"No society is worth 'saving' as such," wrote Allen Tate (1899-1979). "What we must save is the truth of God and man, and the right society follows."¹ Such words are anathema to the secularists whose "progressive" theories have intoxicated the modern mind. Words of this kind are neither popular nor politically expedient in an age like ours when dissertation directors at the "best" universities in America instruct their apprentices to put the word truth between inverted commas, lest the nascent academic transgress the law of "moral relativity," or appear to have beliefs that cannot be examined under the lens of a microscope, or validated by a survey poll of one kind or another. Yet these words testify to the stand that Tate took against the heresies of modernity.

This stand must be understood in the context of the poetically pure and simple words that sanction it: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." Were there to exist somewhere in Tate's writings an exegesis of this passage from Genesis, it would surely emphasize the word created. For in all that he wrote, Tate proceeded from the view that men and women are creations of God, and like all created things, dependent upon that which created them. As creations they are fundamentally religious beings whose real world exists in a common creaturehood of the spirit. If one is led to believe that he can sufficiently satisfy himself through his own ingenuity as scientist, sociologist, psychologist, or even artist, "he may believe it for a while," says Tate, "but like a child after the game is over and the fingers are uncrossed, he will return to the real world, unprepared and soon to be overwhelmed by it because he has been told that the real world does not exist."²

Of course Tate knew that most moderns have for some time now denied their metaphysical situation as creatures of something greater than themselves. This denial constitutes nothing less than an attack on reality, which, according to Tate, began with surrealist art (the poetic phase of which his adopted mentor T. S. Eliot described as "a method of writing poetry without talent"), found philosophical support in Existentialism (or what Tate calls "the denial of histori-
cal reality through a dogma holding that only each successive movement is 'real,' the *tick* of *tick-tock* being unreal the moment we hear *tock*, and so on*), and reached its logical end in nihilism (which Tate dismissed in one of his last lectures as nothing more than "Hippism"). Although Tate may have wrongly traced its origins, or perhaps oversimplified its twentieth-century ramifications, the denial of which he speaks with grave seriousness is nonetheless apparent and its disordering effects on culture all the more deplorable.

Why, in an age bent on denying its creaturehood, did Allen Tate—biographer, essayist, novelist, poet—devote his creative energies to defending the truth of God and man? The answers to this question are both complex and various. However, they all come down to one thing: he was provoked by a world view that threatened to eradicate any non-utilitarian concept of life. He opposed this world view for the first time at Vanderbilt University, where he matriculated in 1918. There he rallied behind John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, and a handful of other stalwart faculty members who opposed certain curricular changes that imperiled the school's classical orientation—changes then being adopted across the country to make university learning "practical" and more sensitive to what would today be called "student diversity." Irving Babbitt, one may recall, had begun this opposition ten years earlier. "*His Literature and the American College,*" Tate would later write, "is still quoted, but there is no reason to believe that its message has ever been taken seriously by the men who most need it."

For Tate and the others the attitude behind such changes personified itself in the Chairman of the English Department, Professor Edwin Mims, whom they associated with the "new South" that began to emerge at the end of the First World War—a South, as Radcliffe Squires puts it, "more positivistic, more, in short, like the North." Mims was not only a progressive; he was an apologist for H. L. Mencken, whom many eminent Southerners disliked because he had written such derisively condescending lines as these: "If the whole of the late Confederacy were to be engulfed by a tidal wave tomorrow, the effect upon the civilized minority of men in the world would be but little greater than that of a flood on the Yang-tse-Kiang. It would be impossible in all history to match so complete a drying up of civilization." To prove Mencken and his kind wrong, Tate helped Davidson and Ransom to establish *The Fugitive*, a poetry magazine that became internationally famous in less than three years. The first issue appeared in April 1922, and soon thereafter Merrill Moore and Robert Penn Warren joined Tate and the other poets to form the Fugitive group. Though the members differed in temperament, they were all Southerners who felt somewhat alienated from the northeastern writing establishment. What is more, they all resented the doctrine preached by Mims that the South needed desperately to import culture in order to move forward. And, as the magazine's name implies, they thought of themselves, only half seriously at first, as a group of modern-day poet-prophets. "For a Fugitive," writes Tate, "was quite simply a Poet: the Wanderer, or even the Wandering Jew, the Outcast, the man who carries the secret wisdom around the world."

In 1924 Tate married novelist Caroline Gordon, and together they settled in New York. By the end of the year, the knot that had held the Nashville poets together had all but come undone, and finding it increasingly difficult to organize their efforts they ceased publishing *The Fugitive* in 1925. The magazine had accomplished its end, however: it had asserted and celebrated the enduring value of
literature. Moreover, it made its founders aware of something they had forgotten: that literature must be accompanied by the reverent discipline of criticism. It was this discipline that (as editors) Warren took to *The Southern Review*, Ransom to *The Kenyon Review*, and Tate to *The Sewanee Review*. "In this way," says Squires, "*The Fugitive* rose from its ashes to continue in the most powerful and sensitive voices in American culture for a span of three decades."8

For some months after their magazine's last issue, the Fugitives forgot about the South. But history soon tugged at their Southern roots when the Scopes "monkey" trial occurred in Dayton, Tennessee. Personally offended by the deprecating commentary on the South and religious fundamentalism that ran in the Northern papers as a result of the trial, the poets felt compelled to defend the virtues of the South and its ties to tradition. This compulsion resulted in the idea for *I'll Take My Stand*, a radical symposium in which the former Fugitives transformed themselves into Agrarians who supported "a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing The importance of this symposium, published in 1930, lies not in its answers, but in its questions. "And the central question—where are we allowing ourselves to be led by our passion for industrial progress and for an ever-higher standard of living—remains among the deepest, the most embarrassing, and the most unasked questions of our day," writes Daniel J. Boorstin.

Back of Tate's contribution to the symposium was his unshakable conviction that, after the War Between the States, the North had, in effect, forced itself upon the South. While he conceded that once upon a time in America there had been "two nations within the political unity," he dissented from the popular view that the marriage of 1865 was consummated in a spiritual union. "It is obvious," he averred, "that the stringency of the divorce laws was so prohibitive that nullification on the part of the bride was impossible, and that in the end love of finery and good food have made the recalcitrant bride into a wife." Together the North and the South have formed a "more perfect Union" upon two false premises, he asserted: that local autonomy and sectionalism are generally bad; and that progress and industrialism are inherently good.10 While making no apologies for the institution of slavery—which he described as a curse like that of Original Sin which the South could never fully expiate—Tate declared war upon these two premises, a war he fought to his death.

Clearly the South that Tate knew as a boy had been compromised. Yet up to about 1914 the people who called themselves Southerners were still rooted in the soil, rooted in their traditions, and rooted in a way of life inscribed with the permanent values and intelligible principles that had been passed down from one generation to the next. Having reconciled vice with virtue, the South knew from experience what the modern world has tried to forget: the depravity that lurks inexorably in the hearts of mankind everywhere. This knowledge, along with their cultural ties to the past, humbled the best Southerners and contributed to their conservatism. As Tate suggests in his two interpretive Civil War biographies *Stonewall Jackson: The Good Soldier* (1928) and *Jefferson Davis: His Rise and Fall* (1929), the refined remnant of antebellum society rarely discussed money or how much of it someone had. For this remnant the quality of a particular man was, according to the narrator of Tate's acclaimed novel *The Fathers*, "bound up with his kin and the 'places' where he lived," not with his income or way of earning it, and "'Class' consisted solely in a certain code of behavior."11
For Tate the New South that arose after 1918 from the ashes of the Confederacy was not a reconstruction, but an obliteration. He remained convinced that what was good and right about the Old South perished along with what was mean and vile; the cure for what ailed the old order, in other words, had been in many ways worse than the disease. He maintained that while the "cynical materialism of the new order brought to the South the American standard of living...it also brought about a society similar to that which Matthew Arnold saw in the North in the Eighties and called vigorous and uninteresting." Much like the town portrayed in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," the New South that Tate oppugns in his writings joined the march of progress, and its people, tempted by dreams of avarice, willingly conformed themselves to the ways of industrialization, urbanization, and standardization—for fear that they be otherwise ridiculed like Emily Grierson, who refused to let the postal service affix a number to her mailbox.

Tate insisted that the Confederacy was defeated in and after the Civil War because the South failed "to bring out a body of doctrine setting forth its true conviction that the ends of man require more for their realization than politics." He encouraged his fellow Agrarians not to make the same mistake. If the Agrarians were to succeed in forwarding their cause, they had to be of a religious mind, he argued, and they had to be able to understand each other's religion. Such an understanding, he proclaimed, "is necessary to fire the enthusiasm of a group; it is reciprocal in its action." What the Agrarians—or anybody else opposed to progress for the sake of progress—needed, according to Tate, was the intelligence of sacred tradition.

This was precisely what Tate thought humanism lacked. In "The Fallacy of Humanism," his most controversial essay, which appeared in the journal *Criterion* about a year before the Agrarians took their stand in print, he made this judgment jarringly plain. Here he denounced the humanistic writings of Norman Foerster, Babbitt, and Paul Elmer More. He alleged that their New Humanism (or Neohumanism) denied the polarities of life, of Heaven and Hell, and disparaged the timeless myths by which man lives and organizes his literature. Furthermore, he argued that it did not possess the authority of religion from which values emerge and around which they unify themselves to form a coherent moral system. Moreover, he contended that authority for the humanists lies not in sacred tradition, but in individuals, not in unity, but in diversity. And most important, he claimed that the New Humanism could offer no consistent point of view without "the background of an objective religion, a universal scheme of reference."

In fairness, and from the perspective of recent critical assessments, it should be pointed out that the New Humanists, particularly Babbitt and More, shared much more in common with Tate than his occasionally rash pronouncements indicate. More, for example, certainly recognized the importance of religion: "Will not the humanist, unless he adds to his creed the faith and the hope of religion, find himself at the last, despite his protests, dragged back into the camp of the naturalist? If we perish like beasts, shall we not live like beasts?" Babbitt, to whom More addressed these troubling but vital questions, acknowledged that humanism could never take the place of religion: "Religion indeed may more readily dispense with humanism," he wrote, "than humanism with religion." And although he cautiously and characteristically refused to give any dogmatically exclusive, definitively binding answers to difficult questions like More's, Babbitt realized that religion and hu-
manism could fight together against mutual foes, whom he identified as the humanitarians and "the other philosophers of the flux who simplify this problem for themselves by dismissing the One, which is a living intuition, as a metaphysical abstraction." For Babbitt humanism was, in the words of George A. Panichas, "a common ground upon which dualists, Christians and non-Christians, could meet" in defiance of these common enemies.¹⁹

Much as Tate initially insisted that his stance in "The Fallacy of Humanism" implied in no way a profession of faith privileging a particular religious persuasion, it became evident in subsequent writings that what he called "a universal scheme of reference" resembled the Church of Rome (whose "discipline" and "definite standards" Babbitt himself admired as aspects "that could protect society against the individual")²⁰. When, for example, Herbert Read mentioned the religious overtones in his friend's correspondence of early 1929, Tate explained: "I am not in the arms of any church; though I am convinced there is only one church capable of meeting us with a really warm embrace."²¹ At about the same time, Tate surprised Donald Davidson with some shocking news: "I am more and more heading towards Catholicism.... We have reached a condition of spirit where no further compromise is possible."²² That Tate was already in Rome, at least intellectually, became apparent when his "Remarks on the Southern Religion" appeared in I'll Take My Stand.²³

This particular essay has little to do with the South as a geographical reality. It has to do with the South as a symbol for something much more momentous: the insidious decay of Christian orthodoxy in the Western world. To elaborate this phenomenon, Tate invents yet another symbol which he sets in alto-rilievo: "the horse cropping the blue-grass on the lawn."²⁴ The horse is Tate's image for religion as a complete system. Orthodoxy, Tate tells us, is concerned with the whole horse, not with that part which the horse shares in common with other horses, not with the horse's resemblance to other four-legged animals or vertebrates in general, and not with the horse's relative power compared with the relative horsepower of propelling things. The truly orthodox mind desires the whole horse, Tate affirms, and will be satisfied with nothing else.

Acknowledging and accounting for human failure, the religion of the whole horse is, as Tate maintains, "realistic, for it calls upon the traditional experience of evil which is the common lot of the race." It is a prudent religion unlikely "to suffer disillusion and collapse."²⁵ Whereas the whole-horse religion tempers desire with memory, half-religions, such as humanitarianism, inflame desire with yet more desire. Based as they are on amelioristic presuppositions about the nature and destiny of man, the half-religions of the modern age have forgotten Oedipus, whose fate should stand as a warning to those who would foolishly pronounce a man happy before he has lived his life to its end. The half-religions have, according to Tate, murdered Laius and assumed his kingdom, wife, and all. They have achieved what appears to be at this point in time a marvelous success. "But the end is yet to come," Tate forewarns; "Tiresias is yet to come."²⁶

In the meantime Tate would have us avoid cosmic catastrophe through the recovery of the whole horse. For the whole horse is an ever-fixed mark comprised of timeless moral prescriptions without which we languish in a nauseating state of ontological decadence of the kind his mentor diagnoses in The Waste Land (1922). Until we once again acknowledge with Tate who, where, and what we are in relation to "the horse cropping the blue-grass on the lawn," we shall con-
tinue to be hopelessly unwise, and spiritually dry, because, without orthodoxy, the "Da," "Da," "Da" of Eliot's thunder—God's command that we give, sympathize, and control—will remain but a meaningless roar.

Tate fought for Southern autonomy and Christian orthodoxy even when they appeared to be lost causes because, for him, there was no such thing as a lost cause. "Any coherent point of view," he remarked, "whether it have any chance of practical success or not, becomes a valuable instrument of criticism...to make contemporary abuses stand forth for what they are.... No cause is lost so long as it can sustain a few people in the formulation of truths." The despots of democratic society, says Tate, fear the man who would defend a presumably lost cause, for he possesses that which can expose them: "the courage to condemn the abuses of democracy, more particularly to discriminate the usurpations of democracy that are perpetrated in the name of democracy."28

Such was the courage that Tate and Herbert Agar evinced as coeditors of *Who Owns America?*, the still-pertinent sequel to *I'll Take My Stand*. Their editorial daring in bringing to fruition this classic critique of industrialism, corporate capitalism, and the bureaucratic state is best understood in relation to what Tate says about the role of the editor in "The Function of the Critical Quarterly." The editor, he writes, "owes his first duty to his critical principles, his sense of the moral and intellectual order upon which society ought to rest, whether or not society at the moment has an interest in such an order or is even aware of a need for it." To give the public what it so desperately needs, the editor, according to Tate, must join together the individual talents of his contributors in a common effort "to discredit the inferior ideas of the age by exposing them to the criticism of the superior ideas."29 In uniting Agrarian voices with those of certain English Distributists, including Hilaire Belloc, Tate and Agar achieved just such an end with the publication of *Who Owns America?*, which they boldly subtitled *A New Declaration of Independence*.30

It was in fighting courageously for seemingly lost causes that Tate found meaning and purpose. Even in the face of apparent defeat, he was never nonplussed. When a few of the contributors to *I'll Take My Stand* responded to the book's negative reception in both Northern and Southern literary circles by later revising their views, or by speaking reticently about what they had written, Tate redoubled his commitment to the Agrarian cause. "You evidently think that Agrarianism was a failure," he wrote to Davidson. "I think it was and is a very great success; but then I never expected [as Davidson did] any political influence." Tate reminded Davidson that, in reaffirming the humane tradition, the Southern Agrarians had achieved a righteous end. "Never fear," Tate assured him, "we shall be remembered when our snipers are forgotten."31

Tate identified the snipers as the "positivists," and in his later essays he endeavored to expose the positivistic spirit of modern times to the scrutiny of critical judgment. Though the manifestations of this morally stupefying spirit are legion, Tate, as a critic of force and cogency, cast his discerning eye on two of them in particular. The first is secularism, which he considered to be the bane of the West. Tate equates secularism, or what he calls "the society that substitutes means for ends," to barbarism, and he compares the secularists of our time to chronic drunkards who, according to Dr. Johnson, make beasts of themselves to forget the pain of being human. For there is, says Tate, "no anodyne for the pains of civilization but savagery."32

Secularism gave us the *fourmillante Cité*, a world which Tate calls "the most
vulgar civilization in the history of mankind. The *fourmillante Cité* is the world of getting and spending, a nervous world in which men and women huddle anxiously together in the din of urban life, a mechanized world in which human dignity is subordinated to the means of production, and the means of production aimed at producing a quantity of things with little or no relation to the quality of life. The *fourmillante Cité* is in truth a society of material means without spiritual ends, and, in the present age of technology, it "so multiplies the means, in the lack of anything better to do," writes Tate, "that it may have to scrap the machines as it makes them; until our descendants will have to dig themselves out of one rubbish heap after another and stand upon it, in order to make more standing room." Then, says Tate, the natural world will be "literally as well as morally concealed from the eyes of men."34

Secularism caters to our vanity, and Tate's essays remind us that those who control the means and ends of production would have us ever dissatisfied with our material comforts and unceasingly pursuing, because we "deserve" them, superior material satisfactions that lie in some imagined future. The social engineers would have us believe that moral progress is inevitable and inextricably connected to the physiological development of the human race. But, as Tate warns us, the future that the materialist promises is nothing more than "a naturalistic Utopia of mindless hygiene and Tom Swift's gadgets." And what the godless sociologist promises is "irresponsible perfection in the future, to be gained at the slight cost of our present consent to extinguish our moral natures in a group mind."35

The other manifestation of the positivistic spirit is the "historical method," which Tate describes as a "way of discovering historical 'truths' that are true in some other world than that inhabited by the historian and his fellow men: truths that are, in brief, true for the historical method."36 Tate observes that, because it proceeds from the supposition that the past is dead, the historical method tends to reduce literature to mere information to be arranged by the bibliographer, or made by the literary critic (turned social scientist) to advance the latest trend in literary theory. Tate recoiled from the positivistic critics of his day and, with the prescience of a prophet, anticipated today's political critic, whose "insights into the meanings of a work become methodology," and whose critical intentions are to have "the picture apologize to the frame."37

Accounting for the gradual decay of criticism, Tate points out that the immense practical successes of the sciences in the university and elsewhere so intimidated the critic of the nineteenth century that he willingly surrendered literature to the purveyors of the historical method. In one essay, he imagines several cowering critics gathered together in the dark of night, covertly justifying their capitulation: At length, they all agree that Milton's philosophy is scientifically absurd and that science has proven that his religion is positively invalid. Still, they admit that giving up Milton means giving up their profession. Thus they decide that it is best to bestir themselves to study scientifically Milton's unscientific philosophy and useless religion, so that they fail not to profit from the coming triumphs of science. "Nobody," they conclude, "believes today that the arts give us a sort of cognition at least equally valid with that of scientific method; so we will just take the arts as fields of data for more scientific investigation."38

Tate concedes that historical scholarship is indispensable when it is used correctly. By way of exemplification, he refers us to the first stanzas of John
Donne’s “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning.” If one knows that in Middle English and down through the Renaissance the word *die* has a secondary meaning, “to perform an act of love,” he is better able to appreciate the implied analogy and the otherwise concealed pun on which this famous love poem turns. The point of making this observation, says Tate, is not to show that “a man in the late sixteenth century was still aware of the early, secondary meaning of *die*.” The point is to make better sense of the first eight lines of the poem. “It is of no interest to anybody,” writes Tate, “that Donne knew how to make this pun; it is of capital interest to know what the pun does to the meaning of the poem.”39 The best of literary critics, he adds, never deny the importance of historical knowledge; they simply refuse to employ history methodologically. They refuse, in plain words, to allow it to devour the literary text. For them, history “survives as contributory knowledge.”40

Selectively anthologized and published some seven times, Tate’s criticism issued steadily for over forty years. By his own account, he composed 119 essays, including book reviews, two Swiftian satires, and a few “old-fashioned personal essays.”41 His most pertinent commentaries include, in addition to “The Fallacy of Humanism” and “Remarks on the Southern Religion,” “The Man of Letters in the Modern World” and “Liberalism and Tradition.” His essays in literature are no less concerned with civilization than those with overt cultural implications. Essays such as “Emily Dickinson” and “The Symbolic Imagination” are indeed focused on poetry and fiction; however, they are, in Tate’s words, “concerned with poetry and fiction as actualizations of culture.”42

While they are some of the most brilliant ever written in the twentieth century, Tate’s essays are also some of the most neglected. And they are likely to remain neglected awhile longer because they are unmistakably moral in their tone and metaphysical in their aim. If Tate’s criticism speaks at all in the intellectually dark years to come, it will speak to the reader of noble mind who has chosen to pursue the intelligible truth of God and man. Such a reader will find spiritual sustenance in Tate’s essays, for they penetrate, as Louise Cowan rightly describes them, “into the interiority of the soul’s connection with poetry and the real.”43

In his essays one may find a tendency to “oversimplify.” But, as Eliseo Vivas reminds us, Tate “is not a pure philosopher; he is a man endowed with a philosophic instinct...that ought to be trusted more than the skill of the pure philosopher.”44 Great writers who see through the eye rather than with the eye, one might add, are always hunting about for striking images to convey abstract ideas concretely, imaginatively, and succinctly. Such writers know that the right image can speak volumes. One thinks, for example, of Henry Adams, who revealingly juxtaposed the Medieval and Victorian worlds by associating the former with the Virgin, and the latter with the Dynamo. Poetic simplicity ought not to be confused with simplimindedness.

Though Tate distinguished himself as a critic, his poetry represents his greatest and most notable achievement as one of America’s most formidable writers. He was truly a poet prolific. By the time he entered his senior year at Vanderbilt, two of his poems had been published in the *American Poetry Magazine*. Over a hundred more of them appeared in periodicals from 1922 to 1953. Some were published in *The Fugitive*, others in such journals as *The Kenyon Review* and *The New Republic*. Including accomplished works such as “Aeneas at Washington,” “The Swimmers,” “The Mediterranean,” “Seasons of the Soul,” and the esteemed verse translation of the *Pervigilium Veneris*, his poetry is re-
markably diverse, and every poem a unique contribution to his oeuvre.

Viewed as a whole, however, Tate’s poetry, like his prose, is finally about one thing: the muddled modern mind. Muddled is the modern mind, he argues in one poem after another, because it has lapsed into an unprecedented state of chronological and spiritual provincialism of the kind that Alfred North Whitehead envisioned when he observed that men and women “can be provincial in time, as well as in space”; of the kind that Eliot, echoing and furthering Whitehead, described as a provincialism “for which history is merely the chronicle of human devices which have served their turn and been scrapped, one for which the world is the property solely of the living, a property in which the dead hold no shares”; of the kind that Tate, inspired by both Whitehead and Eliot, indicted in his accurate delineation of the “provincial man” who “cuts himself off from the past, and without benefit of the fund of traditional wisdom approaches the simplest problems of life as if nobody had ever heard of them before.”

The muddled modern mind is nowhere better drawn than in “Ode to the Confederate Dead” and “Last Days of Alice,” two of Tate’s best, most characteristic poems. These two works are significant because they set their author apart from many poets of his day who celebrated, or at least surrendered themselves to, the Cartesian notion that the mind creates the universe in perceiving it—that there are, ipso facto, as many universes as there are minds thinking them into existence. For Tate this notion was troubling. On the one hand, it leads dangerously to philosophical abstraction and moral confusion. On the other, it begets poetry of a rather superstitious kind that severs language from “the grammar of a possible world,” a dissolution motivated by “the belief that language itself can be reality, or by incantation can create reality.”

Marion Montgomery has lately identified Wallace Stevens as one twentieth-century poet whose verse, though some of the finest ever written, is nonetheless informed, consciously or not, by certain modern strains of Cartesianism. To illustrate, Montgomery refers to “The Idea of Order at Key West,” a poem where a woman singing on the beach “was the single artificer of the world / In which she sang.” And they who witness her song know “that there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made.” Whereas here Stevens exalts the ego’s ability to be at once its own creator and universe, in “Ode to the Confederate Dead” and “Last Days of Alice,” Tate laments the inability of the modern mind to engage a higher reality—“out there,” so to speak—whose efficient and final cause is God, whose thought is one integral universe.

We find in the “Ode” several explicit symbols for this moral debility. First there is “the blind crab,” a creature that moves about freely but knows no direction, that has vigor but, in human terms, no spiritually meaningful world in which to expend that vigor purposefully, and with a view toward eternity. There is also the “mummy, in time,” a static variation on the dynamic image of the “Heaving, turning,” benighted crab. Being a symbol, the “mummy” can have as many meanings as the poem’s context makes possible. One meaning, however, surely has to do with what Tate refers to as “the cut-offness” of the modern intellect from the history of which it is the momentary fulfillment. As a mummy is saved from, yet, in a sense, dead to, time—to whose natural ravages the rotting corpses in the Confederate graveyard are, on the contrary, quite alive—the modern intellect that fails to realize the past that lives in every present moment is saved from, yet dead to, history. Finally, there is “the jaguar” that “leaps / For his own image in a jungle pool, his victim.” Here Tate ap-
propriates the myth of Narcissus. But instead of a youth gazing lovingly, though conceitedly, at his reflection in a pool, Tate gives us a terrifying post-Darwinian symbol for the brutish individualism of our age that does violence not only to selfhood, but to neighborhood as well.

Stevens’s idea of order, like that of countless other modern writers, stands in contradistinction to that which Tate argues for in the “Ode.” Stevens’s idea proceeds presuppositionally from cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am), Tate’s from cogitat Deus ergo sum (God thinks, therefore I am). In “Narcissus as Narcissus,” his only extensive commentary on one of his own poems, Tate makes this point for himself. The “Ode,” he writes, “is ‘about’ solipsism … or any other ism that denotes the failure of the human personality to function objectively 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.”

Unlike the observed woman of Stevens’s poem, the observer in the “Ode” — the poem’s central consciousness through which Tate examines his own limitations as the modern “intellectual man” — desires entry into just such a unity, in other words, into an “active faith,” which Tate opposes to the ‘fragmentary cosmos’ which surrounds us.

The “Ode” is tragic, but ironically the tragedy involves not the Confederate dead, on whose graves the observer meditates from the cemetery’s “shut gate” and “decomposing wall,” but rather the observer himself. His sensibility being cut off from that mystery which contains both the living and the memories which sprout “from the inexhaustible bodies that are not / Dead, but feed the grass row after rich row,” the observer cannot, try as he may, become one in an active faith with the “inscrutable infantry.” Although, while gazing intently at the leaves whirling violently in the wind, he envisions the soldiers fighting like “Demons out of the earth,” he cannot prolong the vision, “seeing,” finally, “only the leaves / Flying, plunge and expire.” There where the “headstones yield their names to the element,” he imagines that he, too, knows the soldiers’ “midnight restitutions of the blood…the rage…the angry resolution…the unimportant shrift of death”; that he, too, can “praise the vision / And praise the arrogant circumstance / Of those who fall / Rank upon rank, hurried beyond decision.” But he is ultimately thrown back upon himself — the imagined soldiers left in “that orient of the thick-and-fast,” and he left to “curse the setting sun…Like an old man in a storm.”

In “Last Days of Alice,” Tate personifies the muddled modern mind as an egoistic woman who has slipped behind the mirror to join her reflection in a boundless wonderland where self is the measure of all things. Temporally and eternally cut off from any reality beyond the one she thinks into existence, Alice has “grown lazy, mammoth but not fat,” and “Declines upon her lost twilight age.” Like the observer in the “Ode,” Alice arises from the “new provincialism” that characterizes the late evening of Christendom. However, she is not as sympathetic as he because she gives not even a glance to the past upon which she carelessly reposes. On the contrary, her gaze is fixed on the present in which she exists as part of “a dumb shade-harried crowd / Being all infinite, function depth and mass / Without figure, a mathematical shroud / Hurled [like the leaves in the ‘Ode’] at the air.”

In this respect, Alice resembles what Ortega y Gasset calls the mass-man of modernity who “is spoiled by the world around him,” who behaves not unlike a “pampered child” that encounters nothing “to contravene his whims, to draw him out of himself, to make him listen to
higher authority, and, even less, to plumb the depths of his own destiny.” In the same respect, she is not unlike the subject of “How Beastly the Bourgeois Is,” a poem in which D. H. Lawrence portrays the chronological provincial as a man “living on the remains of bygone life / sucking his life out of the dead leaves of greater life than his own.” Like Gasset’s mass-man and Lawrence’s beastly bourgeois, Alice rests complacently upon the achievements of the West, while never acknowledging the great debt she owes them. In fact, she is unaware of those achievements, and though she stares “learnedly down her airy nose,” she stares at “nothing, nothing thinking all the day.”

For context Alice has neither cosmos nor history, for bearings neither creed nor custom. Her heaven is behind the looking glass, and “that heaven is a dayless night, / A nightless day driven by perfect lust.” Her philosophy, born strictly of feeling, is but a “theorem of desire.” Acting as her own creator, she is contingent only upon herself, “blesséd without sin.” In a word, she lacks morality. “For morality is always and essentially a feeling of subordination and submission to something,” writes Ortega, “a consciousness of obligation and service.”

Alice, then, is more than a metaphor for the muddled modern mind turned in upon itself; she is an image of modern decadence from which the speaker recoils at the end of the poem: “O God of our flesh, return us to Your wrath,” he cries out against this ontological sham, this phantom of life. “Let us be evil could we enter in / Your grace, and falter on the stony path!” Though pained, this cry is nevertheless hopeful, for while it invokes God’s righteous anger, it acknowledges the possibility for human beings to achieve perfect forgiveness for their moral anomy by humbly submitting themselves to the order of sacred law.

What the speaker recognizes, and what the spiritually provincial modern mind cannot accept—being of an abstract, scientific sensibility—is the immemorial truth that human beings are conceived in sin and born in corruption, having inherited the taint of their Edenic parents. Tate’s poetry is based and dependent upon this difficult supernatural assumption, even if this assumption extends, as some critics suggest, from what Tate calls (speaking of John Peale Bishop) “our modern unbelieving belief”—the poet’s “attempt to replace our secular philosophy, in which he does not believe, with a vision of the divine, in which he tries to believe.”

As the narrator Lacy Buchan says in one of the many poetic passages found in The Fathers, “To hear the night, and to crave its coming, one must have deep inside one’s secret being a vast metaphor controlling all the rest: a belief in the innate evil of man’s nature, and the need to face that evil, of which the symbol is the darkness, of which again the living image is man alone.” Here, as elsewhere in the novel, Lacy speaks for Tate, who understood the evil darkness that lurks deep down in every lonely human heart, and whose poetry reminds us of the eternal consequence of evil unrepented and unforgiven. With the aged Confederate veteran who speaks out boldly, albeit cryptically, to his reunited comrades in the poem appropriately titled “To the Lacedemonians,” Tate says to those who still have the moral imagination to take this consequence seriously, and to those who would understand his poetry and poetic intentions, “Gentlemen, my secret is / Damnation.”

Naturally this secret lies at the heart of all serious literature from the Hebrew prophets down to the mysterious stories of Flannery O’Connor. Damnation is among the ultimate realities with which moral minds have concerned themselves for thousands of years. Still, it remains in
our time, as Muriel Spark reaffirms in the catechetical epigraph to her novel *Memento Mori*, one of "the four last things ever to be remembered." These are, of course, Death, Judgment, Hell, and Heaven. Without fear of the third, and hope for the fourth, crime and punishment, Dostoevsky cautions us in his own fiction, are but meaningless abstractions, and civilization but a vexatious absurdity in which anything is possible and everything permissible—in which there is neither virtue nor any need of it. The young suicides have forgotten the question of the hereafter, says Ippolit Kirillovich in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "there is no sign of such a question, as though the whole matter of our soul and what awaits us beyond the grave had long since been erased from their nature and buried under the sands."56

Tate could not agree more. In a morally muddled age like ours that takes damnation for so much superstition, "for-nication," he says in the poem "Cause-rie," is but "self-expression, adjunct to Christian euphoria, / And whores become delinquents; delinquents, patients; / Patients, wards of society." As O'Connor and Spark thought of their fiction, Tate thought of his "poems as commentaries on those human situations from which there is no escape."57 And like Kirillovich, he knew that most moderns fail to appreciate the ineluctable threat of damnation, having been for too long suckled on the sophistries of secularism, or, as Tate puts it in "The Cross," "from all salvation weaned."58 Tate saw that the modern world has lapsed into a state of being analogous to that censured in his poem "The Eye," in which we find the spiritually fossilized "mineral man" who "takes the fatherless dark to bed," whose eye resembles the "Shut shutter" of a camera, which, even with its shutter open, can only reproduce what it sees without understanding.

For Tate this lapse signified a crucial failure of the religious imagination. Without the religious imagination, our literature is at a loss, he warns. As he points out, we would not have the *Inferno*, a depiction of damnation *par excellence*, had not Dante been able to imagine the subject of his allegory to be true. But, then, Dante's poem was born of an "age whose mentality held the allegorical view of experience as easily as we hold the causal and scientific."58 It is the spirit of Dante's age, an age which aspired to beatitude and feared damnation, that informs Tate's poetry, not the positivistic spirit of modernity that elevates self above all else and pretends to fear nothing.

Tate considered himself to be an "archeologist of memory dedicated to the minute particulars of the past, definite things—*prima sacramenti memoria*."59 And that which gives his verse meaning are the great myths which function as poetic vehicles for remembering these permanent things. Tate acknowledged this when he quoted at length from the later work of I. A. Richards: "Myths are...no diversion to be sought as...an escape from the hard realities of life. They are these hard realities in projection, their symbolic recognition...and acceptance.... Without his mythologies man is only a cruel animal without a soul...a congeries of possibilities without order and aim."60 Without the communal language of myth to live by, one can only wonder, with the speaker in Tate's poem "Retroduction to American History," "When shall I wake?" Shorn from myth one might just as well cut off his head, "piece after piece" (Tate jests in an early poem called "Homily") and "throw the tough cortex away...Tear out the close vermiculate crease / Where death crawled angrily at bay." For left alone in the cozy den of his intellect, man will be sooner or later devoured by the "sav- age" beasts "in the next room" that "snarl" and "claw the floor," waiting as they do for the mythically unsupported soul in
Tate’s haunting poem “The Wolves.”

Tate believed what he professed in his poetry and prose, and he knew that what he said made him generally unpopular, particularly among academics. “When people have betrayed their own heritage,” he observed, “it is natural for them to hate anybody who reminds them of the betrayal.”61 Not only did Tate believe in what he said, but he stood always ready to defend it. Even to the death, it would seem. Shortly after his attack on the New Humanism, he half-seriously challenged to a duel a critic whose inveighing rebuttal Tate took to be sheer effrontery. Some months later Tate wrote to John Peale Bishop: “I took some pleasure in my opponent’s statement to my brother that such things were done nowadays only by people of the underworld; it seemed to mean unconsciously profound criticism of modern society.”62

Nor did Tate ever fear the intolerant snipers who objected to his politically incorrect views. Just a few years before he died, for instance, Tate traveled to Chicago where he hosted a panel at the annual conference of the MLA. While having dinner with a few of the panelists, he and William K. Wimsatt began to wax nostalgic about the South and its agrarian ways of life. Neither of them had yet said that he regretted that the South had lost the war, but they were both on the verge of saying as much when R. W. B. Lewis took a chair at the table. Lewis scolded Tate and Wimsatt for their Confederate sympathies; he said that the Southern cause was doomed from the start and that the war had ended appropriately. According to Walter Sullivan, who accompanied Tate to the conference, both Tate and Wimsatt, who were sitting across from each other, slid their chairs back and stood up undauntedly. “You don’t know anything about it,” Tate said to Lewis. “Absolutely nothing,” Wimsatt agreed. Lewis (remembers Sullivan) was “surprised into silence. Allen and Bill sat down and, as if there had been no interruption, they continued to lament the demise of the Confederate South.”63

Yes, Tate was a reactionary. But he believed that one could animate Western culture only by reacting violently to the enervating forces within it. “Reaction is the most radical of programs,” he wrote; “it aims at cutting away the overgrowth and getting back to the roots.”64 Tate reminds us that reaction, while decisively radical, is anything but progressive in form, for a progressive radicalism only rearranges the foliage. His reactionary tendencies emerged from what he called a “healthy skepticism,” a skepticism “which, like formaldehyde, is a great preservative of all sorts of things—of a sense of how things really were and of resistance against things as they are.”65 Tate possessed both of these senses; he knew that to be without the one is surely to be without the other.

Still, his reactionary tendencies never prevented him from making even the most difficult of concessions. His being a “historical relativist”—though not a philosophical or moral one—finally compelled him, for example, to concede that the Southern way of life, all nostalgia aside, could not have continued, and that a Southern victory over the Northern states might very well have precipitated its demise. “For the Confederacy to have survived,” he wrote, “the development of competitive power would have followed military victory and political independence.” The politicians of South Carolina, he regretfully admitted, would have been just as anxious as their Northern counterparts to enter the global power arena. “So I am convinced—if one can be convinced of what didn’t happen—that a uniform industrial civilization would have spread over the two countries; so that the South today [in 1962] would be even more ‘Yankee’ than it actually is.” The paradox of the historical outcome, adds...
Tate, is "that the South has enjoyed a longer period of identity in defeat than it might have been able to preserve in victory."66

It was as a man of letters, however, not as a historian, that Tate stood tall among his contemporaries. His early poetry was championed by Ford Madox Ford, whose recommendation was decisive in securing for Tate a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1928. To be near the man he considered his foremost teacher, the young writer Robert Lowell lived for several weeks in a pup tent pitched on Tate's lawn. Theodore Roethke and John Berryman sought Tate's advice on the making of poetry. Jacques Maritain referred to their guide as "an astounding force of nature" and arranged a private meeting between "this great poet whom I love so much" and Pope Pius XII.67 For Austin Warren, Tate was "a transmitter of the poet's discipline and authority...a prime and fortifying representative of culture."68

During his tenure at the University of Minnesota, where he taught English from 1951 until his retirement in 1968, Tate delivered invited papers across America, throughout Western Europe, and in India. He also received honorary degrees, as well as several prestigious awards, including the National Medal for Literature, the Bollingen Prize in Poetry, and the Gold Medal of the Dante Society. In 1959 The Sewanee Review reverenced Tate by publishing an issue of verse, essays, and notes in honor of his sixtieth birthday. Chief among the contributors was Eliot, who recognized the genius of his protégé in this telling sentence: "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."69

As sage Tate resisted the creeds of modernism, creeds inspired by Rousseau and institutionalized by the heirs of Marx and Engels. Even as a burgeoning writer living in Manhattan between the two World Wars, Tate rejected the faith of those fashionable intellectuals whom he engaged on that proverbial island of sophistication and forward looks, a faith predicated upon the myths of progress and materialism. From the start he was, in the words of his loyal confidant Cleanth Brooks, "the man of insight, the man of the shrewdest judgment, the truly orthodox man."70 Concisely put, Tate was everything that the present literary establishment despises: a crusader for the philosophical and theological realism of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

So much more could be said about the stand of Allen Tate. To be sure, much more needs to be said. In the end, however, Tate speaks for himself—in, and through, all that he wrote. He speaks with certainty, lucidity, and authority. His is the voice not of quiet desperation, but of calm conviction. His purpose is true and consistent, and that purpose is, according to his longtime friend Andrew Nelson Lytle, to remind us of "that Western knowledge of ourselves which is our identity."71 This knowledge flows from the sacred source of all created things, the source to which Tate would have us forever returning, lest we float like so many dead things into the chaotic sea of nothingness.