Louis D. Rubin On "Ode To The Confederate Dead" Essay, Research Paper

Louis D. Rubin, Jr.

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:

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!

A symbol is something that stands for something else. What I want to do is to 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 muse 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 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 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."

The brute curiosity of an angel’s stare

Turns you, like them, to stone,

Transforms the heaving air

Till plunged into a heavier world below

You shift your sea-space blindly

Heaving, turning like the blind crab.

If the Confederate Ode is based upon a moral conflict involving "the cut-off-ness

of the modern ‘intellectual man’ 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 the 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

renascence, 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 had 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 renascence 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 renascence—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 its 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 was 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. In the words of the Confederate Ode,

What shall we say who count our days and bow

Our heads with a commemorial woe

In the ribboned coats of grim felicity,

What shall we say to 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. . . .

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 of 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 disassociated 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. In the

words of the poem,

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?

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 0f Tate and his

colleagues? I think we find it stated, and recognized, from the very outset, 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 as 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 is 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 spacial symbol in the poem. . . "

Why, though, if that is all that Tate "meant," did he not write something

like the following:

Let us leave the graveyard now.

Time runs riot there

And time brings death to bear

And wears it on its brow.

The answer is that those lines are simply the abstract statement of what Tate was

saying—and not even that, because 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 it 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 it doesn’t depend upon

a paraphrase of a scientific statement, and its validity is neither confirmable nor

refutable by scientists. It mayor 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 0f 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 0f 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 0f 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:

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.

Times are not what they were, Tate’s Southerner at the gate realizes; it has become

almost impossible even to imagine such days:

You hear the shout, the crazy hemlocks point

With troubled fingers to the silence which

Smothers you, a mummy, in time.

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 I intended an irony: the scene of the poem is not a public celebration, it is a lone

man by a gate."

from Rubin, Southern Renascence. Copyright ? 1953 by the Johns Hopkins UP.