



Allen Tate

(1899-1979)

Ode to the Confederate Dead (1928)

Row after row with strict impunity
The headstones yield their names to the element,
The wind whirrs without recollection;
In the riven troughs the splayed leaves
Pile up, of nature the casual sacrament
To the seasonal eternity of death;
Then driven by the fierce scrutiny
Of heaven to their election in the vast breath,
They sought the rumor of mortality.

Autumn is desolation in the plot
Of a thousand acres where these memories grow
From the inexhaustible bodies that are not
Dead, but feed the grass row after rich row.
Think of the autumns that have come and gone!--
Ambitious November with the humors of the year,
With a particular zeal for every slab,
Staining the uncomfortable angels that rot
On the slabs, a wing chipped here, an arm there:
The brute curiosity of an angel's stare
Turns you, like them, to stone,
Transforms the heaving air
Till plunged to a heavier world below
You shift your sea-space blindly
Heaving, turning like the blind crab.

Dazed by the wind, only the wind
The leaves flying, plunge

You know who have waited by the wall
The twilight certainty of an animal,
Those midnight restitutions of the blood
You know--the immitigable pines, the smoky frieze
Of the sky, the sudden call: you know the rage,
The cold pool left by the mounting flood,

Of muted Zeno and Parmenides.
You who have waited for the angry resolution
Of those desires that should be yours tomorrow,
You know the unimportant shrift of death
And praise the vision
And praise the arrogant circumstance
Of those who fall
Rank upon rank, hurried beyond decision--
Here by the sagging gate, stopped by the wall.

Seeing, seeing only the leaves
Flying, plunge and expire
Turn your eyes to the immoderate past,
Turn to the inscrutable infantry rising
Demons out of the earth--they will not last.
Stonewall, Stonewall, and the sunken fields of hemp,
Shiloh, Antietam, Malvern Hill, Bull Run.
Lost in that orient of the thick-and-fast
You will curse the setting sun.

Cursing only the leaves crying
Like an old man in a storm

You hear the shout, the crazy hemlocks point
With troubled fingers to the silence which
Smothers you, a mummy, in time.

The hound bitch
Toothless and dying, in a musty cellar
Hears the wind only.

Now that the salt of their blood
Stiffens the saltier oblivion of the sea,
Seals the malignant purity of the flood.
What shall we who count our days and bow
Our heads with a commemorial woe
In the ribboned coats of grim felicity,
What shall we say of the bones, unclean,
Whose verdurous anonymity will grow?
The ragged arms, the ragged heads and eyes
Lost in these acres of the insane green?
The gray lean spiders come, they come and go;
In a tangle of willows without light
The singular screech-owl's tight
Invisible lyric seeds the mind
With the furious murmur of their chivalry.

We shall say only the leaves
Flying, plunge and expire

We shall say only the leaves whispering
In the improbable mist of nightfall
That flies on multiple wing:
Night is the beginning and the end
And in between the ends of distraction
Waits mute speculation, the patient curse

That stones the eyes, or like the jaguar leaps
For his own image in a jungle pool, his victim.
What shall we say who have knowledge
Carried to the heart? Shall we take the act
To the grave? Shall we, more hopeful, set up the grave
In the house? The ravenous grave?

Leave now
The shut gate and the decomposing wall:
The gentle serpent, green in the mulberry bush,
Riots with his tongue through the hush--
Sentinel of the grave who counts us all!

ANALYSIS

[From "Narcissus as Narcissus" (1938) by Tate]:

II

That poem is "about" solipsism or Narcissism, or any *ism* that denotes the failure of the human personality to function properly in nature and society. Society (and "nature" as modern society constructs it) appears to offer limited fields for the exercise of the whole man, who wastes his energy piecemeal over separate functions that ought to come under a unity of being. (Until the last generation, only certain women were whores, having been set aside as special instances of sex amid a social scheme that held the general belief that sex must be part of a whole; now the general belief is that sex must be special.) Without unity we get the remarkable self-consciousness of our age. Everybody is talking about this evil, and a great many persons know what ought to be done to correct it. As a citizen I have my own prescription, but as a poet I am concerned with the experience of solipsism. And an experience of it is very different from a theory *about* it.

I should have trouble concerning solipsism and the Confederate dead, as a rational thesis; I should make a fool of myself in the discussion, because I know no more of the Confederate dead or of solipsism than hundreds of other people. (Possibly less: the dead Confederates may be presumed to have a certain privacy; and as for solipsism, I blush to the philosophies who know all about Bishop Berkeley; I use the term here in its strict etymology.) And if I call this interest in one's ego Narcissism, I make myself a logical ignoramus, as well as a loose-mouth with mythology. I use Narcissism to mean only preoccupation with self; it may be love or hate. But a good psychiatrist knows that it means self-love only, and otherwise he can talk about it more coherently, knows more about it than I ever hope or desire to know. He would look at me professionally if I piped up with the remark that the modern squirrel cage of our sensibility, the extreme introspection of our time, has anything to do with the Confederate dead.

But when the doctor looks at literature it is a question whether he sees it: the sea boils and pigs have wings because in poetry all things are possible--if, as the drug-store cowboys would put it, you are man enough. They are possible because in poetry the disparate elements are not combined in logic, which can combine only under certain categories and under the law of contradiction; they are combined rather as experience, and experience has decided to ignore logic, except perhaps as another field of experience. Experience means conflict, our natures being what they are, and conflict means drama. Dramatic experience is not logical; it may be subdued to the kind of coherence that we indicate when we speak, in criticism, of form. Indeed, as experience, this conflict is always a logical contradiction, or philosophically an antinomy. Serious poetry deals with the fundamental conflicts that cannot be logically resolved: we can state the conflicts rationally, but reason does not relieve us of them. Their only final coherence is the formal re-creation of art, which "freezes" the experience as permanently as a logical formula, but without, like the formula, leaving all but the logic out.

Narcissism and the Confederate dead cannot be connected logically, or even historically; even were the connection a historical fact, they would not stand connected as art, for no one experiences raw history. The proof of the connection must lie, if anywhere, in the experienced conflict which is the poem itself. Since one set of references for the conflict is the historic Confederates, the poem, if it is successful, is a certain section of history made into experience, but only on this occasion, and on these terms: even the author of the poem has no experience of its history apart from the occasion and the terms.

It will be understood that I do not claim even a partial success in the junction of the two "ideas" in the poem I am about to discuss. I am describing an intention, and the labor of revising the poem--a labor spread over ten years--fairly exposes the lack of confidence that I have felt and still feel in it. All the tests of its success in style and versification would come in the end as a single test, an answer, yes or no, to the question: Assuming that the Confederates and Narcissus are not yoked together by mere violence, has the poet convinced the reader that, on the specific occasion of this poem, there is a necessary yet hitherto undetected relation between them? By necessary I mean dramatically relevant, a relation "discovered" in terms of the particular occasion, not historically argued or philosophically deduced. Should the question that I have just asked be answered yes, then this poem or any other with its specific problem could be said to have form: what was previously a merely felt quality of life has been raised to the level of experience--it has become specific, local, dramatic, "formal"--that is to say, *in*-formed.

III

The structure of the Ode is simple. Figure to yourself a man stopping at the gate of a Confederate graveyard on a late autumn afternoon. The leaves are falling; his first impressions bring him the "rumor of mortality"; and the desolation barely allows him at the beginning of the second stanza, the heroically conventional surmise that the dead will enrich the earth, "where these memories grow." From those quoted words to the end of that passage he pauses for a baroque meditation on the ravages of time, concluding with the figure of the "blind crab." This creature has mobility but no direction, energy but no purposeful world to use it in: in the entire poem there are only two explicit symbols for the locked-in ego; the crab is the first and less explicit symbol, a mere hint, a planting of the idea that will become overt in its second instance--the jaguar towards the end. The crab is the first intimation of the nature of the moral conflict upon which the drama of the poem develops: the cut-off-ness of the modern "intellectual man" from the world.

The next long passage or "strophe," beginning "You know who have waited by the wall," states the other term of the conflict. It is the theme of heroism, not merely moral heroism, but heroism in the grand style, elevating even death from mere physical dissolution into a formal ritual: this heroism is a formal ebullience of the human spirit in an entire society, not private, romantic illusion--something better than moral heroism, great as that may be, for moral heroism, being personal and individual, may be achieved by certain men in all ages, even ages of decadence. But the late Hart Crane's commentary is better than any I can make: "The theme of chivalry, a tradition of excess (not literally excess, rather active faith) which cannot be perpetuated in the fragmentary cosmos of today--'those desires which should be yours tomorrow,' but which, you know, will not persist nor find any way into action."

The structure then is a tension between the two themes, "active faith" which has decayed, and the "fragmentary cosmos" which surrounds us. (I must repeat here that this is not a philosophical thesis; it is an impressionistic rendering of a conflict that is concrete within the poem.) In contemplating the heroic theme the man at the gate never quite commits himself to the illusion of its availability to him. The most that he can allow himself is the fancy that the blowing leaves are charging soldiers, but he rigorously returns to the refrain: "Only the wind"--or the "leaves flying." I suppose it is a commentary on our age that the man at the gate never quite achieves the illusion that the leaves are heroic men, so that he may identify with them, as Keats and Shelley easily and beautifully did with nightingales and west winds. More than this, he cautions himself, reminds himself repeatedly of his subjective prison, his solipsism, by breaking off the half-illusion and coming back to the refrain of wind and leaves--a refrain that, as Hart Crane said, is necessary to the "subjective continuity."

These two themes struggle for mastery up to the passage,

We shall say only the leaves whispering
In the improbable mist of nightfall

which is near the end. It will be observed that the passage begins with a phrase taken from the wind-leaves refrain--the signal that it has won. The refrain has been fused with the main stream of the man's reflections, dominating them; and he cannot return even to an ironic vision of the heroes. There is nothing but death, the mere naturalism of death at that. Autumn and the leaves are death; the men who exemplified in a grand style an "active faith" are dead; there are only the leaves.

Shall we then worship death?

...set up the grave
In the house? The ravenous grave...

that will take us before our time? The question is not answered, although as a kind of romanticism it might, if answered affirmatively, provide an illusory solution to the solipsism of the man; but he cannot accept it. Nor has he been able to live in his immediate world, the fragmentary cosmos. There is no practical solution, no solution offered for the edification of moralists. (To those who may identify the man at the gate with the author of the poem I would say: He differs from the author in not accepting a "practical solution," for the author's dilemma is perhaps not quite so exclusive as that of the meditating man.) The main intention of the poem has been to state the conflict, to concentrate it, to present it, in Mr. R. P. Blackmur's phrase, as experienced form--not as a logical dilemma.

The closing image, that of the serpent, is the ancient symbol of time, and I tried to give it the credibility of the commonplace by placing it in a mulberry bush--with the faint hope that the silkworm would somehow be implicit. But time is also death. If that is so, then space, or the Becoming, is life; and I believe there is not a single spatial symbol in the poem. "Sea-space" is allowed the "blind crab"; but the sea, as appears plainly in the passage beginning, "Now that the salt of their blood..." is life only in so far as it is the source of the lowest forms of life, the source perhaps of all life, but life undifferentiated, halfway between life and death. This passage is a contrasting inversion of the conventional

...inexhaustible bodies that are not
Dead, but feed the grass...

the reduction of the earlier, literary conceit to a more naturalistic figure derived from modern biological speculation. These "buried Caesars" will not bloom in the hyacinth but will only make saltier the sea.

The wind-leaves refrain was added to the poem in 1930, nearly five years after the first draft was written. I felt that the danger of adding it was small because, implicit in the long strophes of meditation, the ironic commentary on the vanished heroes was already there, giving the poem such dramatic tension as it had in the earlier version. The refrain makes the commentary more explicit, more visibly dramatic, and renders quite plain, as Hart Crane intimated, the subjective character of the imagery throughout. But there was another reason for it, besides the increased visualization that it imparts to the dramatic conflict. It "times" the poem better, offers the reader frequent pauses in the development of the two themes, allows him occasions of assimilation; and on the whole--this was my hope and intention--the refrain makes the poem seem longer than it is and thus eases the concentration of imagery--without, I hope, sacrificing a possible effect of concentration.

IV

I have been asked why I called the poem an ode. I first called it an elegy. It is an ode only in the sense in which Cowley in the seventeenth century misunderstood the real structure of the Pindaric ode. Not only are the metre and rhyme without fixed pattern, but in another feature the poem is even further removed from Pindar than Abraham Cowley was: a purely subjective meditation would not in Cowley's age have been called an ode. I suppose in so calling it I intended an irony: the scene of the poem is not a public celebration, it is a lone man by a gate.

The dominant rhythm is "falling," the dominant metre iambic pentameter varied with six, four-, and three-stressed lines; but this was not planned in advance for variety. I adapted the metre to the effect desired at the moment. The model for the irregular rhyming was "Lycidas," but for that other models could have served. The rhymes in a given strophe I tried to adjust to the rhythm and the texture of feeling and image. For example, take this passage in the second strophe:

Autumn is desolation in the plot
Of a thousand acres where these memories grow
From the inexhaustible bodies that are not
Dead, but feed the grass row after rich row.
Think of the autumns that have come and gone!--
Ambitious November with the humors of the year,
With a particular zeal for every slab,
Staining the uncomfortable angels that rot
On the slabs, a wing chipped here, an arm there:
The brute curiosity of an angel's stare
Turns you, like them, to stone,
Transforms the heaving air
Till plunged to a heavier world below
You shift your sea-space blindly
Heaving, turning like the blind crab.

There is rhymed with *year* (to many persons, perhaps, only a half-rhyme), and I hoped the reader would unconsciously assume that he need not expect further use of that sound for some time. So when the line, "The brute curiosity of an angel's stare," comes a moment later, rhyming with *year-there*, I hoped that the violence of image would be further reinforced by the repetition of a sound that was no longer expected. I wanted the shock to be heavy; so I felt that I could not afford to hurry the reader away from it until he had received it in full. The next two lines carry on the image at a lower intensity: the rhyme, "Transforms the heaving *air*," prolongs the moment of attention upon that passage, while at the same time it ought to begin dissipating the shock, both by the introduction of a new image and by reduction of the "meaning" to a pattern of sound, the *ere*-rhymes. I calculated that the third use of that sound (*stare*) would be a surprise, the fourth a monotony. I purposely made the end words of the third from last and last lines--*below* and *crab*--delayed rhymes for *row* and *slab*, the last being an internal and half-dissonant rhyme for the sake of bewilderment and incompleteness, qualities by which the man at the gate is at the moment possessed.

This is elementary but I cannot vouch for its success. As the dramatic situation of the poem is the tension that I have already described, so the rhythm is an attempt at a series of "modulations" back and forth between a formal regularity, for the heroic emotion, and a broken rhythm, with scattering imagery, for the failure of that emotion. I have pointed out that the passage, "You know who have waited by the wall," presents the heroic theme of "active faith"; it will be observed that the rhythm, increasingly after "You who have waited for the angry resolution," is almost perfectly regular iambic, with only a few initial inversions and weak endings. The passage is meant to convey a plenary vision, the actual presence, of the exemplars of active faith: the man at the gate at the moment is nearer to realizing them than at any other in the poem; hence the formal rhythm. But the vision breaks down; the wind-leaves refrain intervenes; and the next passage, "Turn your eyes to the immoderate past," is the irony of the preceding realization. With the self-conscious historical sense he turns his eyes into the past. The next passage after this, beginning "You hear the shout..." is the failure of the vision in both phases, the pure realization and the merely historical. He cannot "see" the heroic virtues; there is wind, rain, leaves. But there is sound; for a moment he deceives himself with it. It is the noise of the battles that he has evoked. Then comes the figure of the rising sun of those battles; he is "lost in that orient of the thick and fast," and he curses his own moment, "the setting sun." The "setting sun" I tried to use as a triple image, for the decline of the heroic age and for the actual scene of late afternoon, the latter being not only natural desolation but spiritual desolation as well.... Again for a moment he thinks he hears the battle shout, but only for a moment; then the silence reaches him.

Corresponding to the disintegration of the vision just described, there has been a breaking down of the formal rhythm. The complete breakdown comes with the images of the "mummy" and the "hound bitch."

(*Hound* bitch because the hound is a hunter, participant of a formal ritual.) The failure of the vision throws the man back upon himself, but upon himself he cannot bring to bear the force of a sustained imagination. He sees himself in random images (random to him, deliberate with the author) of something lower than he ought to be: the human image is only that of preserved death; but if he is alive he is an old hunter, dying. The passages about the mummy and the bitch are deliberately brief--slight rhythmic stretches. (These are the only verses I have written for which I thought of the movement first, then cast about for the symbols.)

I believe the term modulation denotes in music the uninterrupted shift from one key to another. I do not know the term for change of rhythm without change of measure. I wish to describe a similar change in verse rhythm; it may be convenient to think of it as also modulation of a kind. At the end of the passage that I have been discussing the final words are "Hears the wind only." The phrase closes the first main division of the poem. I have loosely called the longer passages strophes, but if I were hardy enough to impose the classical organization of the lyric ode upon a baroque poem, I should say that these words bring to an end the Strophe, after which must come the next main division, or Antistrophe, which was often employed to answer the matter set forth in the Strophe or to present it from another point of view. And that is precisely the significance of the next main division. But I wanted this second division of the poem to arise out of the collapse of the first. It is plain that it would not have suited my purpose to round off the first section with some sort of formal rhythm; I ended it with an unfinished line. The next division must therefore begin by finishing that line, not merely in metre but with an integral rhythm. I will quote the passage:

The hound bitch
Toothless and dying, in a musty cellar
Hears the wind only

Now that the salt of that blood
Stiffens the saltier oblivion of the sea,
Seals the malignant purity of the flood,...

The caesura, after *only*, is thus at the middle of the third foot. (These are the familiar terms; I should use others in an extended discussion of prosody.) The reader expects the foot to be completed by the stress on the next word, *Now*, as in a sense it is; but the phrase, "Now that the salt of their blood," is also the beginning of a new movement; it is two "dactyls" creating momentarily a mounting rhythm counter to the falling rhythm that has prevailed. But with the finishing off of the line with *blood*, the falling rhythm is restored; the whole line from *Hears* to *blood* is actually an iambic pentameter with liberal inversions and substitutions that were expected to create a counter-rhythm within the line. From the caesura on the rhythm is new; it has--or was expected to have--an organic relation to the preceding rhythm; and it signals the rise of a new statement of the theme.

I have gone into this passage in detail--I might have chosen another--not because I think it is successful, but because I labored with it; if it is a failure, or even an uninteresting success, it ought to offer as much technical instruction to other persons as it would were it both successful and interesting. But a word more: the broader movement introduced by the new rhythm was meant to correspond, as a sort of Antistrophe, to the earlier formal movement beginning, "You know who have waited by the wall." It is a new formal movement with new feeling and new imagery. The precarious illusion of the earlier movement had broken down into the personal symbols of the mummy and the hound; the pathetic fallacy of the leaves as charging soldiers and the conventional "buried Caesar" theme have become rotten leaves and dead bodies wasting in the earth, to return after long erosion to the sea. In the midst of this naturalism, what shall man say?--What shall all humanity say in the presence of decay? The two themes, then, have been struggling for mastery; the structure of the poem thus exhibits the development of two formal passages that contrast the two themes. The two formal passages break down, the first shading off into the second ("Now that the salt of their blood..."), the second one concluding with the figure of the jaguar, which is presented in a distracted rhythm left hanging in the air from a weak ending--the word *victim*. This figure of the jaguar is the only explicit rendering of the Narcissus motif in the poem, but instead of a youth gazing into a pool, a predatory beast stares at a jungle stream, and leaps to devour himself.

The next passage begins:

What shall we say who have knowledge
Carried to the heart?

Should the reader care to think of this as the gathering up of the two themes, now fused, into a final statement, I should see no objection to calling it the Epode. But upon the meaning of the lines from here to the end I see no need for further commentary. I have talked about the structure of the poem, not its quality. One can no more find the quality of one's own verse than one can find its value, and to try to find either is like looking into a glass for the effect that one's face has upon other persons.

If anybody ever wished to know anything about this poem that he could not interpret for himself, he is still in the dark. I cannot believe that I have illuminated the difficulties that some readers have found in the style. But then I cannot, have never been able to, see any difficulties of that order. The poem has been much revised. I still think there is much to be said for the original *barter* instead of *yield* in the second line, and for *Novembers* instead of *November* in line fifteen. The revisions were not undertaken for the convenience of the reader but for the poem's own clarity, so that, phrase, line, passage, the poem might at worst come near its best expression.

I know that this long commentary has been a long presumption. But perhaps I have not been talking chiefly of the ostensible subject. At any rate, the presumption cannot be so egregious as the shorter presumption of the poem itself. There is nothing so presumptuous as poetry.

Allen Tate
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"Tate's 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' and 'Narcissus as Narcissus' afford a unique opportunity to study the work of a modern poet in the closest possible relation to the critical ideas which it embodies."

Walter Blair
The Literature of the United States II, third edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953, 1961, 1966) 1097

"That poem is 'about' solipsism, a philosophical doctrine which says that we create the world in the act of perceiving it; or about Narcissism, or any other *ism* that denotes the failure of the human personality to function objectively in nature and society.'

That poem, as Tate goes on to say about the 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' is also about 'a man stopping at the gate of a Confederate graveyard on a late autumn afternoon.' Thus the man at the cemetery and the graves in the cemetery become the symbol of the solipsism and the Narcissism... A symbol is something that stands for something else. What I want to do is point out some of the relationships between the 'something' and the 'something else.'

Richard Weaver has written of the Nashville Agrarians that they 'underwent a different kind of apprenticeship for their future labors. They served the must of poetry.' In a certain sense that is true, but the word 'apprenticeship' is misleading in Tate's instance. Allen Tate did not become a poet merely in order to learn how to be an Agrarian. He was a poet while he was an Agrarian; he continued to be a poet after his specific interest in Agrarianism diminished, and now he has become an active communicant of the Roman Catholic Church and he is still a poet. One must insist that for Allen Tate poetry has never been the apprenticeship for anything except poetry.

'Figure to yourself a man stopping at the gate of a Confederate cemetery....' Tate writes in his essay 'Narcissus as Narcissus.' He continues: '...he passes for a baroque meditation on the ravages of time, concluding with the figure of the "blind crab." This creature has nobility but no direction, energy but from the human point of view, no purposeful world to use it in.... The crab is the first intimation of the nature of the moral conflict upon which the drama of the poem develops: the cut-off-ness of the modern "intellectual man" from the world.'...

If the Confederate Ode is based upon a moral conflict involving 'the cut-off-ness of the "modern intellectual" from the world,' why did Tate choose as his symbol the Confederate graveyard? The answer lies in the history of the region in which Allen Tate and his fellow Fugitives and Agrarians grew up. Tate was born and reared in the Upper South, and he attended college in Nashville, Tennessee, and there was a symbolism in the South of his day ready for the asking. It was a contrast, and conflict, between what the South was and traditionally had been, and what it was tending toward. 'With the war of 1914-1918 the South re-entered the world,' Tate has written, '--but gave a backward glance as it stepped over the border: that backward glance gave us the Southern renaissance, a literature conscious of the past in the present.'

What kind of country was the South upon which Tate and his contemporaries of the early 1920s looked back at as well as observed around them? It was first of all a country with considerable historical consciousness, with rather more feeling for tradition and manners than existed elsewhere in the nation. There has been a civil war just a little over a half-century before, and the South had been badly beaten. Afterwards Southern leaders decided to emulate the ways of the conqueror, and called for a New South of cities and factories. Such Southern intellectuals as there were went along with the scheme. Men of letters like Walter Hines Page and John Spencer Bassett preached that once the provincialism of the Southern author was thrown off, and the Southern man of letters was willing to forget Appomattox Court House and Chickamauga, then Southern literature would come into its own.

When it came to forecasting a literary renaissance in the South, Bassett and his friends were absolutely right, but they could not have been more mistaken about the form that it would take. What brought about the renaissance--what there was in the time and place that made possible an Allen Tate and a William Faulkner and a Donald Davidson and a John Ransom and a Robert Penn Warren and an Andrew Lytle and three dozen other Southern writers--was not the eager willingness to ape the ways of the Industrial East, but rather the revulsion against the necessity of having to do so in order to live among their fellow Southerners. By 1920 and thereafter the South was changing, so that Tate's modern Southerner standing at the gate of a Confederate military cemetery was forced to compare what John Spencer Bassett had once termed 'the worn out ideas of a forgotten system' with what had replaced that system.

And what had taken place was what Tate and his fellow Agrarians have been crying out against ever since: the industrial, commercially-minded modern civilization, in which religion and ritual and tradition and order were rapidly being superseded by the worship of getting and spending.

Thus the Confederate graveyard as the occasion for solipsism, and the failure of the human personality to function objectively in nature and society, because for Tate there could be no question about where the young Southern writer should stand in the matter. The agrarian community that had been the Southern way of life with all its faults vastly preferable to what was taking place now. As he wrote in 1936, 'the Southern man of letters cannot permit himself to look upon the old system from a purely social point of view, or from the economic view; to him it must seem better than the system that destroyed it, better, too, than any system with which the modern planners, Marxian or any color, wish to replace the present order.' Surveying the heroic past and the empty present, the young Southerner could only feel himself in isolation from what were now his region's ways... We are, that is, inadequate, cut off, isolated; we cannot even imagine how it was. All we can see is the leaves blowing about the gravestones. So Mr. Tate's modern Southerner felt.

The 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' dates from about 1926, and that was the year, Tate recalls, that he and John Crowe Ransom began toying with the idea of 'doing something' about the Southern situation, a project which soon led to plans for the book entitled *I'll Take My Stand*, in which Tate, Ransom, and ten other Southerners set forth Agrarian counsels for what they felt was an increasingly industrialized, increasingly misled South. The central argument was stated in the first paragraph of the introduction, which Ransom composed and to which all the participants gave assent: 'All the articles bear in the same sense upon the book's title-subject: all tend to support a Southern way of life as against what may be called the American or prevailing way; and all as much as agree that the best terms in which to represent the distinction are contained in the phrase, Agrarian *versus* Industrial.'

The problem that the twelve Agrarians felt confronted the modern South was the same problem, then, as that which Mr. Tate's modern man at the graveyard gate faced. And in a very definite sense, *I'll Take My*

Stand represented their recommendations for a solution, in a particular time and place, of the central moral problem of the 'Ode to the Confederate Dead.'

The Agrarians declared in their symposium that industrialism was predatory, in that it was based on a concept of nature as something to be used. In so doing, industrialism threw man out of his proper relationship to nature, and to God whose creation it was. The Agrarian quarrel, they declared, was with applied science, which in the form of industrial capitalism had as its object the enslavement of human energies. Since all activity was measured by the yardstick of financial gain, the industrial spirit neglected the aesthetic life. It had the effect of brutalizing labor, removing from it any possibility of enjoyment.

It must be remembered that most the Agrarians were speaking not as economists or sociologists or regional planners or even as professional philosophers; they were speaking as men of letters. They believed that an agrarian civilization was the way of life which permitted the arts to be an integral and valuable social activity, and not, as Ransom put it, 'intercalary and non-participating experiences.' Donald Davidson wrote of the Agrarians that 'they sought to force, not so much a theory of economics as a philosophy of life, in which both economics and art would find their natural places and not be dissociated into abstract means and abstract ends, as the pseudo-culture of the world-city would disassociate them.'

In an Agrarian community aesthetic activity would not be subordinate to economics. The artist would be a working member of society, not a person somehow set apart from the everyday existence of his neighbors. Nature, religion and art would be honored activities of daily life, and not something superfluous and outmoded, to be indulged when business permitted. Knowledge--letters, learning, taste, the integrated and rich fullness of emotion and intellect--would be 'carried to the heart,' as Tate said in the Confederate Ode, and not an unassimilated, discordant conglomerate of fragments... Shall we, he is asking, who still possess this full knowledge and who live in a world from which we are increasingly cut off by its insularity and isolation, in which we have mobility but no direction, energy but no outlet--shall we wait for death, or better still, court it?

In one sense, the program put forward in *I'll Take My Stand* constituted an answer to that question. But for all the book's effectiveness (and 23 years later it is receiving more attention from young Southerners than ever before in its history), it would be a mistake to believe that the Agrarian program was the only, or even the most important, statement of the problems of modern man as Tate and his colleagues saw them. One must always remember that Tate, Ransom, Davidson and Warren were poets primarily, not social scientists. The place to look for Allen Tate's ultimate statement of views is in his poetry.

Cleanth Brooks has pointed out the relevance of Tate's poetry to this central moral problem. Not only is this so in regard to subject matter, however; we find it implicit in the poetics as well. What is the most obvious characteristic of the poetry of Tate and his colleagues? I think we find it stated, and recognized, from the very onset, in the first reviews of the anthology, *Fugitives*, published in 1928. 'Fugitive poetry makes one distinctly feel that one of the serious and fundamental defects of nineteenth century poetry was that it was too easy,' one critic wrote. 'Mr. Ransom, Mr. Tate and Miss [Laura] Riding are not for those who read and run,' another reviewer asserted. The poet John Gould Fletcher, himself soon to join the Agrarians in the symposium, declared in a review that the Fugitive poets had become the main impulse in America in the leadership of 'a school of intellectual poetry replacing the free verse experiments of the elder school.'

The kind of poetry that Allen Tate was writing, then, represented a disciplined, intellectual, difficult poetry, requiring of the reader, in Tate's own words, 'the fullest co-operation of all his intellectual resources, all his knowledge of the world, and all the persistence and alertness that he now thinks of giving to scientific studies.' It was therefore a direct challenge to the attitude that aesthetic concerns were a subordinate, harmless activity 'for those who read and run.' It claimed for art as important and demanding a role in human affairs as that played by science and business. As Ransom wrote, art 'is a career, precisely as science is a career. It is as serious, it has an attitude as official, it is as studied and consecutive, it by all means as difficult, it is no less important.'

Another characteristic of Tate's poetry is its concentrated use of image and metaphor, as in the concluding lines of the Confederate Ode:

Leave now
The shut gate and the decomposing wall:
The gentle serpent, green in the mulberry bush,
Riots with his tongue through the hush--
Sentinel of the grave who counts us all!

Of those lines Tate says that 'the closing image, that of the serpent, is the ancient symbol of time, and I tried to give it the credibility of the commonplace by placing it in a mulberry bush--with the faint hope that the silkworm would somehow be explicit. But time is also death. If that is so, then space, or the Becoming, is life, and I believe there is not a single spatial symbol in the poem....

Tate was not simply declaring that one should not remain in a graveyard because it reminds one of time and time brings death. Such a statement represents merely the 'message' of the lines. Its purpose would be to give instruction concerning the course of action to be followed at a cemetery gate. One may decide that is 'true,' which is another way of saying that the idea expressed is in accord with the findings of science; or that it is 'false,' in which case the advice is non-scientific and not an advantageous basis for action. If the former, the poet is not saying anything startling, and certainly a clinical psychologist could present much more convincing proof of the validity of the action than the poet would be doing. And if one decides that the advice is not scientifically plausible, then what else remains? The lines contain nothing but the advice; the 'meaning' represents the lines' sole reason for being.

Tate's lines, however, do not simply give 'advice'; they do not base their appeal on their adaptability to counsel. They are not dependent upon any scientific 'proof' of their correctitude. Both alone and in the context of the Ode they *create their own validity*. They do not pretend to be representative of scientific knowledge and proof; they *are* their own knowledge and proof. They are about serpents and mulberry bushes and shut gates and decomposing walls, and not advice to graveyard visitors. Tate's poem isn't a mere pseudo-scientific statement, and its validity is neither confirmable nor refutable by scientists. It may or may not contain a statement of scientific truth, but that would at most be a portion, only one of a number of parts, involved in the whole creation of the poem. The poem, therefore, does not depend upon science; science plays only a relatively minor role. The relationship is obvious to the Agrarian belief in the equality of the aesthetic pursuits with the scientific.

Tate and his colleagues have insisted in their poetry and criticism that the image possesses a priority over the abstract idea. They have taken over the pioneering work done by the Imagists and gone further. They have been instrumental in reviving contemporary interest in the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, constructed as that poetry is with complex imagery and metaphor. An idea, Ransom has written, 'is derivative and tamed,' whereas an image is in the wild state: 'we think we can lay hold of image and take it captive, but the docile captive is not the real image but only the idea, which is the image with its character beaten out of it.' The image, Ransom declared, is 'a manifold of properties, like a field or a mine, something to be explored for the properties.' The scientist can use the manifold only by singling out the one property with which he is concerned: 'It is not by refutation but by abstraction that science destroys the image. It means to get its 'value' out of the image, and we may be sure that it has no use for the image in its original state of freedom.'

A poetry of abstract ideas, Tate and Ransom held, is a poetry of science, and as such it neglects the manifold properties of life and nature. Just as an economist used only the special interests of economics to interpret human activity, so the poetry of ideas was concerned with only one part of the whole. This led to specialization and isolation, fragmenting the balance and completeness of man and nature into a multitude of special interests, cutting off men from the whole of life, destroying the unity of human existence.

And here we come again to Tate's main theme in the Confederate Ode, 'the failure of the human personality to function objectively in nature and society,' 'the cut-off-ness of the modern "intellectual man" from the world.' It is a constant refrain in Tate's work. In 1928, for instance, we find these two sentences in a review by Tate of Gorham Munson's *Destinations*, in the *New Republic*: 'Evasions of intellectual responsibility take various forms; all forms seem to be general in our time; what they mean is the breakdown of culture; and there is no new order in sight which promises to replace it. The widespread

cults, esoteric societies, amateur religions, all provide easy escapes from discipline, easy revolts from the traditional forms of culture.' And 25 years later he is still saying just that, as in his recent Phi Beta Kappa address at the University of Minnesota: 'the man of letters must not be committed to the illiberal specializations that the nineteenth century has proliferated into the modern world: specializations in which means are divorced from ends, action from sensibility, matter from mind, society from the individual, religion from moral agency, love from lust, poetry from thought, communion from experience, and mankind in the community from men in the crowd. There is literally no end to this list of dissociations because there is no end, yet in sight, to the fragmenting of the western mind.'

Modern man of the dissociated sensibility, isolated from his fellows, caught up in a life of fragmented parts and confused impulses; thus Allen Tate's Southerner waiting at the gate of the Confederate cemetery contemplates the high glory of Stonewall Jackson and the inscrutable foot-cavalry of a day when ancestors of that Southerner knew what they fought for, and could die willingly for knowing it.... Times are not what they were, Tate's Southerner at the gate realizes; it has become almost impossible even to imagine such days... Even the title of the poem stems from the irony of the then and now; 'Not only are the meter and rhyme without fixed pattern,' Tate wrote, 'but in another feature the poem is even further removed from Pindar than Abraham Cowley was: a purely subjective meditation would not even in Cowley's age have been called an ode. I suppose in so calling it intended an irony: the scene of the poem is not a public celebration, it is alone man by a gate.'

If in the Confederate Ode there is regret and irony over 'the failure of the human personality to function objectively in nature and society.' then in Tate's poem 'Seasons of the Soul' the malady has attained the proportions of desperation. The poem is Tate's equation of the present-day dissociation of sensibility with the medieval Hell."

Louis D. Rubin, Jr.
"The Serpent in the Mulberry Bush"
Southern Renaissance: The Literature of the Modern South
(Johns Hopkins 1953) 352-57

"The 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' Tate says, is about 'solipsism.' (All the critical comments quoted in connection with the "Ode to the Confederate Dead' are from Tate's essay 'Narcissus as Narcissus'.) In the 'Ode' Tate suggests, as he does in "The Mediterranean' and "Aeneas at Washington,' that the solipsism of modern man results from the fact that contemporary society denies him his traditional right to fulfillment through a heroic goal. This is the positive quality of the 'Ode.' The dual themes of solipsism and the need for the *virtutis opus*, which are, of course, really one, are developed more fully and more deeply in the 'Ode' than they are in the two poems discussed above ["The Mediterranean" and "Aeneas at Washington"], and again they are expressed through the imagery of the ancient world.

Tate remarks on the general form of the poem: it is an ode '...even further removed from Pindar than Abraham Cowley. I suppose in so calling it I intended an irony: the scene of the poem is not a public celebration, it is alone man by a gate.' Though Tate does not say so, he implies that the contrast between the personal quality of his ode and the public nature of the Pindaric expresses the solipsism of modern man. The man at the gate has the 'secret need' of the wanderers on the Mediterranean, and like them he makes a lonely journey into the past. Obviously, Tate expects his readers to be aware of the nature of the traditional odes, the Pindarics, not of the specific details of their contents, but their tone, which always implies that the poet speaks to and for a society united in triumph. The Pindarics are not simply victory odes; they are poems in which a particular hero is regarded as the worthy bearer of a great tradition. Tate's adaptation of the ode form implies that if modern man is trapped by his personal conception of the world, so is the very character of the ode transformed by this view. The lone man speaks for himself, and, if what he says represents the thoughts of others, it is their defeat which he expresses, for they, like him, are cut off from the heroic past and the actual present.

This defeat is symbolized most intensely in the leaf image, which Tate uses not only in the refrain but in the first and last strophes. The image is an extremely interesting and important one. In the first strophe Tate says of the leaves: 'They sough the rumors of mortality.' The leaves, 'of nature the casual sacrament / To the seasonal eternity of death,' remind man of his own mortality. 'Autumn, and the leaves are death,' says Tate

in 'Narcissus as Narcissus.' The leaf image replies with finality in the cry for an 'active faith,' which constitutes the second theme of the poem.

There is a striking similarity between Tate's and Homer's use of the leaf image. Homer's passage containing this image is perhaps one of the best known in the *Iliad*. Diomedes and Glaucus meet on the battlefield, and Diomedes asks Glaucus who he is. Glaucus replies: 'Great-souled son of Tydeus, why do you ask about my lineage? Just as the generation of leaves, so is that also of men. The wind scatters the leaves upon the earth, but the forest as it flourishes, puts forth others when spring comes. So one generation of men springs up while another passes away. However, if you want to, you may know my lineage. There are many who do know it' (VI, 145-51). In this passage the contrast between man's struggle to live heroically, between his justified pride in his past and present achievements and his tragic destiny is clearly set forth. Man is like a leaf but he is also man. The agony of his tragic end is all the more terrible because, unlike a leaf, he struggles to perform heroic deeds, yet like a leaf he passes away to extinction. The very points at which the simile is inadequate contain its greatest emotional force.

In Homer the leaf image provides a commentary on the constant feats of heroism which his heroes demand of themselves and which it is assumed they owe their society. 'Be a man,' says one warrior to another. In other words, act nobly; perform the heroic deeds which offer man his one chance of redemption, his chance to snatch from life a glory which defines it. That the very act which may destroy a man is what offers him a measure of release from his doom is the tragedy of human life.

Tate's repeated references to the leaves in the 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' recall the leaf image in the *Iliad*. In the 'Ode' the image of the leaves provides the answering strain to the quest for heroism in history, in man himself, and vainly, in society. Like the *Iliad*, the 'Ode' is 'a certain section of history made into experience.' Tate uses history both literally and symbolically, fusing with ease the recent American past with antiquity. Before discussing the leaf image in the 'Ode,' it is necessary to observe how Tate develops 'the theme of heroism,' which he himself says is the second theme of the poem.

III

Tate says that the strophe beginning 'You know who have waited by the wall' contains 'the other terms of the conflict. It is the theme of heroism, not merely moral heroism but heroism in the grand style, elevating even death from mere physical dissolution into a formal ritual; this heroism is a formal ebullience of the human spirit in an entire society, not private, romantic illusion--something better than moral heroism, great as that may be, for moral heroism, being personal and individual, may be achieved by certain men in all ages, even ages of decadence.' He goes on to quote Hart Crane's definition: 'the theme of chivalry . . . active faith.' He describes an ideal way of life based upon conduct, and the heroic code of conduct he speaks of is that clearly defined in the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, the code which could make Aeneas 'disinterested,' which makes Glaucus, even after he has expressed the tragic irony of man's doom, go on to tell his enemy of his ancestors, prepared to fight as bravely as they did and as nobly as the code of his society demands that he fight and live. Both his desire to fight Diomedes and his subsequent acceptance of his friendship are motivated not by personal whim but by the code of his society.

Tate tells us that the passage in the 'Ode' beginning 'You know who have waited by the wall' is 'meant to convey a plenary vision, the actual presence of, the exemplars of an active faith.' This plenary vision appears in two main symbols: the warrior and the ancient philosophers, Zeno and Parmenides. The warrior is the traditional symbol of heroism. Though Tate concretizes his warrior through his list of names connected with the Civil War, he does not limit him to this particular time, for he is the warrior whose heroism results from a view of the world represented by the philosophical system of Parmenides and Zeno. His warrior is once again the man who lives by a heroic code of conduct. 'Muted Zeno and Parmenides' represent the world view which makes such a code possible.

Of those who have the heroic vision, Tate says:

You know the rage,
The cold pool left by the mounting flood,

Of muted Zeno and Parmenides.

Parmenides and his disciple, Zeno, were the first to separate existence into being and becoming. Theirs is a philosophical system which makes a distinction between the objective and unchanging world of being and the subjective world of becoming. Parmenides (in *Frag. VI*) warns against the 'way of seeming' (the state of solipsism, Tate would say). He warns against the subjective blindness of mere dependence on the senses for knowledge of the world. Thus, Parmenides and Zeno represent for Tate an objective, 'whole' view of life. Moreover, Zeno, not only in his thought but also in his conduct, exemplifies the heroic way of life. According to tradition, when captured by the tyrant he was opposing, he bit off his tongue rather than give the information demanded by his enemy. 'Muted Zeno,' therefore, has a double meaning: Zeno made mute by his own act of heroism and Zeno, the heir and exponent of a philosophical system which regards the universe as whole and knowledge as objective, muted in what Tate calls the 'fragmentary cosmos of today.'

The heroic vision, as Tate presents it poetically, is composed of heroic action based on a view of the world which is objective, whole, and unchanging. Moreover, it is a vision created out of the ancient past combined with the recent one. It is a vision which suggests a continuity in human thought, conduct, and feeling, broken only in the world of today.

'In contemplating the heroic theme,' says Tate, 'the man at the gate never commits himself to the illusion of its availability to him. The most that he can allow himself is the fancy that the blowing leaves are charging soldiers, but he rigorously returns to the refrain: 'Only the wind'--or the 'leaves flying.' The wind-leaf refrain provides the answering strain. The lone man, striving to be one with those who waited by the wall, tries even to transform the leaves into fighting men. But, as in Homer, we are struck by the dissimilarity. In the *Iliad* the simple quality of the leaf is contrasted with the complex and tragic nature of man, doomed to the same end. In Tate's poem man's inability to transform the leaf into a symbol of heroism suggests that the certainty of man's tragic fate overpowers any thought of his potential heroism. The man at the gate cannot identify himself with the leaves 'as Keats and Shelley too easily and too beautifully did with nightingales and west winds.' The leaf is a symbol of his mortality and his aloneness.

In both Homer and Tate, the leaf image, with its implications of death, is combined and contrasted with a scene of heroism in warfare. In Homer, Glaucus, even as he sees these implications, suggests by his very conduct that through heroism man can redeem himself if only partially and tragically. Tate, looking back on the history of his own nation with the traditionally epic view, finds that in the present there is not even the possibility of tragic redemption. Thus, his departure from Homer is as important as his echo of him, for the very contrast between the two poets' use of the leaf image suggests the theme of Tate's poem.

Tate's last use of a classical allusion in the 'Ode' is an entirely ironical one. The jaguar, he tells us, is substituted for Narcissus. Of course, Narcissus by his very absence is immensely important. Replaced by the jaguar, the destructive and self-devouring elements of the Narcissus figure are made explicit. As the 'jaguar leaps' we see the lovely boy Narcissus for what he really is. In giving solipsism this concrete form, Tate reveals its ugliness and brutality, and he adds a dimension to the myth he adapts.

'Ode to the Confederate Dead' cannot be understood without the framework of the classical world. Here, as in 'The Mediterranean' and 'Aeneas at Washington,' Tate speaks of the present only in relation to the past, and his view of the past is the epic view, heroic, exalted, the poet's past rather than the historian's."

Lillian Feder

"Allen Tate's Use of Classical Literature"
The Centennial Review 4:89-114 (Winter 1960)

"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.... The situation [in *The Fathers*] is, therefore, much like that projected in the 'Ode to the Confederate Dead': Lacy is attempting to reclaim the energy of a

tradition which is gone.... [It] is not a public and heroic celebration; Tate's ode is muttered by a man standing alone at the gate of a graveyard."

R. K. Meiners

The Last Alternatives: A Study of the Works of Allen Tate
(Alan Swallow 1963) 28, 92, 158

"[Donald] Davidson did not like the poetic direction his friend seemed to be taking: 'Your "Elegy," he said, 'is not for the Confederate dead but for your own dead emotion'.... Practically at the moment of the Fugitives' success at doing their bit for American letters in the South the Dayton trials [Scopes "Monkey Trial"] were making it a laughingstock and worse--a place of ignoramuses and bigots.... Northern ridicule of the Dayton trials moved Tate in the direction of a defense of the South when before he was on the side of its critics. On March 1, 1927, Tate wrote Davidson that he had 'attacked the South for the last time, except in so far as it may be necessary to point out that the chief defect the Old South had was that...it produced, through whatever cause, the New South'....

The very success of this poem [the "Ode"] in later years, the number of times it has been reprinted in anthologies, the notoriety Tate himself lent it with his essay 'Narcissus as Narcissus' (1938)--these things have distorted the casual reader's notion of Tate. The title alone--and some readers recall little but titles--is cause of offense to many. Why 'Ode'? Doesn't that mean public celebration?...

The 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' has a lot in common with *The Great Gatsby*. The man at the gate of the Confederate graveyard has 'knowledge carried to the heart' and Jay Gatsby has 'some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life'; they come to the same thing. The man at the gate allows himself to imagine, if only for a moment, that the leaves he sees blown by the wind are charging infantry; Gatsby, when Nick Carraway tells him he can't repeat the past, says: 'Can't repeat the past? Why of course you can.' The man at the gate has 'waited for the angry resolution / Of those desires that should be [his] tomorrow'; Gatsby 'believed in the green light.' Both men are accounted failures, or rather they fail and are memorialized in their failure. Neither is an international *Waste Land* character. The man at the gate is philosophical, like Hamlet, but he is not a prince; he is ineffectual, like Prufrock, but he is not ridiculous; he is as American as Jay Gatsby but he is not a vulgarian 'in the service of a vast, vulgar, meretricious beauty.' Poor Gatsby really did go to Oxford, but talks about it in such a way as to convince Nick Carraway he is lying; somewhere along the line the man at the gate has learned about Zeno and Parmenides, so that he understands the wider reference of his problem. I can't help thinking of the inventors of the two characters: Tate got a good education at Vanderbilt, Fitzgerald an indifferent one at Princeton....

With respect to Christianity, Tate can be compared first with Eliot, and then with Ransom and Stevens. I intend no disrespect to Eliot when I say that his work shows a rather easy acceptance of orthodox values--no disrespect because I would say the same of Herbert, though not of Donne or Hopkins. Like Donne and Hopkins, Tate is not at ease in any orthodoxy; his work shows the strains of a man trying to work out his own salvation, like Yeats, but lacking the great style of Yeats. Where Yeats's language is a proud, seamless garment, Tate's language, just as proud, is tattered and patched.

Ransom's language is another seamless garment, but it is not instructive to compare his preternaturally high standard with Tate's uneven one; the instructive point of comparison is with respect to Christianity. 'Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian,' Ransom once wrote Tate, 'but I am a tough heathen.' The date is early (1923), the language is jocular, and the occasion is dim (Ransom is referring to an unpublished poem of Tate's called 'Yellow River'), but even so a real state of affairs is being represented, and Ransom came back to it at the end of his essay 'In Amicitia.' Tate's work shows that he has always been an uneasy Christian; the pull toward paganism is seen only in his translations and, best of all and in its true light, in the Jason and Medea episode in *The Fathers*. Ransom, on the other hand, has always been an uneasy heathen, or a backslider, like the woman in 'Sunday Morning.' When Tate, before his conversion to Roman Catholicism, told Philip Blair Rice, Ransom's colleague on the *Kenyon Review*, that 'something he had observed led him to think Ransom was about to have a conversion,' Tate must have been confusing his own thoughts with Ransom's. Tate is far from being a writer of Christian apologetics, like Eliot; he is equally remote from the aestheticism of Ransom and Stevens. Tate also gets into his work considerably more of the torment of the spirit than is to be found in these three.

But his work does not show the ultimate torment of a lost or condemned soul like Poe or Hart Crane. Crane stands mostly as an object lesson to Tate. When Tate said of Crane that 'he had an abnormally acute response to the physical world, an exacerbation of the nerve-ends, along with an incapacity to live within the limitations of the human condition,' he easily could have been speaking of George Posey, his brother of fiction."

George Hemphill
Allen Tate
(U Minnesota 1964) 1, 12-14, 44-45

"Tate sees this condition of rationality-dominated inaction--what he later calls in 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' the 'cold pool left by the mounting flood, / Of muted Zeno and Parmenides--as the characteristic modern disease. In this realm of mechanical order and abstraction, twentieth-century man finds the means of avoiding any contemplation of death.... 'The Subway' is a metropolitan companion piece to the rural 'Idiot.' Both are densely effective statements of the relationship between spatiality and temporality, science and religion in the modern world. But the poem that shows most profoundly the impact of Tate's meditation on these problems is his famous 'Ode to the Confederate Dead.' It is filled with imagery that recalls Spenglerian ideas. To dispel any doubt about that relationship, one need only turn to Tate's own explication of the poem in 'Narcissus as Narcissus,' where he explains:

'The closing image, that of the serpent, is the ancient symbol of time.... But time is also death. If that is so, then space, or the Becoming, is life; and I believe that there is not a single spatial symbol in the poem, "Sea-space" is allowed the "blind crab"; but the sea, as appears plainly in the passage beginning, "Now that the salt of their blood..." is life only insofar as it is the source of the lowest forms of life, the source perhaps of all life, but life undifferentiated, halfway between life and death.'

In fact, Tate has altered Spengler's concepts somewhat, for in *Decline of the West* space is associated with the 'Become' and time with the 'Becoming.' Nevertheless, the principal motif is clear; and the poem, begun only a year after Tate's first encounter with Spengler's work, is haunted by the problem of knowledge through analogy. Knowledge is impossible without the power of analogy, for the tangle of perceptions man experiences can be given some discernible structure or ontological validity only if the mind in its activity can find correlatives among things....

These two polarities--death and the self--are the tensional basis for the kind of conflict between deterministic pessimism and radical solipsism Tate depicts in 'Ode to the Confederate Dead.' The first stanza shows a natural order that is dominated by the close system of 'the seasonal eternity of death.' The whole passage is a picture of a world with a kind of Spenglerian destiny that ignores the presence of man. There are suggestions of a system of rewards and punishments, such as might make up some mythical order of justice, but nature offers only the salvation that comes with total effacement. What is lacking is any sense of individual continuity that might break out of the terrible cycle.

The stone memorials placed over the graves 'yield their names' with 'strict impunity.' Their loss of memory will go unpunished and uncorrected. The wind shows no signs of 'recollection'--the poet puns on the scattering effect of wind on the leaves in the 'riven troughs' as well as the mindless energy of its whirr. The leaves themselves are 'splayed,' never again to be made whole; they are part of nature's 'casual sacrament,' an accidental rather than an intentional communion. (The word 'casual' suggests the 'fall' of the leaves by association with Latin *casus*.) The falling leaves have long been images of human mortality, from Homer, Virgil, and Dante to Shelley; but these leaves also take on the imagined quality of damned beings. Part of the whole of things, they lose all individuality as they are 'driven...in their election in the vast breath.' Like 'The Subway,' 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' is a grim parody of traditional religious ideas of salvation tinged with overtones of predestinarian determinism.

If death dominates the first stanza, the self is prominent in the second. The protagonist of the poem attempts to break out of the terror of this organic cycle by thinking 'of the autumns that have come and gone,' but memory itself takes on the quality of the grass that feeds analogically on the dead leaves. The alternative to the closed temporal system that he views resides in some sort of spatial suspension,

represented in part by the sculptured angels on the tombs. There is surely a suggestion in this passage of what Tate was later to call 'the angelic imagination,' an ability to penetrate into the essence of things without recourse to their sensual manifestations. The 'brute curiosity of an angel's stare,' which like the Gorgon's turns those who look on it to stone, is trapped in decaying matter, the 'uncomfortable' statue assaulted by 'the humors of the year.' The split between body and mind is embodied in the art of the grave sculptor's angels as much as in the sensibility of the protagonist. Like the falling leaves, he too is 'plunged to a heavier world below,' a kind of mental hell in which, like Dante's damned shades, he exerts directionless and purposeless energies. (Tate's description of Phelps Purnam's heroes also comes to mind.)

The grim wit of Tate's language--the multiple shadings of words like 'impunity,' 'recollection,' 'sacrament,' 'scrutiny,' 'rumor,' 'inexhaustible,' 'zeal,' or 'brute'--gives these first two stanzas an astonishing compactness and power. Their dense network of analogies denies poetically the assertion in the following refrain that the protagonist is seeing nothing more than fall leaves. What he knows that nature does not know is history and the pattern of things that comes through the memory as man's refusal to submit to mere despair. For unlike the fallen leaves, man continues to believe that he has a future.

You who have waited for the angry resolution
Of those desires that should be yours tomorrow,
You know the unimportant shrift of death
And praise the vision
And praise the arrogant circumstance
Of those who fall
Rank upon rank, hurried beyond decision--
Here by the sagging gate, stopped by the wall.

'Ambitious November' is answered by the arrogance of man himself; he will rush to his death without waiting for his place in the natural cycle of decay. It is this 'immediate past' that makes man 'inscrutable,' in answer to the mindless but 'fierce scrutiny' of the sky. Though man cannot possess the stony detachment of the angelic self depicted on the statues, he does have a strange demonic energy that pulls him out of the earth. He knows the empty paradoxes of the mind--the puzzles of 'muted Zeus and Parmenides' as they contemplate the nature of time and being. But he also knows the 'twilight certainty of an animal.' If Zeno's paradox would never allow the arrow to hit the target, death's efficacy in drawing all things to their destruction is indubitable. The struggle between self and death has reached an equilibrium in the protagonist's thoughts.

The late autumnal season of the poem and the setting sun that dominates its main scenes are traditional symbols of history and death. (Besides his correlation of the seasons and stages of historical growth and decay, Spengler's title--literally 'Sunset of the West'--offers an obvious parallel.) What history provides is a memory of 'that orient of the thick-and-fast' where action begins, but since the protagonist has been reduced to paralysis, 'stopped by the wall' (death) and the 'angel's stare' (self), he can only hover over the decaying transition point of the 'sagging gate,' the threshold of initiation into another life or state. Sight and sound, like time and space, are confused in him:

You hear the shout, the crazy hemlocks point
With troubled fingers to the silence which
Smother you, a mummy, in time.

The mummy is a particularly interesting image, since it can stand both for the ineffectiveness of a man wrapped in his embalming shroud and for the limited immortality of the body. Like the 'old man in a storm,' it is surrounded by the ravages of time yet remains a captive of space. Outside of time, like the mummy the self has no freedom. This section of the poem is brought to a close by the image of the 'hound bitch,' a reminder of the ancient action of the hunt. She should be a symbol of vitality; now, however, she too is the quarry of death, lying 'in a musty cellar.' The end of the hunt is another manifestation of that loss of heroic energy which once drove the soldiers to their graves. The soldiers and the hound bitch live for the event and decay once the event is concluded. Still, their fate is better than the mummylike existence in time that has rendered the protagonist immobile.

What remains for modern man is that blank oneness of the universe which dissolves all into a 'malignant purity' and a salty 'oblivion' (examples of Tate's startling use of oxymoron). There is a radical shift, however, in the sixth stanza, and Tate himself has spoken of it as the beginning of the second main division of the poem, in 'Narcissus as Narcissus.' The progression is evidenced by the metrical movement, as he points out, but also by a shift in the pronoun from 'you' to 'we.' Tate's final question to Spengler, 'How shall we set about restoring the values that have been lost?' is already posed in the poem. The poet asks it of the young man who stands by the gate. For it is at this point that one becomes aware of some sort of community standing behind the protagonist, those 'who count out days and bow / Our heads with a commemorial woe' during the public ceremonies offered for the dead. The ritualistic gestures are still carried on, though perhaps as a 'grim felicity' that is a distinct decline from heroic action. What has changed in the perception the poem offers, however, is the image of nature: Before, nature was the inhuman cycle of a world without past or future. Now there is the suggestion of something in nature that recalls man's heroic energies:

In a tangle of willows without light
The singular screech-owl's tight
Invisible lyric seeds the mind
With the furious murmur of their chivalry.

This is an image different from the 'brute curiosity' of the angel's stare and the mere sound of the wind. In the darkness where space has vanished, there is an aural suggestion of an energy with more direction than that of the 'blind crab.' It is crucial to see what has occurred in this and the following stanza.

The question that has been asked--'what shall we say of the bones?'--is answered in the refrain--'We shall say only the leaves / Flying, plunge and expire.' Those who merely go through the motions of the ritual of 'grim felicity' can see nothing more than that 'Night is the beginning of the end.' They cannot speak because there is nothing to speak about. Birth and death are but 'the ends of distraction,' and between them is the 'mute speculation' of Zeno and Parmenides and the angel's gorgonic stare, that 'patient curse / That stones the eyes.' The toothless dog is replaced by the energetic jaguar who 'leaps / For his own image in a jungle pool, his victim.' The cycle of nature has been replaced by the solipsistic self. The 'mute speculation' is part of the 'jungle pool' (a play on the Latin word for mirror, *speculum*, is hidden in the phrase). Vision and space, the counting of days, abstract stare, the setting sun, all these Spengler-like images are part of the symbolic paralysis that must be rejected for an acceptance of the aural and temporal dimensions of the memory, the understanding, and the will. The critical question is transformed at the end of the poem in a phrase that has become famous:

What shall we say who have knowledge
Carried to the heart? Shall we take the act
To the grave? Shall we, more hopeful, set up the grave
In the house? The ravenous grave?

The solution is the one Spengler seems to embrace, for his impressive array of organically growing and dying cultures adds up to nothing more than worship of the grave. By giving no final meaning to human history, Spengler falsifies his own premises. If human memory serves only as a means of collecting man's actions around the central fact of death, then human history has no significance at all. In Spengler the West has indeed begun to set up the grave in its own house.

The protagonist in 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' stands between two communities, the city of the living and the city of the dead; but he does not know how to bring them together in any meaningful fashion. He has a kind of intuitive knowledge that has been 'carried to the heart,' but he is also haunted by the specter of abstract rationalism--'muted Zeno and Parmenides,' who, like the jaguar, stared into the 'cold pool' of a method that removes them from life and action. He never enters the cemetery; the gate remains shut to him at the end. He cannot participate in the kind of space occupied by the dead, and he is himself smothered in time. He is typical of the modern man in his mummylike condition. The only kind of immortality the modern mind can grasp is one that is a stopping of the natural cycle, an immobilization of all life processes.

The poem ends, as Tate emphasizes in his essay, with an image that complements the owl, that of the serpent. Like the ouroboros--that ancient figure of the snake biting its tail--it is a symbol of the relation of

time to eternity. Equally significant is the command to the protagonist to leave the 'shut gate and the decomposing wall.' For he is not the poet, this man at the gate, but the skeptical historian who meditates on the past of Western civilization as though he were looking at a graveyard. The gate and the wall separate the living from the dead, but the two important 'sounds' in the poem--the screech-owl's call and the rioting 'tongue' of the 'gentle serpent'--are appeals to some kind of life. That life is not the simple organic cycle of nature but something beyond it. As the figure of the serpent makes plain, it is the life of myth, of speech through the imagination that is neither mutely paralyzed like the mummy nor rendered as a meaningless noise in the buffering of the leaves. By yielding to time and participating in the past through memory, man can at least survive through the makeshift devices of his secular imagination, even in a declining civilization.

Nevertheless, 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' does not offer, as Tate explains in his essay, a 'practical solution...for the edification of moralists,' but it does imply that such a solution is possible. As Tate goes on to say, 'To those who may identify the man at the gate with the author of the poem I would say: He differs from the author in not accepting a 'practical solution,' for the author's personal dilemma is perhaps not quite so exclusive as that of the meditating man.' It is the exclusive character of the dilemma that makes it difficult to resolve, for the alternative of science or religion at least offers the promise of a practical solution to the problem of acting in an alien universe. Unless the man at the gate can learn to see the choice between a nature dominated by mortality and a self locked in solipsism as a false presentation of alternatives, he cannot act in any decisive way.

In "Reintroduction to American History"--in its original form and placement in Tate's first collection an obvious companion piece to 'Ode to the Confederate Dead'--he dramatizes the figure of a person who is unable to speak out about what he understands. Perhaps influenced by the style of Eliot's 'Gerontion,' it is the first of Tate's truly 'confessional' poems. It is also his version of Babylon, the modern city in its late Spenglerian phase of engineered abstraction and cultural decadence....

The long struggle to perfect 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' was perhaps the poet's attempt to reveal the next step in the journey towards a solution... The interplay of cycle and progression is notable in Tate's poetry as early as 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' where nature is simultaneously viewed as an eternal cycle of 'casual sacrament' and as a realm whose 'crazy fingers' and screech-owl's call point to something higher than nature itself. As in the 'Ode', the conflict between cycle and progression is not definitively resolved in 'Seasons of the Soul.' Even 'Spring,' the last part of the poem, is about a descent into submission rather than a rise to glory."

Robert S. Dupree

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

The Tates' poverty was so extreme that Allen's twenty-seventh birthday passed in November without celebration. He was depressed and dissatisfied with New York City. Yet it was in this state of mind--and to some degree because of it--that he conceived and wrote his most famous, and perhaps his finest, poem, 'Ode to the Confederate Dead.'... 'Figure to yourself a man stopping at the gate of a Confederate graveyard on a late autumn afternoon,' Tate explained many years later. 'The leaves are falling, his first impressions bring him the "rumor of mortality.'" But the poem, Tate added, was not simply about the modern Southerner's difficulty in coming to terms with his own traditions and bringing them back to life. It was, he said, "about" solipsism or Narcissism, or any other *ism* that denotes the failure of the human personality to function properly in nature and society. Although set in the South, the poem's larger theme was 'the cut-off-

ness of the modern "intellectual man" from the world.' Such a man, who was obviously Tate, was trapped between a need for religious faith and the reality of the 'fragmentary cosmos' surrounding him.

In an article Tate thought 'the best' ever written about him, critic Lillian Feder observed that the 'Ode,' rich in allusions to the ancients, must be interpreted within 'the framework of the classical world.' Tate's poetry, she observed, 'speaks of the present only in relation to the past, and his view of the past is the epic view, heroic, exalted, the poet's past rather than the historian's.' For Tate, the 'Ode' not only explored these complex views of the present but marked the beginning of the twelve-year period recognized by many scholars as the era in which he was absorbed by Southern culture and the history of his own family. Indeed, he told Davidson that writing the poem had been so wrenching for him personally that it dredged 'up a whole stream of associations and memories, suppressed, at least on the emotional plane, since my childhood.' Years later he still believed he had let go emotionally 'only once: in the Ode.'...

Tate's Southern friends were mystified. Davidson admired the poem, but was annoyed at his friend for reducing the grand themes of Southern history to 'personal poetry.' Your *Elegy*, he observed, 'is not for the Confederate dead, but for your own dead emotion.' It did not appear to Davidson that the poem had much to do with Confederate soldiers. 'Where, O Allen Tate,' he asked, 'are the dead? You have buried them completely out of sight--with them yourself and me.' Even Robert Penn Warren referred to the poem as 'the Confederate morgue piece.' Yet after the Fugitives examined the 'Ode' more closely, they abandoned their early reservations. They came to agree with subsequent critics who placed the 'Ode' among the major poems of the century. It would be reprinted countless times....

Like the 'Ode,' 'Causerie' suggested an emerging theme in Tate's poetry: that of them modern Southerner in a hostile, industrializing society struggling with Faith.... Tate's childhood memories fought with his Modernist aesthetics.... Reviews of *Mr. Pope and Other Poems* 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'.... John Gould 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.'... Tate's *Three Poems*, which appeared in 1930, contained a slightly revised version of [the 'Ode'], by now well known as a poem about the difficulty of maintaining religious faith in the modern world."

Thomas A. Underwood
Allen Tate: Orphan of the South
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Michael Hollister (2021)