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Allen Tate: A Study in Southern Modernism and the Religious Imagination by Joseph Kuhn (review)

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Allen Tate: A Study in Southern Modernism and the Religious Imagination. Joseph Kuhn. Series Filologia 32. Adam Mickiewicz UP, 2009. 524 pp. \$45.00 paper.

IT MAY COME AS A SURPRISE TO SEE A RECENT AND LENGTHY STUDY OF THE work of Allen Tate and his influence on Southern letters emerge from Poland. Joseph Kuhn is a professor in the School of English at Adam Mickiewicz University (whose press is the publisher). We who have been engaged in what Lewis Simpson called "Southern self-interpretation" take for granted much that is perhaps unfamiliar to those outside the South. Yet a shift in perspective can teach us things we ourselves are inclined to overlook. It is one of the numerous merits of Kuhn's book that it poses questions that might not occur to a self-interpreter to ask and highlights relationships that familiarity has kept us from probing. For this reason alone, the book makes interesting reading, though it does a great deal more. After an introduction entitled "A Model of Order," in which Kuhn explores the implications of the Old South as "a metaphor of spiritual and artistic community," he offers four stages in the sources, development, maturation, and influence of Tate's thought: "Beginnings in New England," "The Two Masters," "A Modernist Metaphysical: Tate's Poetry," and "The Historical Imagination."

The first section offers a good example of what commentators on Southern literature seem to have overlooked: the neo-medievalism of that class of scholars in the nineteenth century called the "Boston Brahmins," in particular that of Henry Adams, who represented "an awkward paternity" for both T. S. Eliot and Tate. Kuhn has some very acute observations about the crisis of historical relativism that Adams addressed but failed to solve. Nevertheless, his writings provided an important, if ambiguous, precedent for "traditionalist modernism." Eliot, a combination of collateral Brahmin through his New England ancestry and quasi-Southerner because of Missouri's uncertain regional status, depicted Adams's dilemma in his "Gerontion," which Kuhn analyzes at some length and then goes on to explore this intellectual context and make a convincing case for its relevance.

In the second section, he further examines the main components of Tate's inheritance from his two principal literary mentors, Eliot and Ransom. He focuses on the modernist version of traditionalism proposed by the former and the "curious theology" presented by the latter in his *God Without Thunder*, showing in each instance how Tate built on

and—in Ransom’s case especially—modified their ideas. He challenges the notion that Tate was simply a Southern version of Eliot. In a detailed reading of Ransom’s book, he shows how the disciple diverged significantly from the master, who nevertheless showed him a way to rethink the importance of religion in culture and society and of religious myth as a critical concept—key elements in the thought of all three men. Kuhn warns that this “religious imagination” does not designate mere piety but a longing for the transcendent and the tensions, ironies, and conflicts that arise from such a quest for the whole.

The central and, by far, longest section is the third, devoted to a number of close readings of individual poems, early and late, as well as to Tate’s novel, *The Fathers*. The organization of these pages is thematic in basis but broadly chronological. Throughout his book, Kuhn draws on key passages from the poetry and prose, reinforcing and exploring their nuances by constantly placing them in new contexts. He draws on the rich array of philosophical and literary theory at his command, from Augustine, Aquinas, and Abelard to Ricoeur, Levinas, and Derrida, to say nothing of a host of other contemporary thinkers on whom he draws tellingly to illustrate how enduring are the questions that Tate confronted during his lifetime. Those who know the poetry well will discover many insightful interpretations of individual passages and whole poems.

The fourth part of the book is given over to three “Tateians”: Richard Weaver, Lewis Simpson, and Walker Percy. Kuhn does not mean to imply that these three men were necessarily disciples. Rather, he sees in them a continuation of the main concerns of a man of letters with whom they were thoroughly familiar: Weaver extending Tate’s emphasis on rhetoric, the proper use of language, and the consequences that ideas can have; Simpson, the historical and cultural dimensions of literature; and Percy (the essayist rather than the novelist), with broad philosophical questions. Most important is the way that the three highlight the all-important role of the “religious imagination” that lay at the heart of Tate’s enterprise and constitutes the principal focus of this book.

Kuhn mentions having discovered, soon after joining the university faculty in the 1990s, that the head of his program had an enduring fascination with Tate, Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren. Already Czeslaw Milosz had drawn a parallel between the South after the Civil War and his own native country in the aftermath of the Second World War, in his Harvard lectures of 1983, *The Witness of Poetry*, in which

he speaks of a Poland on the borders of both North-South and East-West divisions. The artistic and spiritual re-imagining of a region in peril of losing its past and cultural identity to domineering challengers has certainly been shared by most of the neighboring countries of that entity once called “central” but later, in a significant politico-linguistic shift, “eastern” Europe. It is not altogether startling, then, that there should be an interest in Southern literature among certain Eastern European scholars and that those living in other parts of the twenty-first-century world may be struck by its similarity to their own historical situations.

This book extends Tate’s work from the dilemmas of modernism into those of our contemporary world, where language seems to have swallowed up all the means of knowing and nominalism threatens to displace the possibility of knowing “reality.” Without claiming that late twentieth-century theory is necessarily consonant with modernist traditionalism or the religious imagination, Kuhn does imply that it has continued to confront many of the same problems, especially in its skepticism towards positivist, pseudo-scientific, or uncritical historicist approaches to literature and culture. As a consequence, he shows how Tate’s insights might be brought to bear on our present concerns. Throughout the book he devotes a great deal of space to Tate’s published correspondence, essays, and novel as well as to the poems. He offers us the whole of Tate’s intellectual and spiritual enterprise in all its facets. In short, this is an important book, not simply for students of the modern American South and its literature but for those who are concerned with what Paul Valéry once called “the crisis of the mind.” One hopes that it can somehow be made more widely available in this country.

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