Simone Weil, and Plato long before her, images as "the Great Beast." Even when civilization is tottering at its roots, faith in social organization per se remains as the religion of the new order. And even when intellectuals like Heilbroner see what has gone wrong, they still insist on sustaining their illusion of progress, no matter how limited or modified.

In the final struggle against the terrible epochal happenings that he traces in the future of man, Heilbroner calls for help from "the intellectual elements of Western nations whose privileged role as sentries for society takes on a special importance in the face of things as we now see them." This is an astounding statement! Anyone who has read Irving Babbitt's *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919) or Julien Benda's *La Trahison des Clercs* (1927) should by now know the full and continuing extent of betrayal and the high rate of desertion committed by intellectuals in the modern age. But this is another symptomatic instance, really, of the alarming limitations of Heilbroner's general premises and approach. If he had any understanding of the roots of the crisis of spirit in our time he could hardly appeal to those "sentries for society" who have steadily, even ruthlessly, and with an imposed uniformity of thought in all cultural spheres, preached the new gospel of power that rejects those lessons in piety which must contain first and last principles. But Heilbroner's remarks here are, if astounding, not surprising. Wisdom is not something we have come to expect from our intellectuals. Heilbroner's thesis, in spite of all the intelligence of its sociological "reflections," dissolves (like our "dissolving society," in Lord Radcliffe's phrase) into nothingness insofar as it ultimately ignores the truth of what Edmund Burke expresses in words that progressivist ideologues scorn: "There is no qualification for government but virtue or wisdom, actual or presumptive."

Reviewed by George A. Panichas

A Critical Communion

The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate, edited by John Tyree Fain and Thomas Daniel Young, Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1974. lxx + 442 pp. $15.00.

Southern Education early in this century, both in preparatory schools and universities, was in the main exceptional. The programs of the prep schools, though circumscribed, were by no means parochial: centered as they were in Greek and Roman literature, they provided for their students the universality as well as the conservative bias of a classical education. From such schools issued a profusion of talented and energetic adolescents who in the 'teens and early 1920's encountered at Vanderbilt, what few universities can at present claim, a coherent curriculum and a vigorous faculty quite equal to the excellence of their earlier training. Of these men John Crowe Ransom, who came there as a freshman in 1903, was one of the first and most eminent, and under his respected if occasionally resented influence more than a dozen bright students met regularly at Vanderbilt, immediately before and after the First World War, to discuss and criticize one another's poetry. After Ransom, the most significant of this group were Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and Robert Penn Warren. In 1922 they established *The Fugitive*, which for three years was to supply them with an organ for their poetry and criticism. This magazine was terminated in 1925, but from the narrower, aesthetic concerns of the "fugitives" proceeded the broader, cultural and religious interests of the "agrarians," a group composed largely of the same writers and devoted to protesting the drift of modernism generally, and specifically the pretensions of science to a complete control of human destiny. Although the agrarians were seen initially as
romantic antagonists of industrialism and technology, they were at bottom opposed to the secularizing and dehumanizing of contemporary man with—as they saw it—the consequent fragmenting of his culture and indeed of his very sensibility. And far from being romantic, they were belligerent rebels against the sentimental poetry and politics that had characterized for so many years the post-bellum South. In 1930 two crucial books appeared: the symposium *I'll Take My Stand*, in which are distilled the agrarians' cultural and economic views, and Ransom's theological work, *God Without Thunder*.

These documents, together with the poetry and criticism of Ransom, Tate and Davidson, constitute the essential materials for a history of the fugitive-agrarian movement, and indeed no survey of twentieth-century American conservatism can ignore this group. Though ancillary to the major works, the present collection of correspondence between Davidson and Tate—specifically those letters on literary subjects—provides a more intimate perspective on this movement than we have had heretofore. The letters of these men, filled largely with sensitive, acute and detailed analyses of each other's verse, will be of most interest to students of their poetry. The apparatus criticus is both adequate and convenient, though the Foreword has, along with some interesting matter, an ungainly style rendered all the more apparent by the brisk and lucid prose of the letters it introduces. The editors have, to be sure, over-elaborately classified the correspondence into four chronological periods running from 1922 to 1966. The opening two sections have indeed something of a unity, the first affording an inside view of the joys and contents that are a part of editing a literary magazine (*The Fugitive*), and the second describing the intricate pattern of events and decisions preliminary to the publication of *I'll Take My Stand*. But the last two sections, despite editorial claims, have little such unity. In truth these letters have but one important quality in common: they exhibit their writers' life-long devotion to poetry as a craft, and their endlessly loving but candid criticism.

Authors are not invariably interesting letter-writers—Alexander Pope's letters are too studied and factitious, Samuel Johnson's too tersely mundane. Davidson's and Tate's are informally graceful and unostentatious; they are naturally smooth, not polished, and show on either side an agile and unpretentious mind. Tate's are slightly wittier and contain more memorable observations, while Davidson's are often more detailed and sometimes more personally revealing. These distinctions obtain in their poetry as well, Davidson's being more lyrical, passionate and even more pagan than Tate's generally astringent, urbane, and ironical verse. This difference in temper and aesthetics introduces into the correspondence an interesting variety and tension. Davidson's strictures on Tate's famous "Ode to the Confederate Dead," for example, together with Tate's apologia, make up a fascinating interplay. For Davidson the poem is in craftsmanship and economy superb, but it has merely a "cold beauty," and its tendency is to nihilism and despair; moreover, it is not an ode for the Confederate dead at all, he tells Tate, "but for your own dead emotion. . ." Tate responds that many fine poems are not really about what they ostensibly address: "Was Keats' Nightingale Ode about Nightingales?" And he goes on to justify the pessimism and satire as well. Had these correspondents agreed more fundamentally on aesthetics, their criticism would assuredly have been more relaxed and therefore less discriminating and volatile. For forty-five years they exchanged such critiques—so precise and candid as to constitute an invaluable supplement to the poetry itself, and so loving even when acerbic as to suggest, not merely a common interest in writing verse, but indeed a common spiritual quest. As early as 1924 Tate wrote thus of their relationship to Davidson:

... It is a compact of the understanding,
the seal of a love unsuspected by those who are so inured to the mere materials of life that they cannot speak of it impartially in art, either out of love of it or out of hatred. This attitude...grown out of loneliness in an alien world is so secret that it must exult a little when it recognizes a brother.

It was a compact kept by both of them to the end.

Their correspondence, though it will appeal mainly to teachers and critics of their poetry, compasses many other subjects: science, poetic theory and technique, literary scholarship and criticism, religion (we see very early Tate's attraction to Roman Catholicism), the significance of Southern history, culture and politics, the role of regionalism in poetry. We have also pungent and sometimes acrid comments on such figures as Hemingway, Edmund Wilson, Ellen Glasgow, T. S. Eliot, H. L. Mencken (who, according to Tate in 1924 "is the flapper of Amer. lit., i.e., he gives typical expression to female sophomores in Southern and Middle Western universities. His journal [The American Mercury] is a two-ring circus of which the squeamish intelligence, which is often mine, grows extremely bored"). Throughout these decades of correspondence one observes a genuine continuity of thought, for however much their temperaments may have differed, they are united in their concern for the universal and enduring things, for the deepest pieties, for reverential and compassionate as well as profound intelligence—united also, one may add, in their contempt for the metallic and arid iconoclasm of such moderns as Mencken.

But the letters, interesting as they are, cannot show us the ultimate significance of these two lives and of those movements into which they cast so many years and such passion. There are apparent anomalies and incongruities difficult to reconcile. Why is it that these men, raised in a classical and conservative tradition, should have written such poetry as was to fortify, not counteract, the tendency towards obscurity and egotism in modern versifiers? How is it that they should have been among the architects of an aesthetics—the New Criticism—which, although it was reacting against an increasingly moribund historical scholarship, has often resulted in irresponsibly subjective textual interpretation in classrooms and even in journals? To start such objections is perhaps like blaming Rousseau for the fatuities of his disciples, yet it must be remembered that Rousseau provided the nutriments, if not the essence, of his followers' excesses. Still, the central message of the agrarians—pietas—is profound: we must be reverent before God and his creation. Although alchemy, modern science, psychiatry or the current social study may seem to promise the complete control of our world, our nature, and our destiny, these promises are shown always to be derisory; yet in the experience of mankind this lesson is never mastered. Davidson, in a pessimistic vein, thus lamented to Tate: "We lost the immediate experiment; that is, we converted no large body of opinion, high or low, received no subsidies from foundations, formed no bloc of voters." But Tate's view is more persuasive, for the agrarians were, in fine, only expressing truths to which every age—though ours perhaps most desperately—needs to be recalled. He writes:

You evidently believe that agrarianism was a failure. I think it was and is a very great success; but then I never expected it to have any political influence. It is a reaffirmation of the humane tradition, and to reaffirm that is an end in itself. Never fear: we shall be remembered when our snipers are forgotten. I have had a certain disagreement with you from the beginning; you have always seemed to me to hold to a kind of mystical secularism, which has made you impatient and angry at the lack of results. We live in a bad age in which we cannot give our best; but no age is good.

Reviewed by Robert D. Stock