

# For Mr. Tate

Samuel Hux

## I

ALLEN TATE'S birthday keeps approaching and passing (b. 11/19/99), his death day keeps receding (d. 2/9/79; my God, has it been so long?), and I recall that he once wrote, lamenting the absence of T. S. Eliot and John Crowe Ransom, "a high civility. . . has almost disappeared from the republic of letters. Its disappearance means the reduction of the republic to a raw democracy of competition and aggression." The "republic of letters," a "raw democracy"—I admire the phrasing, while I'm not sure I approve completely the tone, which rubs my on-again-off-again populist tendencies. But I'm sorry there aren't many people around anymore who talk that way, who *can* talk that way. . . I mean who can pull it off because they *think* that way. Granted, the tone betrays the bias of a shabby-genteel gentry no longer very relevant to America and about which Tate, thinking of his own family, could see the humor: "We were brought up with silver spoons in our mouths and were expected to eat the spoons." But it reveals just as surely a profound and classically "political" sense of literary responsibility: *although art is conceived in privacy, in its practice it is a high public calling with its own codes and rituals.* I don't think such a notion has meant very much to us for a very long time (it's a different thing from the idea of

literature *engagée*: takes stances, propounds views); but we might allow ourselves, lamenting the absence of Tate, to be reminded again of that certain grace and keen manners that do not come easily to us anymore—and that we only kid ourselves we can do well without.

Tate's place in our literature is secure. At least it's secure "under the aspect of eternity": I don't think we at this particular moment have a very secure sense of it. His poetry is a little too rigorously sculpted for most contemporary tastes, and it's no great surprise when literary historians assign it to the once-influential-but category. His literary essays are remembered primarily as theoretical statements of the now old New Criticism, whose tenets, ironically, he so often failed to practice. His social and political essays we tend to think of as quite simply wrong-headed, and in many cases I'm sure they were. His remarkable novel *The Fathers* (1938) we all "know" is excellent, but it never quite makes it onto "must" reading lists. But perhaps it's difficult to get very close to a narrator who says of the Old South, with approval balancing irony, "as in all highly developed societies the line marking off the domestic from public life was indistinct. Our domestic manners and satisfactions were as impersonal as the United States Navy." We also tend to like the line indis-

tinct, but weighted differently: it's consistent with our expressionistic ethos that we like the domestic very personal (why not?) and the public its reflection, and we seldom see in that anything deserving irony.

Clearly there was a failure of communication between us and Tate which only deepened in his later years, the various awards he received notwithstanding the principle that we often honor institutionally that which we no longer revere personally. But when a great man passes it becomes *our* responsibility to understand *him*.

By some perverse logic I was reading Rousseau when I heard of Tate's death. Jean-Jacques: I lied, I stole, I was a cad; and now let me tell you the worst thing I ever did. And I admit I enjoy the *Confessions*. Even if it has now become next to compulsory to tell one's all, so much so that reticence would shock us as profligate confession used to our fathers, there's still a certain pleasure in reading Rousseau the original contemporary. But I wish, especially now, that Tate's slender *Memoirs and Opinions* (1975), published when he was seventy-five, had been more enthusiastically received than it was. For even what most bothered one about Tate's "memoirs" is what—given the frantic egotism and brash subtlety of so much of our literature, and daily behavior—is most to be valued now. I mean that his "memoirs" (Ah, now he'll tell all that's dark and deep!) weren't really memoirs at all, not as we've come to understand that genre: the confessional mode. They were instead a kind of formal and yet curiously intimate *gesture*, the elegant talk of a man suspicious of "the terrible fluidity of self-revelation" yet assured enough of his achievement to assume that the outlines of his life and opinions would be of some interest; one who while never coy insisted that his definitions of privacy be respected. And then an Epilogue entitled "A Sequence of

Stanzas: Compiled and Read to a Group of Friends on My Seventy-Fifth Birthday"—a typically subtle act of courtesy by which Tate invited and included the reader.

. . . But always let him know he was, after all, but a guest. Whenever one most expected from Tate the dark revelation he was to be disappointed. The thirteen or so year old Tate accompanies his mother on a ritualistic visit of homage to the home of "Aunt Martha Jackson," a blind, centenarian ex-slave—according to family legend half-sister of Tate's great-grandfather—who runs her hands over Tate's face and announces "He favors his grandpa"—which though not literally true, Tate recognizes as a way of placing him within the "family," accepting him "with the aristocratic courtesy that survived with some former slaves longer than their masters could keep it." Ah! Preface to some private revelations of twisted feelings about miscegenation, a tortured confession of the complicated sources of Tate's infatuation with the Old South back when he was an Agrarian, and his often then belligerent neo-Confederate apologetics, and so on? Hardly.

"If the sense of a past comes less from parish registers, old houses, family Bibles, old letters, county records, and tombstones, than from the laying on of hands from one generation to another, then what sense of a living past I may have goes back through the bird-claws of an ancient female slave, my blood-cousin who, ironically enough, in family authority seemed to take precedence over my mother." This anecdote follows some speculations on memory as a feminine quality, as Saint Augustine says, which is not at our command—"it gives what *it* wills"—and is presented as "a glimpse of the past that reversed my stance at the time it happened. Instead of looking back, I felt I had been shifted into the past and was looking into a future that nobody but myself at the end of the eighteenth cen-

tury could have seen." Instead of private recollection leading to confession educated by psychoanalytic modes, it leads to a public, historical vision. But there's little doubt that these graceful speculations reveal Tate more intimately than any "advertisement for himself" could ever do.

Tate was the man who would let us see as far as a genteel and humorous charm would allow: His mother was an "inveterate reader" who disapproved of his reading—"Son, put that book down and go out and play with Henry. You are straining your mind and you know your mind isn't very strong." And as far as old-fashioned taste judged sufficient: His father had "humiliated" the family so his mother felt, but few details are forthcoming. And then with a subtle generosity Tate would tell us a frightening dream about an affable, celibate, mother-ruined, religious-cranky uncle who died in a mental institution, and who in the dream fixes Tate with opaque eyes and blocks the entrance to his apartment—*generous* because Tate does not intrude with explanations and psychological apparatus which would take back, as in a clinic, what he has just shared. "I have had few other dreams that I can remember in such perfect detail."

There was really no more reason to expect Tate to be conventionally confessional in memoir than in his poetry, which even when clearly autobiographical always achieved a formal distance. "The Swimmers," for instance, the recollection of discovering a lynching near a swimming hole, Kentucky, 1911, moves by strict *terza rima*, recedes from direct naturalistic speech ("We stopped to breathe above the swimming-hole") to Latinate vocabulary ("I gazed at its reticulated shade"). Recalling the corpse taken back to town, the speaker observes with a restraint that does not, as it was never meant to, convince, "Alone in the public clearing / This private thing was

owned by all the town, / Though never claimed by us within my hearing."

How does one adequately characterize a mind such as Tate's, so little agitated by the demands of fashion? It's not enough merely to say "conservative." Not that Tate wasn't that. He *was*—to such a degree and of such a sort that, ironically, he has a very ambiguous place in the history of American intellectual conservatism. Tate's conservatism was partially a matter of style, manners, and the reflexive avoidance of the slovenly: tradition is sanity, and whatever is insufficiently respectful of ancient assumption is at best mentally crude. But it had its ideological bias as well—industrial capitalism is corrosive of traditions and impotent to create traditions (his clearest statement is the essay "What is a Traditional Society?")—a bias that would make it hard for him to welcome any "fusion" of traditionalist and libertarian-individualist conservatisms that other traditionalists were able awkwardly to adjust to. Foreign to what his colleague John Crowe Ransom called the "campaigning conservatism," Tate's attachments were to a level and rhythm of life that were much profounder than market mechanisms and policy papers; they were, somehow, "ordinary."

—An interlude: The first adult job I held I drove to daily along a street named for Tate in a North Carolina town. (I think it was. I was told it was: that speaks enough.) An object of Tate's adolescent love recalled in his memoirs attended a Victorian boarding school called Science Hill in a Kentucky town in which I spent many months over a considerable number of years. The winters of my preschool years, as we followed my father about on his job, were spent in a Tennessee town three miles from the farmhouse the Tates inhabited off and on in the 1930s and 1940s. Normally our writers, our artists, seem a little distant to most people, just short of exotic. One doesn't

expect to meet the figure from book jackets unless on vacation one spies him in a restaurant and, after a production of not staring, ventures, "I just wanted to let you know how much I enjoyed. . . ." One doesn't expect to cross his spoor so naturally in the "normal" intercourse of life. Isn't it "right" somehow that so many of Tate's books should have been published by Swallow? Swallow may have become The Swallow Press, Inc., Chicago; but for the longer time it was just Alan Swallow, 2670 S. York St. in Denver—just around the corner to speak. Now, this is illusion, I realize, and if taken too seriously more than a little laughable. But it's a useful illusion for the moment, affording a recognition of something that's rather strange, when you come to think of it.

What I'm trying to suggest about the eloquent, mannered, even aristocratic Mr. Tate is a certain "ordinariness"—if I can strip that word of any patronizing connotations and also assure you that I don't mean, for God's sake, "the common touch." "He seems to be serving not some dashing *daimon* but the plain, solid Gods of the Copybook Maxims." That's Lionel Trilling on Orwell, so the maxims, translated ideologically, seem mostly quite different ones. But it amuses me to imagine that the conservative Tate and the socialist Orwell might have surprised one another by getting along quite well—once Tate recognized that Orwell's plain style was an attempted literary approximation of the plain and common virtues he thought his non-Marxist socialism the best servant of, and once Orwell recognized that Tate's Ciceronian periods were intended as the literary servant of the plain and common virtues he thought his traditionalist conservatism the best approximation of.

Did Tate's defense of a slow-paced pre-industrial society, mythical counter to a frenetic, aggressive industrialism, really run contrary to what most people

then deeply felt, even while they were intrigued with the possibility of grasping what they could while they could for who-knows-what-the-future? His characterization of expressionistic, confessional poetry as "howling poetry" would receive the approval of most, perhaps even especially those who don't read much poetry, including Tate's precise compositions. His public reserve and insistence upon a ritual of manners was a stylistic elevation of the discomfort with raw, put-it-up-front encounter most people most places feel. I doubt that Tate absorbed any blood rhythms from the soil (no Lawrentian in the head, he) even when an Agrarian; but I do think that for all the size of his intellect expanding that Poe-like forehead, and for all his talent, his ideas and values were not simply conservative "principles," but the elevation of common assumption, the articulation of rooted experiences of mind and soul normally thought the possession merely of people not mentally very impressive and thereby deemed stolid and superficial.

(There's nothing necessarily and universally very lovely about this: some common assumptions are just *common*. "Why that's no chauffeur," Tate said to Edmund Wilson; "that's just a common field Negra." There was this side to Tate. But I do not think the particulars—once his neo-Confederatism withered away for lack of historical nourishment—very deep. I cannot *prove* this. I suspect an orneriness I know quite well in some Southerners: a need to provoke one's auditor, "charmingly" to give offense. Better to be thought insensitive than liberal! No. . . better on selective occasion to *be* insensitive.)

One of Tate's friends said of him in Paris, "Monsieur Tate is so conservative that he's almost radical." Which *seems* apt given the shoulder-chip assertiveness of the younger Tate, as when in the midst of the Great Depression he entitled a

book *Reactionary Essays* (1936). But it's without much substance. Just as a radicalism couched in unlettered *sans-culotte* defiance seems the more extreme, so a conservatism couched in crisp, ironic assuredness *seems* the more ultra-montane. Tate's conservatism is, at bottom, the common stuff of town and farm, whatever the voting patterns.

If these remarks were intended as a slap-dash put-down, I'm afraid they would miss their mark: Allen Tate would not, I do not think, have taken offense. Quoting a stanza of Edwin Muir, one of those "Compiled and Read to a Group of Friends on My Seventy-Fifth Birthday," Tate remarked that "Every line is a platitude," but added that they "are so put together, and so arranged rhythmically, that the result is brilliant and profound."

## II

*And he who dribbled couplets like a  
snake  
Coiled to a lithe precision in the sun  
Is missing. The jar is empty; you may  
break  
It only to find that Mr. Pope is gone.*

*What requisitions of a verity  
Prompted the wit and rage between his  
teeth  
One cannot say. Around a crooked tree  
A moral climbs whose name should be a  
wreath.*

I quote a couple of stanzas from Tate's "Mr. Pope" not only because there's a certain appropriateness in an essay partly a lament, but because I want to admit a certain oddity in what I am saying, an apparently perverse contradiction in the thrust of my remarks. Tate and "ordinariness" and the "common stuff" . . . and yet such classical elegance of expression and such Latinate complexities of thought coiling and whiplashing and such a style of metaphor far removed from cracker-barrel directness. And for those of us of an urban experience who only occasion-

ally contemplate trees and seldom snakes—consider his poem "The Subway,"

*where ogives burst a red  
Reverberence of hail upon the dead  
Thunder like an exploding crucible!  
Harshly articulate, musical steel shell  
Of angry worship, hurled religiously  
Upon your business of humility  
Into the forestries of hell. . .*

Not your garden or sooty flowerpot-variety of expression.

The apparent contradiction: when one speaks of a writer who is first and foremost a poet, one speaks of a *voice*. And when that voice differs so fantastically from the ordinary voice of the ordinary man of unconscious plain assumptions, how can we say its owner truly shares those common judgments—even if one adds qualification that the constructions are an elevation of common assumption? Well, what one can do is insist on that word *elevation* and make absolutely no apologies for it.

I'd like to get this right; ours may be the first age in which one has to say it: It may be the privilege or the ease of the gent warming himself before a cracker-barrel stove to talk down-to-earth, and the right of the subway straphanger to say-it-like-it-is, or even the peculiarity of the executive or the college president to speak *Amtssprache*. . . but it's the responsibility of the poet to elevate. Those who in the past rebelled against whatever they considered false eloquence—Donne, Wordsworth, whoever—were still writing a language intentionally elevated in diction and cogent rhythm above the received standards of workaday utterance. They retained the notion that the poet although "of us" was yet different from us, one who practiced, as I said earlier, "a high public calling with its own codes and rituals."

I realize how stuffy this might sound,

how alien to one contemporary sensibility. And although I don't congratulate myself by thinking it some brave statement I'm willing to pay the consequences of (secretly I expect a lot of agreement), I think it does require some explanation and confession of taste which—lengthy disquisition on my readerly aesthetic out of the question here—I suggest by shorthand. I think the most *underrated* major poet in English of this century is the celebrated William Butler Yeats, and the most *overrated* by far the much-admired William Carlos Williams. I think that three among the most excellent of our living contemporaries are Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, and A.D. Hope. I've tried to give that a casual sweep and range.

However that may be, a significant enterprise in our literature, especially during and since the 1960s (after sporadic manifestoes before), has been to bring the literary word down to the linguistic capabilities of "the people"—sometimes done by writer adopting, as if with tape-recorder, the gutsy authenticities of "common speech." There's a great deal of condescension involved in this literary-populist enterprise, although I doubt it's apparent. It *seems* so respectful of the ordinary person ("Come join us in the enjoyment and benefit of one of life's subtle pleasures and revelations"). But it *is* so disrespectful. For the rules are changed such that when (if) he gets there what he's invited to enjoy is no longer there: the compression, tension, profundity, verve, and sheer *differentness* that poetry was having been replaced by a recording of his own voice ("*That*, with your limited capacities, you can enjoy"). If poetry was traditionally a difficult demand, an occasion for a reader to extend himself beyond himself, it now increasingly becomes a passive opportunity for the reader to celebrate his own limitations.

I realize that my objections could be characterized as elitist. Well. . . alright

then. I think of Marx worshipping his incomparable Aeschylus; I'd be surprised to discover (and I won't) that he felt the flights of Shelley should be *verboten* to laborers toiling in Engels' father's mills. Or characterized as merely academic (distrusts the new, he does, longs for the old and safe). But that characterization no longer means very much, academic criticism to a large extent having gone along with the new sensibility, the academy more and more anxious to be "with it." (I don't wish to make too much of the following: it occurs to me almost incidentally and I weigh it in public. Perhaps the decline of the technique of reading *out loud* in the literature class, as an act of literary criticism, and the common enough prejudice that such "performance" is merely the old codger's or the lazy teacher's way of avoiding serious critical labor and filling up class time, have less to do with heated critical systems such as structuralism and semiotics—as Roger Shattuck assumed in an excellent essay, "How to Rescue Literature," *New York Review of Books*, April 17, 1980—than with the possibility that professor-critics have ceased to believe that poetry has any particular *Sound* that rates any particular attention, any Sound that distinguishes it uniquely from the utterance we make when we hail a cab and give the driver directions.)

Now. . . this is no brief for "difficulty" in the poem itself. (Although I insist that good poetry makes difficult demands upon the soul and imagination and intellect—a different thing altogether, which the easiest words can do. Henry Vaughan: "I saw eternity the other night / Like a great ring of pure and endless light.") I freely admit that Tate's subway "hurled religiously / Upon your business of humility" keeps escaping my comprehension—while it keeps fascinating me and demanding something of me. It is difficult. There's nothing particularly difficult about where it plunges: "Into the

iron forestries of hell." That's perfectly clear, as any New Yorker knows. But it's different—and this is a brief for the *differentness*. I wouldn't say it that way; I'd utter something about how depressing it is down there, or how buried one feels, or how foul the air, or I might just shudder. But that's because I'm not a poet; I cannot practice that difference of language, profounder and more precise than my common speech, that would reveal to my hearing something of the subtleties of my experience. Tate I need. And he never deserted his calling. He knew it was a public responsibility. *Which* public? Ah, now there's a problem.

Consider an analogy. Politicians of the Democratic Party often take the liberal voter for granted, those of the Republican, the conservative. Assuming the traditional constituents, having little place else to go, will come 'round by election day, Party can court alien numbers who have little interest in the policies the Party is supposed to stand for. This is usually called "appealing to the independent vote," which is obviously preferable to "telling the loyalist to like it because he can't really lump it." I wouldn't ascribe to the poet of the new sensibility the same degree of cynicism. But I suspect there's a common unarticulated assumption that the traditional lover of poetry—he who delights in verbal nuance, subtle variations of rhythmic harmony and dissonance, striking metaphors which assault our normal visions of things, all that *differentness*, the peculiar Sound—will come 'round, can be counted on ultimately, while there's a broader audience out there to be captured, those normally resistant to or oblivious of the artifice of poetry. If we were talking about novels or plays here we'd say something about popularizing or appealing to the lowest common denominator. But since it's "poetry" we're talking about we tend to assume there just must, for goodness' sake, be something more

aesthetic and philosophic going on.

Implicit in my remarks: There is a Public for poetry which is having to take lumps, and there are *several* publics which are occasionally being entertained with the gratifying message that their utterances ("My back itches—will you scratch it?" let's say) are really, when you come right down to it, because there's something artistic-in-us-all, poetry.

The true Public for poetry will always be small. Elitism? I suppose so once again. But not a matter of social class or occupation. Just as I would expect to find the holders of those ordinary, common assumptions I was writing about earlier among college presidents as well as shopkeepers, journalists as well as typesetters, English professors as well as the departmental secretary, I would expect to find the poetry Public cutting across our expectations the same way. Can one make the poetry Public just a little more specific? I think about the best one can do is: all those whom Tate implicitly included by the act of publishing the Epilogue "A Sequence of Stanzas" and subtitling it "Compiled and Read to a Group of Friends on My Seventy-Fifth Birthday."

Since my rather polemical remarks began as a kind of birth-and deathday lament for Mr. Tate: one further word about the Epilogue, which haunts me now several years later. At its end Tate quoted a verse of George Seferis which concludes, "And now it is time for us to say the few words we have to say / Because tomorrow our soul sets sail." At the Epilogue's beginning Tate had offered some lines of Walter Savage Landor written on Landor's seventy-fifth birthday: "I warmed both hands before the fire of life; / It sinks, and I am ready to depart." But, Tate said, he wasn't really. "He lived fourteen more years."

Sadly, it's now *more* than fourteen years since Tate died.