At first glance, the early career of Allen Tate seems to conform to the legend of literature in the American 1920s: the flight from a tedious provincial society to New York, hard times and book reviewing for the metropolitan journals, late nights of discussion, journeys to Paris, retreats to the countryside around New York. There is a photograph of Tate taken in the 1930s. The high domed brow, the small moustache, the frown, the casual cigarette just lit, might almost be a caricature of the bright young author. Only the suit and tie, the pocket handkerchief not too neatly folded, suggest an unwonted formality. One is not surprised to learn that some of Malcolm Cowley’s *Exile’s Return* was written in Tennessee, on a visit to Tate.1

Such jauntings in New York and Paris set Tate aside from the experiences of his fellow Agrarians. It was not that Davidson, Wade, Ransom, or Owsley had not been out of the South, but they had never been so involved in the intellectual implications of such travel. Moreover, they were provincial figures. They had little to do with New York, and it had less to do with them. Tate, however, was between two cultures: he was provincial and metropolitan. This was to have echoes in his conception of the South.

He had been the self-conscious modern among the Fugitive poets, coming to Baudelaire through the critical writing of Arthur Symons and ending with the “demi-god T. S. Eliot,” of whose virtues he attempted to persuade his reluctant elders. It was Tate who trotted around the Vanderbilt campus as an undergraduate with the *American Mercury* under his arm and championed the brash new poetry magazine, *Secession*, to Davidson with the words: “I can see the back of your neck bristling now. In many ways I feel the same way, checked only by an opposite tendency to sympathize with almost anything revolutionary, sensible or not, and at the same time to derogate conservatism of all kinds.” And true to this, his views about the South upon his graduation in 1923 were not dissimilar from Mencken’s. One finds him speaking of the “damnably barbaric Southern mind.” But he didn’t seem to care much for the region: the topic occupies a miniscule proportion of his collected correspondence with Donald Davidson in the years before 1927.2

He went to New York in 1924, at the age of twenty-five, when it seemed the natural course for a young man of great ambition. Settling there with some ease, he found a hack editorial post to keep him alive, picked up some reviewing jobs, made friends with the likes of Hart Crane, Malcolm Cowley, and Kenneth Burke. “I didn’t come to New York to conquer it,” he told Davidson in 1924, “merely to live as a civilized being in a place where it isn’t important whether you drink liquor or are a virgin,” and to see
a few congenial people when I care to; and thus to concentrate my energies on my own work.” It was fun to dine alone in cheap Italian restaurants, to go to the theatre, to ride the subway, to meet an actress who graciously told one that she was a lesbian and no one was bothered by it. In the flush of enthusiasm, he seemed to be putting his provincial Fugitive days behind him. Davidson was urged to give up on Nashville and come north to teach at Columbia University. Almost in obituary, he wrote to Davidson: “I can never forget you all. But really I shall never return to Nashville; so you must come up here when you can.”

That his lot seemed cast with cosmopolitanism was confirmed by an essay on Southern literature for the Nation in 1925. From its title, “Last Days of the Charming Lady,” to its theme, it rehearsed the typical act of intellectual dissociation from the Romantic tradition of Southern literature. Little in Southern culture, Tate suggested, whether old or new, was of any use to the contemporary author. There had been no conditions for a literature before the Civil War, and the Old South had transmitted to the New South “no tradition of ideas, no consciousness of moral and spiritual values.” Without any critical awareness, no Matthew Arnold, no groundwork had been laid to produce a Henry James. Indeed, the task had to wait long for an outsider in the shape of Mencken, to do it. Indigenous critics of the New South, like Edwin Mims, had been handicapped by “unrealized moral and social values” which prevented them from detecting the errors of the “local color” school. They had blundered into the “ingenuous opinion that a particular setting is intrinsically more ‘poetic’ than another.” Thus, unlike the New Englander, the young Southern author could find nothing in his native tradition. In this, however, lay a small grain of hope. For the Southern writer “may be capable, through an empiricism which is his only alternative to intellectual suicide, of a cosmopolitan culture to which his contemporary in the East is emotionally barred.” It was the burden of the Southerner to realize himself through the eyes of others: “he of all Americans is privy to the emotions founded in the state of knowing oneself to be a foreigner at home.” The Southerner, having no culture, might be free.

The month of May 1925 saw the completion of this severe essay. It also saw Tate trying to get the Nation to send him to cover the Dayton trial. It seems unlikely that he would have cheered either Clarence Darrow or Bryan, but the trial did stimulate him to ponder Ransom’s concern, the problem of science and religion. By the spring of 1926, he was planning an essay on fundamentalism. Like Ransom, he had become convinced that “science has very little to say for itself.” Science might be an admirable system of classifying the fabric of reality, but it could bring no judgment upon ethics. Only philosophy could bear such a responsibility. However, it seemed to Tate that the errors and presumption of science did not, ipso facto, demonstrate the virtue of the Church. “Those who attack science
from the rightness of the Church aren't likely to shake it; they should attack science from principle, philosophically. This is my thesis," he told Davidson. By 1926, Tate had decided that he disapproved of science, but not yet resolved that he approved of religion.5

Indeed, his reaction to that other spin-off of the Dayton trial, Edwin Mims's The Advancing South, showed that he placed a low value on moral judgments. Mims was accused of refusing to acknowledge that a society was judged, not for producing a liberal culture, but for fostering "first class minds, liberal or illiberal." But Tate had changed his mind on the function of criticism. In 1925, he had suggested that the Old South had had no Henry James because it had been insufficiently self-critical. Now he insisted that literature preceded criticism: "It is the literature itself that creates the state of mind for its acceptance."6

Tate had maintained his interest in T. S. Eliot at a time when Eliot was moving from the bleak existentialism of The Waste Land towards Anglo-Catholicism and social conservatism. For Tate had shared Eliot's instinctive diagnosis of a disordered time. In the April 1924 issue of The Fugitive, Tate had pronounced: "An individualistic intellectualism is the mood of our age. There is no common-to-all truth; poetry has no longer back of it, ready for use momently, a harmonious firmament of stage-properties and sentiments which it was the pious office of the poets to set up at the dictation of a mysterious afflatus—Heaven, Hell, Duty, Olympus, Immortality, as the providential array of 'themes': the Modern poet of this generation has had no experience of these things, he has seen nothing even vaguely resembling them."

In 1921, Eliot had announced a singular doctrine, the notion of a "dissociation of sensibility" in modern times. Eliot's essay on "The Metaphysical Poets" had argued that there had been, in Elizabethan and early Jacobean dramatic verse, "a degree of development of sensibility" that had evaporated by the time of Tennyson and Browning. "The difference," Eliot had contended, "is not a simple difference of degree between poets. It is something which had happened to the mind of England between the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning; it is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary.

... We may express the difference by the following theory: The poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of
That Tate subscribed to this doctrine is clear from his review of Eliot's *Poems: 1909-1925*. "Mr. Eliot's poetry," Tate commented, "has attempted with considerable success to bring back the total sensibility as a constantly available material, deeper and richer in connotations than any substance yielded by the main course of English poetry since the seventeenth century." And he diagnosed and approved the movement in Eliot towards an attempt to impose order on the chaos, "the anarchy which he has subsequently rationalized."

Accepting such a doctrine, Tate was more concerned in 1926 with pondering the dissociation than evading it. In this mood, he wrote his "Ode to the Confederate Dead." That it was woven around a Southern theme was not too important to him. He was writing about himself, not the Civil War. Davidson pointed this out: "The Confederate dead become a peg on which you hang an argument whose lines, however sonorous and beautiful in a strict proud way, leave me wondering why you wrote a poem on that subject at all. . . . Your *Elegy* is not for the Confederate dead, but for your own dead emotion. . . . Where, O Allen Tate, are the dead?" Tate's answer was succinct. "Was Keats's Nightingale Ode *about* Nightingales?"

But the poem had an unexpected consequence. The ode had contained the lines:

> Turn your eyes into the immoderate past,
> Find there the inscrutable infantry rising,
> The demons out of the earth—they will not last.
> Stonewall, Stonewall, and the sunken fields of hemp,
> Shiloh, Antietam, Malvern Hill, Bull Run . . .

As later Tate recalled to Davidson: "That passage came out of God-knows-where (as most poems do); and after it was on paper it served to bring up a whole stream of associations and memories, suppressed, at least on the emotional plane, since my childhood." For there had been much in Tate's childhood to merit suppression. In his own words, "since the Civil War my family has scattered to the four winds, and no longer exists as a social unit." His father had been an incompetent businessman, migrating around the region in search of economic stability and once involved in a mild scandal that enforced his resignation from a gentleman's club. His mother was a strong figure, but neurotic and unhappy under the strain. So Tate's early education had been haphazard and unsettled. In an appropriately ironic comment on the legend of the Southerner rooted in "place," he did not know accurately until he was thirty where he was born. His mother, a Virginian nostalgic for the old days, let him believe that he was a Virginian. In fact, he came from Kentucky. Thus Tate's emphasis upon the lack of a
usable tradition for Southerners in 1925 had been mostly a comment upon his unstable background. New York was a way of cutting himself off. But New York, his marriage to Caroline Gordon, the birth of a daughter, the recognition by both New York critical circles and even Eliot himself, was a steadying influence. He was never to be settled, but he had managed some kind of equilibrium. With this, he could begin to come to terms with his own past and, as part of its baggage, the South.

Intermittently he started to read Southern history. Barely two weeks after Davidson had commented on his ode, Tate was writing: “I’ve attacked the South for the last time, except in so far as it may be necessary to point out that the chief defect the Old South had was that in it which produced, through whatever cause, the New South.” And he tied the South to his new sympathy for Eliot’s social conservatism and the issue of “right values.” In these same months, he was corresponding with Ransom over the problem of values in poetry and toying with the idea of a symposium on Southern literature. In March 1927 he wrote to Andrew Lytle: “Interesting things are, I believe, at last stirring in the South, and in that part of the South which we cannot help taking about with us forever, wherever we may go.” In May, he was asking the editor of the *Virginia Quarterly Review* to put him in the list of contributors as “Allen Tate (1899-) ... a Southern poet and essayist living in New York.” At the end of April, he had signed a contract with Minton, Balch, and Company to write a biography of Stonewall Jackson and had a cash advance in his needy hand.  

It would be idle to deny the impulse that financial expediency gave to the new interest. That royalty advance was enticing. Biographies were, in his own words, “commercial magic.” Malcolm Cowley was to recall: “About that time it became possible for young men of promise to support themselves by writing novels and biographies. The book trade was prospering, new publishers were competing for new authors, and suddenly it seemed that everybody you knew was living on publishers’ advances.” Minton, Balch were very much in the hunt for authors, especially for their popular “American Biographies” series, and it was convenient for Tate that interest coincided with profit. As he remarked to Davidson: “I must make my pleasures pay.”

While he was beginning the hectic research for the book, Vernon Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought* was published. His reaction, contrasted to his feeling about Mims’s *The Advancing South*, showed how much he was groping for a moral standpoint. Parrington “lacks any real values,” he told John Gould Fletcher. “It is a very enlightened Liberalism—as enlightened as any Liberalism can ever be. I can’t understand contemporary Liberalism at all; although I can sympathize with Liberalism in Jefferson’s day; then it was only a differentiation within a single attitude, which kept the balance exact. But I think that Jefferson
would be something like a conservative today; I say 'something like' because
the agrarian parties are today so conservative that they are radical.” While
Parrington encouraged a sectional approach to the American mind, Tate
was resistant. As he wrote to Davidson, on the same day: “Our best cause is
not of our place and time.”

Writing about the Civil War and Jackson seemed to reconcile Tate to his
family history. He went to Virginia on a tour of the battlefields in the
summer of 1927. He visited Manassas, “a romantic spot to me since
childhood. My grandfather fought there; and my great-grandfather was
four miles away, on his farm, an old man, listening to the roar of the
battle.” In Woodstock, he called upon an old lady cousin, poor but proud
of a family home built in 1794. In every town, he seemed to find those who
remembered the war. The Civil War past was palpable, when one could
walk into a field near Port Republic, kick up some dirt, and find a squashed
minié ball. Along the Shenandoah Valley, it was still easy to follow the
marks of Jackson’s trail. All this renewed a bond with his family’s past, the
stability beyond the fragility of the last generation, as well as with his own.
In his childhood, his mother used to take him to the ruins of “Pleasant Hill”
in Fairfax County and make him ponder the stones and gaunt chimneys of
a family estate, burnt in the Union march to Manassas in 1861.

The war came to fascinate him, and he tended to pour into its brief span
almost the entire burden of Southern history. But he was ever the pessimist,
the detached figure at the gate of the Confederate cemetery. He had no
faith that enough of the old tradition survived for him to live off. Thus he
agreed with Fletcher: “You are right; the battle was lost long before we
enlisted for the war. The stupidity of our people turns me in rage against
them, and I wheel in greater rage against their enemies. In this state of
mind it is hard to be coherent.” He was irritated with critics like Van Wyck
Brooks and Lewis Mumford, who seemed to imagine that America was a
land east of the Hudson River. Yet he had little confidence that the
Southern people might be wooed back from liberal values and the New
South.

While Tate was writing the Stonewall Jackson, Fletcher had sent from
England a volume by a young English Catholic, Christopher Hollis. The
American Heresy was a curious mélange of American history, seen from
the standpoint of an Etonian, Oxonian, Roman Catholic, polemically
talented Englishman. It started from the premise “here is a Continent gone
wrong”—a familiar premise in the Oxford Union—and attempted to explain
The thesis was that “there went into the Civil War two politically minded
nations. There emerged from it, or rather from the period of Reconstruction,
one nonpolitically minded nation, content, and even anxious, to
allow the rich to order its life to the smallest detail.” For Hollis, Calhoun
was the unsung hero of American history. Jefferson was amiable and intelligent, but pagan; Lincoln was tragic, a noble warrior for the wrong causes; Wilson was a misguided academic, servile to industrialism and ignorant of Europe's needs. Calhoun alone had stood against the rising spirit of capitalism. As Hollis put it: "A people, he [Calhoun] thought, must live upon its traditions or perish, and industrial capitalism, whose very advertisement was that it was daily changing men's material condition of life, was the enemy."  

This impressed Tate. "The value I set upon this book... is perhaps, at the moment, beyond reason," he told Fletcher. "... I have had an idea for my Jackson that Hollis gives me the courage to use, in giving me further intellectual conviction of its truth. (I have long had the emotional conviction.)" This idea was to see the North as the revolutionary aggressor and the South as the conservative status quo. By his own admission, however, The American Heresy left a good deal to be desired: it was "incomplete and inaccurately documented." But still Tate flattered the book as "the first effort to comprehend the supposedly mixed forces of American history under a single idea."

This volume had a double significance for Tate. Its standpoint was religious, and Tate was moving away from his atheism. At the end of 1928, he described himself as "an enforced atheist, who differs from an agnostic in that the atheist is willing to be convinced." Hollis had damned the United States partly because it had "heretically" deduced its political philosophy from secular ideas, and not religious dogma. Moreover, Hollis was a European. Although Tate was never an Anglophile, his adverse judgment on American civilization inevitably involved a certain appraisal of European culture. It was not that he wanted to become a European, like T. S. Eliot. As Tate remarked to the expatriate Fletcher, "I will always believe that one's nationality is never eradicated, and it's suicide to try to eradicate it." Rather, he wished to run the South as a culture parallel to the mature civilizations of Europe.

As soon as the Stonewall Jackson was finished in early 1928, Tate began a biography of Jefferson Davis during the war years. Both books were haunted by the feeling that the South could have won the war. Tate took satisfaction in dwelling upon the incidents that, if reversed, might have produced an independent South: the dilatory defensiveness of Davis in 1861, the failure of Longstreet to attack at Gettysburg until late in the day, the inability of Davis to see the importance of the Western theatre of war, the death of Jackson. The sighs in the prose were audible. As he put in the Jefferson Davis: "In spite of the mistakes of leaders, of the dissension among the people, of the lack of grand strategy in the field, the Confederacy came within a hair of success; its entire history is a mosaic of tremendous ifs. If any one set of unfavorable circumstances had been warded off, the South would doubtless have won."
Taking his cue from Hollis, Tate hinted in the *Stonewall Jackson* that the South should properly be seen as conservative, but forced into revolution by Northern trespass on the Constitution. The point was not developed, for the rest of the book was a straightforward analysis of Jackson’s campaigns, competently if not impressively sketched. By the time of the second biography, Tate had grown in confidence and knowledge. He had acquired a greater feel for the social diversity of the South. To write of a Mississippian like Davis was to note differences between the Upper and Deep Souths, the seaboard and trans-Appalachian Souths. Tate portrayed the Lower South as “new and expansive, unbound by strong local tradition... agricultural, slaveowning, aristocratic,” as the heart of the secession movement. Confederate politicians were, par excellence, victims of a paradox: they were conservative revolutionaries. And the paradox was crippling: “Because that document [the Constitution] had been their best defense within the old Union, they imagined it to be the government best suited to a new social order; and they were wrong.” Davis himself, Tate suggested, did not understand the nature of the sectional struggle. He imagined he was an American, with no suspicion that he was ever “the leader of a profoundly anti-scientific society.” No more did he grasp that the South was making “the last stand, they were the forlorn hope, of conservative Fundamentalist Christianity and of civilization, based on agrarian, class rule, in the European sense... The issue was class rule and religion versus democracy and science.” As Tate saw it, the war was the final struggle between America and Europe, and in the victory of the Union, America finally won. “The South was the last stronghold of European civilization in the western hemisphere,” he insisted, with an echo of Ransom’s sentiments. Though the Old South might be quite dead, the Southerner had one satisfaction. He had not been hoist by his own petard.20

This view of the Civil War was the mirror image of the warfare in Tate’s mind between a religious temperament and an atheist mind, a conservative view of culture and a modernist training. Tate was as divided against himself in 1928 as had been the Union in 1861. The Confederacy stood for what he wanted to be, the Union for a pessimistic diagnosis of what he feared he was. In his family’s terms, it was a division between the old Virginia and the new Kentucky. For Tate was both an elitist and a democrat. “I believe as you do in an aristocracy,” he had told Fletcher, yet he shrank from its exclusiveness. He found Stark Young distasteful for his “cotton snobbery,” and resisted John Wade’s “genteel scruples.” Moreover, he was reluctant to identify the South merely with aristocracy. “It is absurd to suppose that only the quality people were Southern. In my view the poor whites and the negroes were as Southern as any other people. I fear that [Jefferson] Davis was intimidated by this Virginian belief... That sort of snobbery is utterly offensive.”21

During the tenure of a Guggenheim fellowship in 1928 and 1929, Tate
had lived in England and France. In London, he finally met Eliot, with whom he had begun an intermittent correspondence in 1926. And he became involved in the skirmish between Eliot and Irving Babbitt over humanism. This impelled his movement towards Southernism, so intertwined had the issue of religion become. Eliot had asked him to contribute an article on humanism to the *Criterion.* Tate explained his views on the humanists to Fletcher: “The fault I find with them is that they actually do separate art and morals, ignoring the former entirely; you will look in vain in [Paul Elmer] More and Babbitt for a single remark pertaining to the means of expression. They are concerned entirely with the moral results.” For Tate, it seemed that a new inventory of ideas was needed that might recognize the “dissociation of sensibility” doctrine: “we have got to go over the surface of our minds to see if it is really what we think it is. . . . We must go beyond the moral plane to the philosophical support beneath it. Down to the time of Milton, if not later, a moral system might be identical with the attitude of the mind holding it; but now that is not necessarily the case. . . . we have got to create the attitude that will be really their equivalent.” Despite a sympathy with humanism, Tate disliked its eclecticism and deplored Babbitt’s inability to see that “the discrepancy between the terms of thought and the supporting attitude is the modern problem *par excellence* . . . It is our job to create a foundation for thought; not to move to France and give up the ghost with Gertrude Stein.”

Thus far, Tate could go along with Eliot. But he drew the line at Eliot’s Anglo-Catholicism. That could only work if one tried, like Eliot, to assimilate England into your life and thought. Tate himself was leaning towards Roman Catholicism. “Babbitt is right,” he reflected, “in pointing to the most universal church of all, because into it all varieties of national feeling may be assimilated.” A skeptical Donald Davidson was informed in February 1929: “I am more and more heading towards Catholicism. We have reached a condition of the spirit where no further compromise is possible.” And yet he was not yet willing to enter the Church. Where could he look for that philosophy to resolve the dissociating problems of modernism?

The South seemed a kind of answer. Tate told James Southall Wilson in April 1929, “I wish we could have a counter movement in the South toward Humanism; we are historically much closer to its true meaning than a man in the New England tradition can ever be.” But he wanted the South to serve his own special purposes. He was interested in “permanent forms of truth which, under the varying conditions of time and place, may be made pertinent.” The impulse was not dissimilar from Ransom’s, and Tate was quick to see a parallel between his own *Criterion* essay on humanism and Ransom’s 1929 *Harper’s* piece on the South. Thus he insisted in the discussions that led up to *I’ll Take My Stand* that religion was the crux of
the agitation. "We need a stable order," he insisted. "I don't care how we get it or what it looks like." Keenly aware that the South, unlike Ireland, had no common religious faith, he was to daydream that it might be possible to demonstrate the influence of Catholicism on the Old South. Prudently, he abandoned the speculation.26

Such thoughts were forming in France, and the location was not without its influence. Tate was sufficiently Francophile to read the Action française regularly, and it was this model he urged upon his friends. A mere symposium would not be enough, he insisted. They needed an organization that could help to "create an intellectual situation interior to the South." There should be a society, complete with a constitution, which should be dedicated to setting forth "a complete social, philosophical, literary, economic and religious system." Tate was conscious that his situation differed from that of Charles Maurras, even from that of the Anglophile Eliot, one of Maurras's admirers. As Tate put it, "Maurras had a body of ready-made, non-secular doctrine at hand for re-interpretation to the needs of his time." The Southern past was only partly usable. Still, it was all there was, and it would have to be bent to their purposes. It could be used "not in what it actually performed, but in its possible perfection." Such a Southern organization might have organs of publicity, such as the Action française itself. By defining their common position and suppressing their differences, the Agrarians could force their progressive opponents to define their own. If action was to result, lines would have to be clearly drawn. "Organization and discipline are indispensable," he told Davidson. It seemed to Tate that ideological disunity had destroyed the Confederacy, and the mistake should not be repeated. In this mood, it was unsurprising that Tate strenuously emphasized that the proper model for the South was not the deist Jefferson, but Calhoun and the "South Carolina idea."27

It was a headlong scheme; but he had little faith in its practical success, and his confused modernism made him feel a certain admiration for lost causes, be they his own Southernism or Eliot's Anglo-Catholicism. My skepticism, he said, "is one of hoping to be convinced, not by standing aside to watch the spectacle, but by exerting myself.... since I see the value, I am morally obliged to affirm it."28

By a leap of imagination, Tate had fitted the South into Eliot's schema for the "dissociation of sensibility" doctrine. He had to tinker with the chronology. Eliot had put the point of "dissociation" in the early seventeenth century, before Milton. Tate had modified that to "the time of Milton, if not later." And by seeing the Old South as a type of the old European civilization, surviving the destruction of the original, he contrived to extend the life of undissociated sensibility in the Southern United States to the Civil War. "We must be the last Europeans," he told Davidson, "there being no Europeans in Europe at present." Thus armed, he chided the
humanists with ignoring the only "classical and humanistic society that America has ever had."  

It must be recalled that the rationale for Eliot's theory was finally not historical but aesthetic. Its destination was the recovery of that lost immediacy, that fresh smell of the rose, in poetry. So Tate had to adjust his own relationship to one of the villains in the history of aesthetic dissociation, literary Romanticism. For Eliot had been taking a firm stand against Romanticism. The most immediate product of Tate's desire to apply these ideas to the Southern literary heritage was an attack upon the ironic Mr. James Branch Cabell and his dream world of Poictesme. Cabell was especially pertinent to Tate because the author of *Jurgen* was a Virginian and, as Tate dubbed him in a review of *The Way of Ecben* in early 1930, "our first novelist of stature to mold an American mind to something of the attitude of French romantic rationalism from Voltaire to Anatole France."  

In Tate's eyes, the most fundamental influence upon Cabell was the transformation from the Old to the New South, "from God to Mammon." "In Mr. Cabell's generation," he suggested, "this change of religious impulse must have worked unconsciously...it permitted the values of his Southernism to support unconsciously his creative faculty. And he wrote a couple of distinguished books." According to Tate, however, Cabell began to misread the influence of these values and to imagine they came from elsewhere: "Mr. Cabell has evidently not been aware of the moral origin of Poictesme in the Old South: he has tried to escape from the Old South by making Poictesme a place of his own creation." Thus, Tate suggested, Poictesme was "not a way of escape into the Old South but an escape from it into a world that Mr. Cabell both dislikes and needs." As Romantic literature, Cabell's novels had evaded the issues by neglecting the root of its dilemma. In a letter to Davidson, with a copy of this review, Tate elaborated: "Isn't the point about Cabell and Glasgow this: that because they have a mixed thesis—i.e. mixed of old Southism and Progress—because their intelligences are split into contradictory values, they are bad novelists...their social attitude, because it is muddled, distracts the creative mind into mere propaganda and ruins the work of art. This could almost be made into a principle—that all great, or really good writers, must have a simple homogeneous sense of values, which incidentally are the kinds of values we wish to restore."  

If his ambivalent schemes for the restoration of such values were to be realized, Tate could scarcely live in France or even in New York. Upon his return to the United States in January 1930, he boldly decided to attempt the life of an independent man of letters in the South. But his income was to remain basically non-Southern, with advances from his publishers and fees from his reviewing in New York. Even his house near Clarksville, bought by his brother, was purchased with funds culled in Cincinnati.
His first task was to write an essay for *I'll Take My Stand*, and it was natural that he chose the topic of religion in the Old South. Despite, or because of, his brooding on the subject for several years, he found it hard to compose. His self-division on the subject, combined with its amorphousness, made the production of a disciplined essay difficult. But he was eager to stress, in the discussions among the Agrarians, that the symposium be explicitly related to the humanist volume *Humanism and America: Essays on the Outlook of Modern America*, also published in 1930. And he was keen to deplore the Confederate particularity displayed in the title *I'll Take My Stand*, so much so that he insisted on placing before his essay the following note: "The general title of this book is not quite true to its aims. It emphasizes the fact of exclusiveness rather than its benefits; it points to a particular house but omits to say that it was the home of a spirit that may also have lived elsewhere and that this mansion, in short, was incidentally made with hands." True to this, the piece was ten pages gone before the word "South" appeared.

"Remarks on the Southern Religion" began with a discussion of religion and the modern mind. Like Ransom, Tate found little value in the God offered by the "cult of efficiency." For, in its optimistic immaturity, it was incapable of dealing with human failure. It could only predict success. No more could Tate find satisfaction in "the religion of the Symbolist poets, and of M. Henri Bergson," in their belief that nothing is predictable.

Abruptly, Tate's argument jumped to the philosophy of history. There were, he suggested, two ways of examining history: the "Long View," which seeks out abstract continuity, and the "Short View," which re-establishes the contingency in which finite events took place. The former was "the cosmopolitan destroyer of Tradition," because it reduced traditions to a type whose functions were interchangeable. Christ and Adonis were equal in both standing for religion. Moreover, it was abstract and defeated tradition because, as Eliot had suggested in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," traditions must be automatically operative. As soon as choice was admitted into religion, religion was defeated. Then, as Tate wrote, "we are at the verge of committing ourselves to the half-religions that are no religions at all, but quite simply a decision passed on the utility, the workableness, of the religious objects with respect to the practical aims of society."

Religion, defended by reason, seemed to Tate the peculiar quality of the Western approach to tradition. And it had been transmitted by the Renaissance, which consummated the religious argument from reason and utility. This was a paradox, but one built into the modern's cultural inheritance. Nowhere was the confusion greater than in America, where the medieval faith in faith itself was weakest.

In the South, Tate argued, it was more complicated. There one found
once a feudal society, but without a feudal religion. For the region was founded at a time when European religion was disintegrating, and so the South had been "Protestant, aggressive and materialistic." For reasons of soil and climate, the area developed an agrarian culture distinct from the North. But it did not develop its own theology. In Tate's opinion, presumably adapted from Max Weber or R. H. Tawney, Protestantism was the religion of traders and nonagrarians. Thus the South was at odds with itself. With a world view that gave its own social structure no close sanction, its ideological resources failed it during the struggle with the North. "The South shows signs of defeat," Tate wrote, "and this is due to its lack of a religion which would make her special secular system the inevitable and permanently valuable one. We have been inferior to the Irish in this virtue, though much less than the Irish have we ever been beaten in war."

Tate saw the difference between the South and New England in the nineteenth century partly in terms of Europe. In reduplicating European society, the South did not need Europe. But New England "was one of those abstract-minded, sharp-witted trading societies that must be parasites in two ways: They must live economically on some agrarian class or country, and they must live spiritually likewise. New England lived economically on the South, culturally on England." Thus it was natural that Boston should have produced cultural émigrés like Henry James and Henry Adams. The South was European in the sense that it had "taken root in a native soil." In such a context, intellectualism had been redundant. As a society, the Old South had known little of the Long View.

In conclusion, Tate recurred to the religious deficiencies of the ancien régime. Under Jefferson's influence, the South had believed too much in science and practicality. After Hollis, Tate reiterated the absence of religious tradition in Jefferson's influence and the secularity of the vision he offered the South. The modern Southerner was the heir of this heresy, "that the ends of man may be established by political means." Since the Southerner cannot conjure up an inarticulate religious tradition without articulating it, he was left with the unsatisfactory Jeffersonian program. "How," Tate asked, "may the Southerner take hold of his Tradition? The answer is, by violence." He could only turn to political reaction. But the pursuit was quixotic, the game long since lost. For, as Tate concluded: "The Southerner is faced with the paradox: He must use an instrument, which is political, and so unrealistic and pretentious that he cannot believe in it, to re-establish a private, self-contained, and essentially spiritual life. I say that he must do this; but that remains to be seen."

This was scarcely a confident rallying call, but the mournful speculation of a confused atheist. As the opening pages of the essay demonstrated, Tate was the spectator of religion. In later years, near or within the Roman Catholic Church, he was to delete those phrases that marked the gulf
between himself and religious faith, the distance that in 1930 was a source of "deep regret" to him.\textsuperscript{35} It was a long way from the immediacy of a rose in a poem to political reaction, and Tate knew it. Crucially, he failed to make the connection between religion and the South that he wished. The result was the essay's sterility. And it is only just to Tate to acknowledge that this was a product of his honesty. In his biography of Jefferson Davis, he had struggled with his subject's alarming tendency to look like an American. Now he confronted this Southern proclivity on the religious plane, and he admitted that the region had an American religion and, in Jefferson, the prime author of the "American heresy." So he was forced to make a gulf between Southern society and his desired version of religious tradition. Into that gulf, he poured all the failure of the South to give him an operative tradition.

If he had been more cavalier with his history, like Ransom, or less inclined to grant the primacy of Roman Catholicism, Tate's paradox would have been lessened. As it was, there was a curious irony in one of the South's more formidable intellectuals offering his allegiance to an Old South whose mind was, by his own description, "simple, not top-heavy with learning it had no need of, unintellectual and composed...personal and dramatic, rather than abstract and metaphysical," possessed, indeed, of the qualities Allen Tate lacked. The essay had the mark of a profound self-contempt.\textsuperscript{36}

Despite his failure to secure a Southern religious tradition, Tate did lay hold of a version of Southern social history. And that was crucial for offering him genuine involvement in the region. As he wrote to John Gould Fletcher: "Our entire program is based on the assumed fact that the tradition is there to work on; otherwise we are only American liberals offering a new panacea and pretending to a concrete background that doesn't exist." And yet that was not quite what he wanted from the South. It was something, but not enough.\textsuperscript{37}

Pessimism was an old instinct with Tate, and he turned it most consistently towards John Gould Fletcher. It may be significant that Fletcher was an émigré Southerner, living in London, and a founder of the Imagist movement. Moreover, he stood close to Eliot, though not without a jealousy that was to intensify as Fletcher's reputation waned and Eliot's grew beyond bounds. Tate's letters to Fletcher are full of observations, such as this on the 1928 presidential elections: "I believe that you are a little more shocked at the turn of affairs in America than I am. You are older and have some memory of the better days. In my time there's never been anything but what there is now, except of course it is now much worse." Though Tate had been too young to fight in the First World War, he seemed to have fully absorbed its gloomy and numbing lessons. It was not surprising that Fletcher, in his memoirs, should remember most keenly this bleakness.
He recalled in Tate “some terrible remnant of a world-blasting medieval Catholicism . . . reducing to ashes not only everything in his own day and time, but all human experience itself . . . . The last historic hope of America had faded in 1860. Since then one could only contrast the fruitless activity of a degraded democracy with the ultimate eternal quietude of complete death.”

The first task after the publication of I'll Take My Stand was to fulfill a contract with Earle Balch for a new biography, this time of Robert E. Lee. In it, Tate was to approach the ark of several Southern covenants, and he did it with distaste. He was bored with hack biographies, written for the money. Just as the move to New York had prompted a burst of poetic energy, so the shift to Tennessee had turned his mind back to verse. It was irksome to dabble in Confederate military affairs, when he found he could write twelve poems in a week.

But it ran deeper. Tate found Robert E. Lee abhorrent. He confided to Andrew Lytle: “The longer I’ve contemplated the venerable features of Lee, the more I’ve hated him. It is as if I had married a beautiful girl, perfect in figure, pure in all those physical attributes that seem to clothe purity of character, and then had found when she had undressed that the hidden places were corrupt and diseased.” With this, Tate abandoned the book and had to ask Lytle to see Balch and break the contract. But fragments remain in Tate’s papers, and there one can trace the measure of his distaste.

Lee seemed too perfect. As Tate put it: “Lee had no parts, from the day he was born: he was born a perfect specimen of human integration . . . . A man so self-contained may, in a sense, be said to be without ambition, yet in another sense, a more realistic one, his ambition is inexhaustible. No worldly reward can satisfy it; it feeds upon its own perfection, and drops its participation in affairs the moment this inner integrity is threatened. That is the theme of this book.” This judgment on the central figure of Confederate mythology was a savage break with tradition, and Tate knew it. “Can any man alive write this way about Lee?” he asked Lytle. At the last, he could not bring himself to it. He saw in Lee “an abyss, and it is to this that I do not want to give a name.” It was left to Lytle to draw out the lessons of Tate’s objections in a review of Douglas Southall Freeman’s biography of Lee in 1935. In this, Lytle suggested that Lee had put his own honor above the military needs of the Confederacy. By adhering strictly to a belief in the subordination of the military to the civilian government, he allowed Davis to bind him to an irrelevant defense of Richmond. And,
after the war, Lee had failed to see that Reconstruction was the continuation of the war by other means. Fortunately, wrote the biographer of Nathan Bedford Forrest, "the leadership changed to the middle South, to those who led the Ku Klux Klan, that society which made survival possible."41

In Lytle's case, the objection to Lee was that of a trans-Appalachian resentful of the annexation of the Southern legend by Virginia. As he was to remember, "I was very conscious of the fact that Virginia was a special kind of thing, and more Eastern than Southern." Lytle’s biography of Forrest had insisted that, if Virginia had been less disdainful of the western theatre of war and less concerned with the defense of Richmond, the war might have been won. For Tate, with half a foot in Virginia and half in a Kentucky that never seceded, the issue was less clear-cut. He had registered his dislike for the modern Virginia of Ellen Glasgow and the consciously moderate mediation of the Virginia Quarterly Review between North and South. He deplored Virginia's snobbish combination of old Southern graces with New South industrialism, and was sure that Stringfellow Barr's belief that such graces could civilize the factories was unrealistic. "I am afraid," he had written in 1930, "that Barr has a rather typically modern Virginian attitude—he thinks if the South gets rich again, it will be the South still. But the South is not a section of geography, it is an economy setting forth a certain kind of life."42

The Virginia of the Old South was a different matter. One finds in the early pages of Tate’s "Lee" a defense of its aristocratic ways. His description of Lee, the Christian gentleman, was an echo of his grief for the integrated sensibility that Eliot insisted had passed away. One sees in Lytle's review the same diagnosis: "Lee's code was strict. It extended into all his relationships, his duty to himself, to his family, to the army, to the Confederacy and its civil authority. It was complete as no code can be today." As Tate himself wrote, "Lee... was a finished product, a man whose views were bounded and fixed within an already old society."43 It was unsettling for Tate to confront the fullest expression of his "classical and humanist" Old South and find that the sight turned his stomach. It was as well not to write the book. And so he left it alone.

In the autumn of 1931, he went to Charlottesville and participated in the Southern Writers' Conference, organized by Ellen Glasgow and James Southall Wilson. He was pleased at a gathering of authors, far from the pressures of New York, on the first occasion that the literary elite of the region had been gathered in one place. It seemed an opportunity for the Agrarians to proselytize. But their attempt to "politicize" the conference was balked by a coalition of Virginians and South Carolinians. The incident did, however, raise with clarity the issue of the relationship between politics and literature. Wilson had remarked to Tate that he believed in regionalism, but not sectionalism. In a subsequent letter, Tate took him up on the point: "I believe we should have regionalism for literature, but sectionalism in
politics.” With sectional policies, it might be possible to recover the conditions under which a writer might work. This was the point to be reiterated by Ransom, in an essay upon Sidney Lanier three years later. “The leading question before Southern literature,” Tate suggested, “is the nature of its peculiar genius, and perhaps it will some time be appropriate for Southern writers, in the lack of political leadership, to point out certain features of the question that do not ordinarily pertain to the literary problem.”

In an article for the *New Republic* in November 1931, Tate tried to settle the matter further in his mind. He reiterated his view that regionalism—“the immediate, organic sense of life in which a fine artist works”—was healthy for literature. But sectionalism—“a doctrine, philosophical at its rare best, at its worst boastful propaganda”—was a form of political action. For Tate, regionalism was not quite identical with tradition. It was too self-conscious. At its worst, regionalism could destroy tradition “with its perpetual discovery of it.” At its best, it could offer an assumed ambience, which saved the author the labor of defining social and moral fundamentals. The danger was that politics could infect art. As far as Tate was concerned, the distinction between literature and propaganda was absolute.

Or was it? After all, Tate had just come from a Charlottesville conference, where he had made a definite effort to import political perspectives into a literary gathering. What was his defense? It was this: “If tradition is the best condition of literature, then sectionalism, or a preoccupation with the interests of one’s community, is the starting point of political philosophy. And it is here that tradition and politics join; each has its invaluable place and each is subversive of order when out of place. They are finally identical in their purposes. . . . Sectionalism, or politics, is public tradition, and tradition is private, or unconscious sectionalism.” In practice, the two were not absolutely separable, although the artist must keep the difference firmly in mind. Otherwise, he could write propaganda under the impression that it was literature. But, if there is no proper political leadership, a man of letters must be forgiven for indulging in social criticism. Yet it troubled Tate, as all self-consciousness did for its apparent testimony to the death of tradition. And so he confessed: “To defend tradition . . . is to violate it; only temporary emergency would justify it.”

What was this emergency? On this his case rested. It was not the Depression, for his involvement in politics had preceded it. In that his basic theory was the “dissociation of sensibility” notion, this emergency was either Southern history since 1861, English history since the seventeenth century, or European history since the Renaissance. It was a broad canvas on which to spread even the elastic word “temporary.”

This distinction between art and propaganda was at issue between Tate and Malcolm Cowley, who edited this piece for the *New Republic*. It
took its place in the wider discussion over Marxist literature that another friend, Edmund Wilson, was helping to foster. Less obviously, it was the beginnings of a rebuff to Donald Davidson. As Tate was to write to Ellen Glasgow more than a year later: “I fear that some of us may hold out too strongly for literal Southernism. . . . One of the baleful effects of Americanism in letters is the lowering of the creative impulse to the level of propaganda. If we become mere propagandists in turn, we shall betray our position. . . . As economists and political writers we may agitate: but as artists we must prove the value of the agitation by keeping the modes distinct, and writing literature.”* As yet, Davidson was moving only hesitantly towards what Tate regarded as “literal Southernism.” With a few years, a gulf was to open between the two men on this score. And they were to differ, not on the theoretical validity of the distinction between art and propaganda, but on a judgment of Davidson’s literary performance.

The year 1931 had not gone well with Tate. Although he produced some of his best poetry, his biography of Lee had come to nothing. Moreover, he felt that agrarianism was making little headway. An attempt to apply to the Guggenheim foundation for money to fund a country newspaper had foundered on Davidson’s reluctance.47 And again Davidson had disliked to act, when a labor strike in Harlan, Kentucky, brought a prosecution against certain New York writers on a charge of “criminal syndicalism.” Tate had urged the Agrarians to dissociate themselves from this violation of free speech.48 In November 1931, Tate was lamenting to Bernard Bandler, editor of the *Hound and Horn*: “I fear there are no signs here of a movement in action. We are all grinding our own axes. Last year I gave about six months to the Cause—with the result that I am being sued for debt.” In December, he confided to Davidson his belief that agrarianism was dying fast.49

The year 1932 was a little better. Tate became “southern editor” for the *Hound and Horn*. In this capacity, he was able to place many of his fellow Agrarians in the pages of one of the more persuasive, and aesthetically progressive, of New York magazines. At Tate’s behest, Davidson, Lytle, and Owsley were all invited to review or write articles. In this way, Tate helped to bridge the gap between the collapse of Davidson’s syndicated book page for Tennessee newspapers and the establishment of the *American Review*. In the spring, he was asked to edit a “Southern number” for *Poetry*. In June, he gave to the *Richmond News-Leader* his poem “To the Lacedaemonians,” in celebration of a Confederate soldiers’ reunion in that city.50 Despite his doubts, he seemed to be holding to his commitment to the South. In succession to the aborted biography of Lee, he was planning a study of family genealogy, to be called “Ancestors of Exile.”51

For all that, it was a relief to be away from America again and back to France. In June 1932, he went with his wife, Caroline Gordon, when she
took up her own Guggenheim Fellowship. They were to stay for nine months. For the first time, he saw more of France than just Paris. They travelled south to Provence. Early in the trip, they were accompanied by Frank and Harriet Owsley, as well as Lyle Lanier and his wife. Neither the Owsleys nor the Laniers, by Tate’s testimony, took well to French life. Some tension developed, as Tate complained to Andrew Lytle: “The newcomers to France couldn’t at first resist the notion that the novelties of a foreign country were there as criticism of them. This was very trying.”

Tate himself continued to resist the idea of cultural exile, but he did see in rural France a confirmation of his Southern agrarian ideas. About him was a country in which 57 per cent of the people remained on the land, and in which the traditional culture of the French peasantry remained intact. Tate felt that France should be taken as a model for the South: “I intend to study this subject in order to write about it effectively; their idea here is the same as ours—the land not for profit but for enjoyment of civilized life.”

He told Davidson that if he could find out what had kept the French “pure of modern contamination,” it might be a useful lesson for Southerners.

This experience strengthened his feeling that *I’ll Take My Stand* had been sacrificed to Ransom’s Anglophilia. More than that, it turned him away from seeing the South in terms of intellectual tradition, towards the practical aspect of agrarianism. “We should have stood flatly on the immediately possible in the South,” he insisted to Davidson. Anglo-nostalgia had vitiated the concrete and indigenous facts of Southern rural life. In this Tate showed a fresh consciousness of the Depression. And, like Ransom, it had come to him abroad. He had been impressed that France seemed to be faring better than the industrial United States. Unenthusiastically, he was a supporter of Franklin Roosevelt, but remarked, “I fear that no one is at hand for the crisis, yet it is true that money power is everywhere declining, and the only alternative is land; in that lies our hope.”

But the economic crisis cut embarrassingly two ways. It may have been crippling industrialism, but it also hurt industrialism’s employees, the Agrarians. Tate was painfully conscious of this. “There’s no denying that an army marches on its stomach,” he admitted to Davidson. And to Warren, he confessed that “while I find it comparatively easy to be heroic in poverty, I find it impossible to be effective.” The return from France put him back into the financial slough. In October 1933, he was chafing at the strains of free-lancing: “The daily financial pressure is demoralizing. Ten years ago such anxieties didn’t oppress me; but now they devour me.” In this mood, he greeted the establishment of the *American Review* with enthusiasm. Here was a publication in which his agrarian pleasures could be made to pay. It was the more convenient because editorial changes at the *Hound and Horn* had jeopardized his position as its “southern editor.”
His writing for the new journal had an unwonted truculence. Briefly, he assumed a sectional belligerence that gave the impression of being influenced by Davidson’s and Owsley’s writings in 1933. His long review of the Chapel Hill symposium, *Culture in the South*, in early 1934, was severe. He made a point of damning racial liberalism. For him, social equality was not worth attention, as “there has never been social equality anywhere, there never will be, nor ought there to be.” The race problem, he charged, was insoluble. “I argue it this way,” he wrote, “the white race seems determined to rule the Negro race in its midst; I belong to the white race; therefore I intend to support white rule. Lynching is a symptom of weak, inefficient rule; but you can’t destroy lynching by fiat or social agitation; lynching will disappear when the white race is satisfied that its supremacy will not be questioned in social crises.”

Beginning a litany of cuts, Tate damned the social scientists of Chapel Hill for naivety in believing that a committee of academics would ever be appointed to decide the political and economic fate of the South. He was angry at the industrialists of the New South. He jibed at the indistinct definition of the word “culture” employed in the book. He was severe towards the economic determinism that he thought underlay the volume’s philosophy. He mocked it for ignoring the world economic crisis. What, he asked, was the point of imitating a bankrupt North? He dismissed George Fort Milton’s chapter on politics and its contention that the chief issue was the Solid South. For Tate, the failure of political philosophy was the problem: “We get opposition opposing opposition, while the money power rules . . . The donkey, political thought, starves to death between the bales of hay, doing justice to them both, and hoping for the best.”

Tate gave his approval only to those chapters written by Agrarians—Wade, Davidson, and Edd Winfield Parks had wandered reluctantly into the book—or those which offered a neutral précis of aspects of Southern life.

For the first time in public print, Tate had stood by the “agrarian” side of the Southern-agrarian equation. In 1930 he had groaned at the prospect of assuming the name “agrarian”; now he wrote in defense of *I’ll Take My Stand*: “It was nowhere said that Southern agriculture at this moment affords an ideal society to set off against the depravity of industrialism: we said that Southern agriculture might be made into a system in which security and stability could be won in a measure impossible so long as the farmer, fixed in the commercial scheme, remains in economic vassalage to his local merchants and bankers and . . . to the whole industrial system.” For the first time, he urged practical measures towards the revival of agrarianism: offering land to the Negro, stopping the growth of industrialism, the end of aping the North. Even so, his instincts remained abstract, for his most urgent recommendation was the development of a Southern political
philosophy, a "plain program for the South...[in which] either by legislation or by revolution, in those regions where the land supports most of the people, the power must pass to those people." He seemed, in echoing Davidson and Owsley, even Ransom, to be abandoning his elitist concern for "culture" and democratizing his perception of the region. He wrote to a friend: "The people must decide what they want to be, not what they want to let the drift of economics make them." When R. P. Blackmur criticized Tate for the unsoundness of sectionalism, Tate replied that it was idle to charge him thus: "Blue eyes and black hair are not unsound; they are facts. The existence of a civilization here different from yours is not unsound; it is a fact. Our purpose is to see what it might and ought to be."56

In time, his drift towards "practical" agrarianism was to diminish his sectionalism; but before examining this it is necessary to describe a change in his social condition. In 1934, Tate finally gave up the long struggle of free-lancing and took a teaching job in Memphis. He was to find that a professor's lot was as onerous and benumbing, and he had scarcely made the move before he was seeking ways back to his independence.57 A new friendship offered some prospect of that. In September 1933, Tate had read Herbert Agar's new short history of the United States, The People's Choice. "It is the most brilliant short history of the United States ever written," Tate had enthused. Agar had portrayed American history as the slow conquest of the country by a plutocracy, masquerading behind the name of democracy. Tate had written to Agar, then the London correspondent of the Louisville Courier-Journal, and invited him to join a projected second symposium, that he might help "our case for a Conservative Revolution."58

Agar was an ambitious man, on the fringes of power. He had a patron, in the form of Robert W. Bingham, wealthy proprietor of the Courier-Journal and ambassador to the Court of St. James's. Returning to the United States in 1935, Agar had turned his extensive energies to journalism, lecturing in political affairs and trying to form a movement to lobby the New Deal. To this end, he had hatched the scheme of founding a weekly newspaper to be funded by wealthy Middle Western patrons. Tate and Lytle were invited to join in the drive for money. Trips were made to Cincinnati, speeches were delivered to entrepreneurs. Tate's brother Ben was suggested as a possible backer. Members of the Taft family, deans of Ohio politics, were mentioned. This project foundered, but, in its place, a New York based journal was established, to be called Free America.59

There was a dispute over the location of the magazine. The Agrarians wanted it to be run from Tennessee, just as they had wished Seward Collins to move to Nashville and there edit the American Review. Meanwhile, Agar had added to the core of Agrarian support a motley crew of reformers: Ralph Borsodi and his "back to the land" movement, the English Distributists
led by G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, the Cooperative movement, the Catholic Land movement, the National Committee on Small Farm Ownership. Some of these the Agrarians were willing to stomach. There was, indeed, a conference held in Nashville in 1936 to coordinate matters and a joint Agrarian-Distributist Committee was established. But the project was doomed, partly because the attempt to broaden the coalition meant a dilution of its sectional aspect.60 For Davidson and Owsley, that was to miss the whole point. For Ransom in 1936, economics were failing to hold his interest. Lytle was ambivalent; Warren had never shown much interest in such matters. Only Tate seemed willing to sacrifice the local note of Agrarianism, its absorption in the South, for the national issue. Even during the furor over Free America, New York, and reformist eclecticism, he quietly asked Agar to consider him as an editor for the new journal. His discomfort at teaching was not an irrelevant consideration.61

When plans for a successor volume to I'll Take My Stand had been drawn up in 1933, they had been pronouncedly Southern. Of twelve contributors, ten were to be Southern: only Agar and T. S. Eliot were not. Nonetheless, its thrust was less exclusively Southern than the 1930 volume. Agar's involvement impelled the dilution. By the time the symposium saw the light of day in 1936, as Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence, nine out of twenty-one contributors were non-Southerners, and only three of its chapters could be said to be about the South directly. Tate described it, in September, 1935, as "primarily economic in approach and non-sectional."62

In beginning to focus on the practical problem of agrarianism, Tate had, like Ransom, been impelled beyond the exclusive bounds of the South. In his case, social and economic ties outside the region had helped the movement. For years, he had acted as a liaison agent between his friends in Nashville and New York. But it was a delicate balancing act, and the apparent inability of the South to offer him a living that he might enjoy inclined his eyes northward.

In a brooding mood on the problem of the Southern writer and economics—he own problem for the last five years—he wrote his piece for the tenth anniversary of the Virginia Quarterly Review. It was an obituary for his free-lance years. As he told Lambert Davis in October 1934, he had been reading "most of the literature of the South, Old and New, and I should like to say something about our lack of the professional instinct in literature." It had been a chastening experience. In its way, "The Profession of Letters in the South" was as much a leave-taking of the region as Ransom's essay in the same issue.63

Tate began with a bitter description of the writer's status in American society. He belonged, Tate well knew, to "a sweated class," tied to the tyranny of publisher and book market. To survive, swift turnover was
essential. Under such pressure, shoddy goods were the natural result. As usual, Tate traced the origins of the situation to the rise of capitalism and its erasure of an organic society, where the writer had had a natural place. With the crumbling of a patron aristocracy, the writer had become a social fugitive. This was a problem common to both Europe and America, save that in America it was worse. Having said that, Tate turned to the problem of the South. Here was a society that had once had aristocracy on the European model. Should it not have produced the United States’ most distinguished literature?

Tate was blunt: it had produced, in the nineteenth century, the nation’s least distinguished literature. Only Poe stood out. Why should this be, in a region which Tate now insisted was so similar to France? “In religious and social feeling I should stake everything on the greater resemblance to France,” he wrote. “The South clings blindly to forms of European feeling and conduct that were crushed by the French Revolution and that, in England at any rate, are barely memories.” Where else, Tate asked, could one find a society where the Code of Honor was taken seriously? Where else had the patriarchal family, the “ancient land-society,” the resistance to change, the persistence of a “convincing supernaturalism... nearer to Aquinas than to Calvin, Wesley or Knox” existed? And yet still there was no literature worth reading.

Tate dismissed certain kinds of explanation for this poverty. Not surprisingly, he set aside Trent’s old contention that slavery and a tyrannical class system had prevented “the essential faith in American democracy” that nourished literature. Tate was confident that societies could produce good writing amid a good deal of social corruption. But he half accepted Trent’s contention that slavery had been part of the reason, by arguing that slavery had prevented the development of a class system in the South. Moreover, black chattel slavery had interposed a barrier between the white man and his own soil. Without that, no literature could flourish. Politics, however, was his basic explanation. The Old South had been “hag-ridden” with politics. The need for the Southern aristocracy to hold its place in a hostile American world had drained talent from the arts: “The South was a fairly good place for the arts, as good possibly as any other aristocratic country; only its inherent passion for politics was inflamed by the furious contentions that threatened its life. Every gifted person went into politics, not merely the majority.”

Tate was at pains to emphasize that the poverty of the literature should not be glossed because one found the society attractive. It was a great temptation, and he himself had succumbed on occasion. For the Southern writer, one thing had not changed since the antebellum period. Poe had lived under a commercial aristocracy; the modern writer had to come to terms with a plutocracy. Each was a system of class rule. Both had failed
to provide a place for the creative writer. There had not been, nor was there in 1935, a profession of letters in the South or, indeed, in the United States. In his own time, the lack of a Southern publishing system and of a Southern city where writers might naturally gather had driven Southerners to New York.

Such a flight had its dangers, as Tate was aware. But he was careful to resist Ransom's charge that the consequent exposure to modernist influences from Europe was debilitating. He admitted that a "Southern writer should if possible be a Southerner in the South." But, things being what they were, that was not always possible. And it was not always bad to go away, for "the arts everywhere spring from a mysterious union of indigenous materials and foreign influences: there is no great art or literature that does not bear the marks of this fusion." The problem for the Southern writer in the North was not the alien influence, but the feebleness of the literary tradition he took with him.

Willing to grant that modem Southern literature had achieved more than that of the antebellum period, Tate cautioned that the phenomenon was quite temporary, merely the moment of insight offered at the point of transition between two Southern societies. At such a moment, as in the South, politics was a beckoning siren. "There is no escape from it," he lamented. "The political mind always finds itself in an emergency. And the emergency, this time real enough, becomes a pretext for ignoring the arts. We live in the sort of age that Abraham Cowley complained of—a good age to write about but a poor age to write in."64

This article was a break with the New South tradition, but less savage than Tate imagined. Its central call for a profession of letters had been made by Edwin Mims, Tate's bete noire, thirty years earlier. Its lament for the absence of a Southern literary capital was the common currency of writers like Trent. Ironically, his call for a Southern publishing system was being half met, even as he wrote. By the end of the 1930s, the region was surprisingly well endowed with magazines and presses: the Southern Review, through the dubious largesse of Huey Long, the Virginia Quarterly Review, the Sewanee Review, and the limping, committee-run South Atlantic Quarterly; the University of North Carolina Press, which dominated indigenous regional publishing, and three new university presses in Georgia, Louisiana, and Vanderbilt itself. But these developments were posited on the alliance with the university that Tate disliked and assumed academe's patronage for writers. The periodicals and presses paid little or nothing.

Nonetheless, his image of the Southern writer's fate in the postwar world was a mirror image of his own career. "The Southern writer, of my generation at least, went to New York," he had written.65 In fact, very few did. The novels of Thomas Wolfe had only fed a legend that had grown, by extension, from the common 1920s myth about the struggling
author in the great city. Whatever the truth about other regions, the South kept a remarkable number of its writers within its bounds. Of the “Twelve Southerners” of *I'll Take My Stand*, only two—Tate himself and Stark Young—had serious links with New York. If one looks at major Southern authors in the interwar years, one finds that, aside from the Agrarians, the likes of Ellen Glasgow and James Branch Cabell, the Charleston group of DuBose Heyward, the Mississippi set of Faulkner, William Alexander Percy, and Eudora Welty, the North Carolina set of Paul Green, all remained substantially within the region. There was something of a symbol in John Gould Fletcher, the exile, coming back to Arkansas in 1933.

Clearly Tate’s pessimism had deepened with the frustrations of his Agrarian venture. In 1930, he had seemed to cut himself off from the South on the grounds of religion. Now he severed himself from nearly all of the Southern literary tradition, save the Edgar Allan Poe whom he had wished, in his youth, to emulate. He gave himself only the narrow ground of a temporary crossroads in the Southern experience to stand upon, and he could find no economic means that could adequately, and permanently, set him upon that ground. Once again, he was driven back for his sense of Southern identity upon the few characteristics of the Southern society he thought he saw about it—its manners, most of all. And, once again, he feared that the politics of a deranged society would corrupt his art.

Unlike Ransom, Tate took no sudden leave of the South. His involvement had been tentative and racked with doubt. He had carried within him the nagging fear that agrarianism would be the ruin of his literary talent, and it was with sympathy that he greeted Ransom’s recantation, the cry that patriotism was the maggot of art. But Tate had a greater need than Ransom for a social context. Ransom seemed, in all but his most energetic agrarian years, to be able to exist without discomfort in a metaphysical vacuum. Tate has continued to need reminders of his origin. Ransom stayed in Ohio after his retirement, but Tate returned to the South. After the publication of *The Fathers* in 1938, he retreated to the intermittent role of a critic of Southern literature and left its society alone.

Tate had needed the South, as he seemed to need many things, as a way of escaping from the burden of a limiting self into a homogeneous society, a world that might satisfy his thirst for an authoritative context of ideas. It failed him, as well it might. The South was too modern, too heterogeneous. In the long run, he chose a more conventional path towards ideological authority. In 1952, he joined the Roman Catholic Church. From that perspective, he looked back upon his agrarian phase as idolatry. In 1954, he wrote: “What I had in mind twenty years ago, not too distinctly, I think I see more clearly now; that is, the possibility of the humane life presupposes, with us, a prior order, the order of a unified Christendom. The Old South
perpetuated many of the virtues of such an order; but to try to 'revive' the Old South, and to build a wall around it, would be a kind of idolatry; it would prefer the accident to the substance."