he has never been able to concentrate on what could not be useful to him....* And the effect, when the books of this poet are ultimately regarded as one book, is of life pressing round a dedicated victim decked with all the gauds of immolation--dedicated, that victim, to the grand-mannerist acknowledgment of the Natural Order, which is the Repudiation of Eschatology.

His criticism is a part, as I have said, the contralto part, a middle voice taken and sustained within what Blackmur has called Allen Tate's *virtuosity of presence*: one utterance among many voices--verse, fiction, biography, essay, history, gossip, invective--though the voices speak but one language to articulate but one subject. So immense is the urgency of the voices toward that subject, so militant their conviction of its truth, that I cannot afford here, in a mere and marveling note, to engross Allen Tate's objects: the South as a way of life, certain literary figures in their representative achievements (though we may remark that Dante and Dr. Johnson are particularly prized: the autocrats of order, of Superior Form), the theory of literature, the theory of the Imagination.

Instead of entering upon these things which have been useful to Tate, I would try to set forth, with some sway of citation, what they have been useful for, and my response is to be searched, of course, as much from the demonology of *Stonewall Jackson the Good Soldier* as from the angelism of the more impenetrable poems ('I cannot believe I have illuminated the difficulties some readers have found in the

style,' Tate remarks, 'but then I cannot, have never been able to, see any difficulties of that order'), from the essays everywhere as in the emblematic heft of the figure as a whole, the-man-of-letters-in-the-modern-world resumed for my generation. The clarion enunciation of Tate's subject--so passionately entertained as to have become his subjection--occurs in his splendid novel *The Fathers* (1938); the passage contains, exemplifies *en abyme*, as the heraldist would say, by the very unreleasing momentum of the phrasing, his utter effort, his innermost persuasion:

The moment had come that all waiting had been for, but the moment was lost in each new movement, each new step.... There was of course no one moment that it was leading up to, and that piece of knowledge about life has permitted me to survive the disasters which overwhelmed other and better men, and to tell their story. Not even death was an instant; it too became part of the ceaseless flow, instructing me to beware of fixing any hope, or some terrible lack of it, upon birth or death, or upon love, or the giving in marriage. None of these could draw to itself all the life around it or even all the life in one person; not one of them but fell short of its occasion, warning up all to fear not death or love, or any ecstasy or calamity, but rather to fear our own expectancy of it, or our own lack of preparation for these final things.

Nothing ends without having to be broken off, for everything--the poet tells us, in his poems--everything is endless. That is why the South, in these essays, is regarded as a *style of life* representative of the continuities of blood, and so of ritual and tradition. That is the source of Tate's enormous repudiations, for he is truly, as he says, 'talking most of the time about what poetry cannot be expected to do to save mankind from the disasters in which poetry itself must be involved.' Again and again, the critic rehearses what the poet calls 'the deep coherence of hell,' reiterates 'a commitment to the order of nature, without which the higher knowledge is not possible to man.' He wants one thing to lead to another, wants it so hard that his thirst becomes aphoristic:

An absolutely independent judgment would be an absolutely ignorant judgment.

The future is no proper subject for criticism: we shall not derive our standards of human nature and of the good society from an unexperienced future.

Taste is the discipline of feeling according to the laws of the natural order, a discipline of submission to a permanent limitation of man.

We must judge the past and keep it alive by being alive ourselves. Thus he rejects Basic English (the secularization of the mind) as he rejects the Protestant, scientific North (the secularization of the body politic) because it leads to communication without prior or following communion. 'Poe,' he says in one of his great dismissals, 'Poe circumvented the natural world. Since he refused to see nature he was doomed to see nothing. He overleaped and cheated the condition of man.' Essentially Catholic, then, Tate's imagination (and he would say, all imagination) rejects an heretical Apocalypse, rejects that compulsion to cast out nature, to uproot whatever seems external to redemption, whatever might intervene between the self and God. 'The task of the civilized intelligence,' Tate insists, 'is one of perpetual salvage.' His is the tact, as he says of Dante elsewhere, 'the tact of mediation between universals and particulars in the complex of metaphor'."

Richard Howard  
"A Note on Allen Tate's Essays"  
*Poetry* 116:43-45 (April 1970)

"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)

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

"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'."

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

"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....

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 traditionist 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..."

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 to 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

"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 latinate 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 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

"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."

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

"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....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....

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....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."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.

*Twentieth-Century Southern Literature*

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

"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...

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 Benfollly, 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.'...

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....

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

Michael Hollister (2021)