part four:
The Survival of Southern Identity
In February 1941, the house of Knopf, after much travail with an overwrought, dilatory and ill-organized author, published a book called *The Mind of the South*. Before coming to any conclusions about the nature of the Southern idea, one must dwell a little on this volume. For it was the last substantial contribution to the ideological disputes of the interwar years over the South, and the link between those debates and the present interest in Southern mythology.¹

Wilbur Cash was a journalist, a rhetorician of no mean accomplishment, a disciple of the anticlerical Mencken and a student of the cotton mills. Like others, his views on the South were impelled by accidents of time and place. A child of Piedmont, North Carolina, with a love-hate relationship to the ordinary Southerner, he dwelled much upon the sins and strengths of the plain folk of the Appalachian foothills and saw in them a microcosm of the South.² In this, he was following a well-worn path: Odum and Davidson, like many others, had jumped from a rural Georgia or Tennessee to the region. Cash was knowledgeable and shrewd, making many useful suggestions about the race problem, industrialization, war and Reconstruction, but his achievement lay chiefly in a strategic decision about the proper subject matter for a book about the South. He chose to study, not the South, but the mind of the South. In fragmentary fashion, this had been done before him. But no one had isolated the topic with his severity, or attempted to use it as the fulcrum upon which to make Southern history turn.

In so doing, Cash was flying in the face of the traditional positivist approach to the region. For a William Dodd, Ulrich Phillips, or Frank Owsley, the logic had been to use the Southern mind as the janitor of social and economic history: it came to tidy up and rationalize the compulsions of plantation and farm, war and poverty. With boldness, Cash reversed this logic. Awareness, according to Cash, was the master of social history and not its servant. *The Mind of the South* claimed, by dint of an unwonted Hegelian phenomenology, that the Southern zeitgeist had had the ability to create and transform both the perception of the individual and socio-economic realities. Wilbur Cash, by instinct rather than philosophical training, was an idealist historian, not only in the crude sense of believing that ideas were motive forces in the historical process, but also in a more specific dialectical sense. His book had buried in it the movement of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

The original thesis of Southern history, for Cash, had been the agricultural conditions of antebellum society. The climate, the lushness and friendliness of the land had been “itself a sort of cosmic conspiracy against
realism in favor of romance.” The frontier had discouraged intellectuality and loosened social bonds by creating an individualism, free of the “close­pressing throng... rigid class distinctions, the yoke of law and government, economic imperatives.” Thus the early South had been disunited: the plantation had been “an independent social unit,” farmers and crackers had been “in their own way self sufficient.” In this way, the Southerner’s world had been “an aggregation of human units, of self-contained and self­sufficient entities.”

To this thesis of an atomized, unself-aware society, Cash proffered the antithesis: the race problem, slavery, and the dispute with the North. From such tensions had come the synthesis of Southern self-consciousness. “It was,” Cash asserted, “the conflict with the Yankee which really created the concept of the South as something more than a matter of geography, as an object of patriotism, in the minds of the Southerners.” Under its pressure, the South had drawn together around the tenets of racial loyalty, a paternalistic myth, and a more severe Calvinistic religion. Cash’s name for this synthesis was “the savage ideal,” “that ideal whereunder dissent and variety are completely suppressed and men become, in all their attitudes, professions and actions, virtual replicas of one another.”

It is well to be clear on this point. Cash was asserting that, in his own words, the image of the planter “actually came to be” the planter. An atomized society, by the act of perceiving unity, had come to be unified. Thus “the delicate implication that this Southerner was somehow any Southerner at random” had been internalized, and the Southerner had “so absolutely identified his ego with the thing called the South as to become, so to say, a perambulating South in little.” This synthesis of perception and social reality was for Cash the central issue of continuity between Old and New South: the perception generated by an agricultural society had survived to influence the younger industrial society.

A central example in Cash’s argument was the relationship between the “savage ideal” and class consciousness. Cash assumed that class loyalty was the natural product of an industrializing society. Logically, Southern industrialization ought to have created such a sentiment. From his vantage point among the cotton mills of Charlotte, it seemed that this had occurred only imperfectly. Cash’s explanation was the transforming power of the “savage ideal,” which correlated race, Southern patriotism, and religion against the issue of unionization. Discrete social issues had become so intertwined in the ideology of Southernism that to touch one aspect of Southern society was to set up a chain reaction that touched all issues. Thus, although Cash had thought to detect in the 1920s “powerful forces toward the development of class consciousness,” the Southern myth had proved too powerful at Gastonia. Such an analysis betokened a frustration: Cash felt sure that the South ought to have developed in a certain way,
but stubbornly refused. Time and again, Cash dragged his readers and his historical Southerners to the brink of a breakthrough, time and again his mill workers seemed about to break into “The Red Flag,” and time and again he had to shake his head and let them sing “Dixie” after all. In this idealist analysis, Cash was not quite alone among Southern intellectuals. One can find scattered moments elsewhere. Ransom had written *God Without Thunder* as an exercise in the manipulation of myth and by 1934 come to feel that the South was as much myth as reality; with his usual idiosyncrasy of language, he had called it “the aesthetic of regionalism,” but ended by “marvelling at the power of that interregional but sympathetic symbol, the South.” Almost casually, as he did all things, Wade was to come around to the mythic view of the South. In 1954, he declared quietly to Davidson that the South was “one of the really great abstractions of our race.” Odum, though he believed his statistics when they told him that the region was empirically coherent, had nonetheless been interested in the social psychology of intersectional perception in *An American Epoch*. Such views were, indeed, refractions of the migration of intellectual modernism into the South. For, as H. Stuart Hughes has observed of the modernist canon of thought, it had come “to the conclusion that ‘the former conceptions of a rational reality’ were insufficient, and that human thought would have to make ‘concessions’ to a reality that could no longer be conceived as an orderly system. In this process of concession and adaptation, the ‘activity of human consciousness’ for the first time became of paramount importance. For consciousness seemed to offer the only link between man and the world of society and history.” But Cash had gone much further than his contemporaries. Having given perception an active role in Southern history, he had allowed it to wreak havoc. Perception was not a footnote to positivist reality, but reality a footnote to perception. Southerners had not merely perceived the savage ideal and been dialectically influenced by it: they had become the savage ideal. If Donald Davidson was the Herder of modern Southern thought, Cash came close to being its Hegel. Finally he stumbled into being its Fichte. Nonetheless, the phenomenological problem of Southern history had been given its first significant airing, and the groundwork laid for the interest in mythology that followed the Second World War. Cash had been convinced that the Southern myth had been hard and unyielding, set in an unreasoning concrete. In fact, the years in which he had struggled to write *The Mind of the South* had indicated otherwise. The debate had thrown up a wide range of options. Cash himself had challenged the racial orthodoxy of the savage ideal. Tate had tried to swing the Southern idea away from Calvinism to Roman Catholicism and T. S. Eliot. Owsley had attempted to dilute the planter legacy and, with Odum, celebrate the
“plain folk.” The Agrarians had wanted to hold the line against modernization, while Odum had striven mightily to bring the region into a rationalized modern “mainstream.” The myth was clearly negotiable, the dialectic was free and complex. Even the impulse towards Southern identity was optional. One could hold to it as a fundamental tool in understanding the world, like Davidson; let it drift into vagueness, like Wade; forget it, like Ransom. In nibbling ways, the idea of the South had come under pressure. But it had not cracked. To understand why, one must probe a little further into the nature of the Southern idea and construct a phenomenology for Southern identity less totalitarian than that of Wilbur Cash.

The problem can be approached at three related levels: at that of “social reality,” the institutional structure of Southern cultural nationalism; at that of perception, the intellectual structures of Romanticism and modernism; at that of myth. The first helps to define the empirical impulse towards Southern identity, the second defines the analytical tools with which such an impulse could be understood, and the third was the dialectical product, the Southern idea. But the interchange between these three levels was complicated and devious: none was finitely separable from the others, each influenced the others and was, in turn, influenced by them. It is the historian who, for sanity’s sake, needs to still this Bacchanalian whirl.

First, one must ask the old question again. What are the positivist evidences for the existence of a coherent Southern culture? What binding social institutions have existed to make the concept plausible? To answer this, it helps to examine the most thoroughgoing functional definition of nationalism available, that of Karl Deutsch. For the assumption behind this question is functional; it presupposes that Southern identity is explicable as a mirror image of a unified culture. Its inadequacies may help to indicate why the second question, about the structure of perception, may be necessary.

Deutsch has argued that a nation is a community, in which people communicate with one another in more ways than just the physical interchange of goods. If community depends upon social communications, it follows that the community-as-nation can be judged by the completeness of its system of social communications. As Deutsch sees it, “The communicative facilities of a society include a socially standardised system of symbols, which is a language, and any number of auxiliary codes, such as alphabets, systems of writing, painting, calculating, etc. They include information stored in the living memories, associations, habits, and preferences of its members, and in its material facilities for the storage of
information, such as libraries, statues, signposts . . . . Some of these facilities, individual and social, also deal with the treatment of information, its recall from storage and memory, its transmission and recombination to new patterns. If these elements are in fact sufficiently complementary, they will add up to an integrated pattern or configuration of communicating, remembering and acting, that is, to a culture . . . and the individuals who have these complementary habits, vocabularies and facilities are what we call a people." Thus nationalism is the mode and methods by which social groups communicate more effectively with one another than with "outsiders"; national consciousness is the process by which "secondary symbols of nationality" are attached to primary items of information moving through channels of social communications or the mind of an individual. To be most effective, this must influence social decision making. "On a simple level," Deutsch writes, "they may secure for the items to which they are attached quicker or preferred attention, more frequent or speedier recall, greater weight in the process of decision. On another level, they may change some of the decision-making system's operating rules for whole classes of items—and thus, in a sense, its operating 'values'—with effects on the general behavior of the system, and even on the pursuit of its goals or on their change for new ones." The more precise the correlation between primary facts and secondary symbols, the more accurate the resemblance between reality and image, the more effective will be the nationality.9

On this logic, is there a Southern system of social communications? The answer must be a cautious affirmative. There are universities, which draw their constituency from predominantly Southern sources; magazines, that sell to a Southern audience; railroads and airlines, structured to serve the region; corporate organizations, with headquarters and distribution networks bent to the South; party political alliances and caucuses, both in Washington and gatherings like the Southern Governors Conference; local organizations of intellectuals, such as the Southern Historical Association. Equally, there seems to be a discernible tendency for Southerners to be granted preference by Southern employers.10 What is oddly neglected in the impressionistic literature on the South is that such institutions are not the shipwrecked remnants of the Old South, but the offsprings of economic and cultural modernization. Industry, far from destroying the South, has had a central responsibility for sustaining and deepening its hold on men's lives. The need of modern society for centers of organization has given more force to the Southern idea than ever did the decentralized, pre-industrial Old South, which was notoriously resistant to the pleas of Southern nationalists and reluctant to subscribe to an internalized system of social communications.11

In helping this bureaucratization, the generation of the 1920s and 1930s had a hand. Howard Odum was the most industrious promoter of such
an infrastructure, by creating an Institute for Research in Social Science devoted to Southern problems, organizing the Southern Regional Committee of the Social Science Research Council, heading the Southern Interracial Commission, administering funds for Southern higher education, and periodically convening Southern intellectuals in a search for solutions to problems deemed to be common. But the Agrarians too played their part. They too turned up at conferences of the Southern Policy Committee. At Ellen Glasgow’s behest, they attended a meeting of Southern writers in Charlottesville and later patronized a similar gathering in Charleston. They were eager to support Southern periodicals and presses, such as the *Southern Review*—which they founded—the *Virginia Quarterly Review* and the *Sewanee Review*. Moreover, they were keen to bring national periodicals, like the *American Review* and *Free America*, to be edited in the region. Despite both Odum’s and the Agrarians’ caveats against parochialism, they depended upon and created a Southern system of social communications unimaginable to the Old South and luxurious by the standards of 1890.

All this molded a South oddly reminiscent of Herder’s vision of an unauthoritarian nationalism. But this only half answers the question of whether there is a coherent Southern culture. For the lines of social communication were very crossed. One might, as an Odum or a Tate, grow up in towns that gave you Southern magazines to read, took you to cheer Confederate reunion parades, or delivered you into the hands of pedagogues who used the South as a fundamental premise in social discourse. But the South was not a nation-state. There were the norms of the American nation to influence and overlap its own system of social communications. The South shared a language with the rest of the country, though many might lay claim to a Southern accent. Its political institutions, though bent to the needs of white supremacy, were broadly similar; governors, state legislatures, presidential electors, federal and state courts molded social and political life in comparable fashion. For most of the ordinary pattern of life, the Southerner shared assumptions and habits with his counterpart in New York, munched the same brand of corn flakes in the morning, watched or listened to the same baseball and football games, bought the same automobiles from Detroit, drove upon highways made by the same machines. In short, there was a strong case for David Potter’s statement: “If historians had not been captives to the idea that nationality equates with culture, and that where there is separate nationalism there must be culture of equivalent separateness, they would probably have been far quicker to recognize how very thin the historical evidences of a separate Southern culture really are.” There was a strong case, but not an overwhelming one, for there were those Southern institutions to muddy the clarity of that assertion.
Such crossed lines left the Southern intellectual poised between the overlapping categories of region and nation, and the options for reconciling them were bewilderingly complex. They were the more devious, because an ex-colonial society felt the need to mingle the problem of Europe into the equations. Implicit in the intellectual history of nationalism, as in its political record, has been the notion of cultural contrast. Nationalism has been a negative, as well as a positive proposition. Madame de Staël's *De L'Allemagne* was haunted by the question, what is it in Germany that is not French? American nationalism, however, has had several points of reference: the internal sectional contrasts of North and South, East and West, and the image of Europe. It is true, as David Potter has cogently argued, that group loyalties need not be mutually exclusive. A man can be for his South and his America, and have his fondness for Provence all at once. But, as Potter further suggested, the need for action sometimes impels the subjection of one loyalty to another. In 1861, a man could not be for the South and the Union simultaneously and act. For the intellectuals, however, thought was action and the disposition of their world views did not wait entirely upon the clamor of public dispute.

Thus one can trace the metaphysics of reconciling the South, the United States, and Europe differently for each of these figures. For Davidson, Owsley, and Odum, there was an indifference to Europe and so their problem resolved itself into reconciling the South and the nation. All claimed to be loyal Americans and devoted Southerners, but Davidson and Owsley sensed a contradiction in this which led to a devaluation of the federal government, a historiography of sectional imperialism, and a focusing of their loyalties upon the South. For Odum, there seemed no contradiction; he was content to run South and nation in a harmonious tandem. Nonetheless, for all three the loyalty to the South led to a doctrine of regional differentiation that was, in effect, a subjection of the vision of the United States to that of the South. John Wade deepened the confusion by expressing a doubt that Southernism was too abstract; as a particularist Georgian, he gave an uncomfortable reminder that the individual state was not a negligible factor in the adjustment of these metaphysics of identity. For Tate and Ransom, however, the problem deeply concerned the issue of Europe. As they saw it, the real difference lay, not between North and South, but between a traditional European culture and an industrialized America; their feeling for Europe controlled their sense of Southern identity. It was significant that Ransom's English experience in 1931 weakened his Southernism, while Owsley's visits to France and England only deepened his faith in a Southern democracy untrammeled by a deadening past. One can sense a proper unease in Allen Tate's remarks upon his friend's hostility to the French, for it endangered Tate's "European"
sense of Southern identity: "There is something wrong with us. All these things are connected. It is a bad sign when our folks can't take Europe simply and naturally, and not like a crowd of self-improving Yankees."\textsuperscript{15}

In these ways, the pattern of social communications created a context that suggested and impelled a Southern identity, but was so far from being authoritarian that men retained a great latitude. It is this that makes important the second question, What perception did men bring to the issue?

The easiest answer is the individual one, that each had different personalities and social experience. Odum had a determined optimism, while Davidson was a melancholy pessimist. Wade had an affluent background, and Tate a family history of genteel incompetence with money. Ransom travelled to England in comfort and at the benign behest of the Rhodes trust, while Davidson was dragged there unwillingly by the scarring necessity of war. The subtleties of individuality are endless and crucial.

The answer hardest to discipline is that of intellectual traditions of perception. It is complicated because the two main traditions, relevant to an understanding of the problem of Southern identity between the world wars, Romantic social theory and modernism, were not unrelated but, in fact, not too distant relatives. Modernism was, in many ways, the mangled and fragmented stepchild of Romanticism. The organicism of Romantic theory, embodied in the cultural theory of nationalism, had within it an awareness of diversity that could, with the collapse of self-confidence that the twentieth century impelled, break the theory itself.\textsuperscript{16} M. H. Abrams has given the best coherent statement of Romantic philosophy. "After Kant and Schiller," Abrams has suggested, "it became a standard procedure for the major German philosophers to show that the secular history and destiny of mankind is congruent with the Biblical story of the loss and future recovery of paradise; to interpret that story as a mythical representation of man's departure from the happiness of ignorance and self-unity into the multiple self-divisions and conflicts attendant upon the emergence of self-consciousness, free decision, and the analytical intellect; to equate the fall, so interpreted, with the beginning of speculative philosophy itself; and to evaluate the fall as a fortunate self-division, because it was the necessary first step upon the educational journey by which thinking and striving man wins his way back toward his lost integrity, along a road which looks like a reversion but is in fact a progression."\textsuperscript{17}

This vision had many siblings. For literature, it gave primacy to the spiritual and psychological autobiography. At its best, this was a tradition that saw literature as a way to move towards reintegration by a probing understanding of alienation; at its least edifying, it encouraged an indiscriminate fascination with emotions. For philosophy, it bred the concept of the dialectic, whether understood through the phenomenology of Hegel
or the materialism of Marx. For Herder, both cause and effect of the Romantic theory, it gave the Volk an important place in the stand against fragmentation: man became himself by his relationship to the nation around him.18

Abrams and Frank Kermode have shown how this vision is the direct ancestor of the modernism that, distrustful of the Romantic's faith in an eventual reintegration of mind, body, and faith, was left to dwell dependently upon the theme of alienation. This vision came eventually to Eliot's Waste Land, Tate's self-consciousness before the Confederate dead, Ransom's Kantian dualism and sense of irony, and Wade's loss of confidence in the power of intellectuality.

What is important to understand, however, is that the Romantic argument was broken into many pieces by the nineteenth century. The phenomenology of Hegel passed to a Marx whose adaptations were positivist and unconcerned with self-consciousness, save as a footnote to economic relations. Frank Owsley was an unwilling heir to this tradition, when he chose to define the South by its social and economic proportions of yeoman farmer and planter. Comte had taken over the emphasis on progress, implicit in the chiliasm of Romanticism, and transmitted it to the sociology that Odum learned as a student: a faith in progress, intimately tied up with the destiny of the Volk. The Symbolist poets had adapted the introspective genre of Goethe and Wordsworth by converting it into a poetic that stressed the autonomy of knowledge gained during the poetic act. For them, the immediate predecessors of Eliot, Tate, and Ransom, the poem did not merely translate an external reality, but had become a special insight which existed only within the art form. On their logic, the poet was a special sage who used the image as a way of bringing together the broken pieces of the world. In time, this doctrine reemerged as a historical theory in the idea, given by Eliot to Tate, of a "dissociation of sensibility." As Kermode has suggested, Ezra Pound, Yeats, and Eliot sought "a historical period possessing the qualities they postulate for the Image: unity, indissociability; qualities which, though passionately desired, are, they say, uniquely hard to come by in the modern world."19

These fragments of the old argument—the positivist historical philosophy of an Owsley, the sociology of an Odum, the literary aestheticism of a Tate or Ransom—had been rendered fragments by many forces. Not least of these was the drive of modernization to specialize intellectual disciplines. Goethe and Coleridge, even Carlyle, had lived in an intellectual ambience that drew no sharp lines between philosophy, literature, and society; it was natural that they should have tried to keep them in an equilibrium. But the dizzying accumulation of knowledge in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both cause and effect of professionalization, made intellectuals captives of specialized assumptions. When they emerged from the cocoons
of their private worlds, they spoke in tongues unintelligible to one another.

For Frank Owsley, the child of a Rankean tradition of historical objectivity, it was obvious beyond argument that there were real facts in the world. Words, though agreeable if neatly turned, were an uncomplicated vehicle to allow the historian to transcribe the hard truths of an external reality. He came from a profession largely uninterested in philosophy, and only intermittently perplexed by relativism.

For Tate and Ransom, the world began in the individual consciousness, and words, in poetry, were a devious and autonomous force in bringing a Kantian dualism into relationship. They came from a profession deeply worried by the instability of thought, and obsessed with debilitating doubts about the fixity of values.

For Odum, steeped in the traditions of American academic sociology, values were still fairly stable and the conviction that progress was a necessary part of the social process was ingrained.

For Davidson, the Symbolist aesthetics of Tate were unpalatable. While Tate and Ransom saw poetry as a complex metaphorical exercise at odds with mundane social reality, Davidson was sure that poetry should be accessible to the common man: it should distill folk wisdom. Heretically for the Symbolists, Davidson defended the long narrative poem and saw nothing offensive in transcribing the raw subject matter of social reality. One recalls his remark upon the "Ode to the Confederate Dead": "And where, O Allen Tate, are the dead?"30

For Wade, standing skeptically aside from the professional intellect, thought, although it might be unstable, could still elicit an intermittent commitment.

None of these private debates would matter but for a slumbering factor peculiarly important for the student of the Southern idea. One aspect of the old Romantic argument, the cultural theory of nationalism, had grown inarticulate and forgotten as the theory it indubitably was. The tendency of the nineteenth century to institutionalize the theory in the South, to create the system of Southern social communications, had left Southerners the victims of its logic. Nothing is more striking in the range of discussion in the South about the South than the lack of interest in nationalism as an intellectually respectable way of organizing reality; it was merely assumed.

But the debate over Southern identity was not localized in any particular intellectual discipline. It called upon its participants to integrate many issues otherwise broken into special compartments. For the South was deemed to be an organism, and its definition required the integration of facts across time, space, and social divisions. Somehow 1830 and 1930, North Carolina and Louisiana, sharecropper and industrialist, black and white were to be brought into harmony. The lines were very long and exposed. All too often, they broke.
What is interesting is that they usually broke for oblique reasons. Modernism, though its principles were at variance with the organicism of Romantic nationalism, was so fragmented that its attack was not frontal, but indirect. The best example of this is the dispute between Tate and Davidson over the South. The argument between them over poetry, between the Symbolist and the bardic traditions, had begun to crystallize in their Fugitive days. For Davidson, the Confederate dead were the issue; for Tate, his awareness of the dead was central. For Davidson, art was the tool of life; for Tate, art was the highest loyalty. Both, when they became Agrarians, found that the compulsions of studying the South took them far beyond the confines of the individual poem. Tate became a historian, and sometime economist. Davidson likewise, though his interests were similarly “literary and critical” followed them into “historical, political, economic, social interpretations,” into the pages of *The Attack Upon Leviathan*. But Tate’s fear of polemic and propaganda, ingrained in his theory of art, pulled him short. He shifted his contribution to the debate from explicit social philosophy to the metaphor of *The Fathers*. Davidson, without such a commitment, saw no contradiction. Thus the lines held for Davidson, but broke for Tate.

Similarly, for Odum the strains that told upon his *Völkerpsychologie* were indirect. To a neo-Hegelian social psychology, he added a sociology of statistics. While he remained unaware of any possible contradiction, his peers came to think otherwise. The intellectual atomism of modern sociology broke his regionalism, just as the divergent demands of a complicated Southern social scene had frustrated his vision of an administrative structure for the region.

For Owsley, the breaking of the lines was more partial. His profession left unchallenged the utility of analyzing the history of a South. Indeed, the growth of courses in Southern history and the entrenchment of the Southern historical profession made the impulse very respectable. But the ethics of Rankean objectivity made one extension of the lines, into contemporary political discussion, imprudent. The introspection of modernization and professionalism was his difficulty.

Thus each individual brought to the confused pattern of social communications the texture of his own temperament and intellectual training. Each shed a light through the prism of the South, saw it emerge refracted and took comfort or not in its dispersed hues. The Southern idea was but the prism itself, flickering and mobile, both defined by the lights and changing with them: periodically, its facets would be recut and its rays differently disposed.

The function of the myth was complicated. Its ability to absorb many rays was its strength, even though rendering it enigmatic. Men did not come to it whole and unhealed. Precisely its value lay in its organic counterpoint to a confusing and accelerating society. Southerners were collectively
and individually many things: poets, social critics and activists, heirs of farm or plantation or city, sociologists or historians, Christians or agnostics, Americans or Southerners or surrogate Europeans, fugitives from or enthusiasts for bureaucratization. The idea of the South did not only express function, but was a way of integrating disparate functions.

It is no surprise that for each who used its language the most vivid complaint was the vanishing "wholeness" of human experience. Conversely, it seemed to serve those best for whom no single social role offered adequate compensation. Allen Tate and John Ransom wobbled uncomfortably in the late 1920s about the character of their careers; both, in time, came to define themselves more severely as literary critics and teachers. The New Criticism was, after all, the intellectual equivalent of professionalization for the student of literature. For John Wade, the crisis of social mobility had been incomplete; granted the birthright of Marshallville, he could stand aside from the profession of intellectual. Frank Owsley found a secure social role as a historian, once he had abandoned social "polemic" and recovered the esteem of his peers. Moreover, like Howard Odum, he had helped to create a subsection of his trade that, as Southern history or Southern sociology, posited no contradiction between belief and society. In all this, Donald Davidson was the chief victim. Like Ransom, he had been uncomfortable in the institutional world of the university. Unlike Ransom, he was never to make his peace with the university. Nor did his poetry secure him respect. Alienated from friendship and intellectual sympathy, his need for the Southern idea hardened pari passu. Feeling the shock of modernity without composure, he did not bend with the times but dug in his heels. And the gap yawned wider and wider. When Warren in 1947 asked him to contribute to a special issue of the Sewanee Review in honor of Ransom, Davidson refused: "Don't ask me to join in the public profession...", he replied. "I seem to be in another line, going another way, but I don't know how I got there, since I have simply stayed put, or so I thought."23

On this level, the idea of the South helped individuals through moments of personal strain. It contributed towards reconciling Tate to his tangled family past, Ransom to his aesthetic and pedagogical difficulties, Wade to his exile from Marshallville, Odum to the fundamentalist onslaught on his chosen sociological career, and Davidson to nearly everything. It could help to locate a place in society and history. It could also be a burden. Too often Southerners were to echo the sentiments of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus that history was a nightmare from which one was trying to awake. The myth, as Tate and Ransom found, did not always work. Tate moved on to an older framework, the Roman Catholic Church, to make sense of things. Robert Penn Warren, skeptical about its utility even in the 1930s, was to chose a more existential path. In his novel, Flood, the chief character
was to speak of the South as "his country." But the sentiment was modified by the atomism of the admission, "There is no country but the heart."24

These individual impulses merged with the public character of the myth. One's relationship was not merely with the prism, but with those other figures who stood, absorbed, around it. The idea of the South was an indigenous mode of social discourse, a species of political and social thought. By subscription to it, social groups recognized the right of mutual criticism. Allen Tate, writing about religion in the Old South, was attempting historical analysis. With more force, but obliquely, he was pleading with his fellow Southerners that a traditional religion was a compelling social need. In this way, an autonomous point of social commentary was blended into the fabric of the historical myth. This added vitality to the discussion, at the price of provincializing it. By adopting the language of the Southern idea, Odum cut himself off from sociologists outside the region. An important figure inside the tradition of Southern social thought, he has been ignored outside it and one looks in vain for his name in histories of sociology. The Agrarians constantly complained that they were misunderstood by non-Southerners, for their social thought was buried in the language of the Southern idea. In 1932, Tate said to C. Hartley Grattan: "It has puzzled me exceedingly in the last two years that the left-wing critics should not have welcomed our criticism of the industrial regime." In 1931, he had likewise protested to Edmund Wilson that the latter had grasped nothing of Southern Agrarianism but an idea of "wistful boys mooning over the past." During their reunion of 1955, much discussion among the ex-Agrarians centered not on a repudiation of their social beliefs, but on their language in the 1930s. Many insisted that the mode of Southernism had weakened their effectiveness.25

As a system of social analysis, "Southernness" had the weakness which Wilbur Cash had indicated. It was so integrated that to touch one aspect was to lead one, willy-nilly, into many of its ramifications. A poet could end up writing about Robert E. Lee, a literary critic discoursing on economics, a historian dwelling on ethics, a sociologist pondering aesthetics. It became difficult to talk about anything without defining everything. As a historicist doctrine, moreover, it made it difficult for social analysis to cope with conflict. Its core was the desire to bring elements into harmony. Here the social consequences of the idea of the South were most incestuous. The belief had, since its inception in the early nineteenth century, both masked and diminished social conflict within the region. The claim of an Owsley or a Davidson that class conflict had no place in a discussion of the South, or the hope of Odum that regionalism would halt the slide into class divisions, was distortion of a society rich in social conflict; but it was an accurate mirror of the social belief of organicism that had influenced social division in the region.
In these interwar years, the assumptions of Romantic nationalism were mutating under the pressures of modernization. But they did not break. The phenomenology of the Southern idea had made that difficult. For the myth had come to bear the burden of community itself, in dialectical partnership with its younger cousin, the channels of Southern social communications. In the nineteenth century, the myth of Southern unity had bred the form of a Southern culture. In turn, the form preserved the myth even against the decline of intellectual faith. By a quirk of history, the fragmenting pressures of modernization bred an argument with the elder tradition of holism that, in bulk, only served to preserve the value of the old ways of social analysis. “The South” had become so ingrained into the language of society that even to dissociate oneself from the tradition was to confirm that system of language. The observation of the American linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf is a useful commentary on the fate of the Southern idea: “We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized in our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, BUT ITS TERMS ARE ABSOLUTELY OBLIGATORY; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement subscribes.”

The categories of section and nation have been less authoritarian. But they have been compelling, and their pressures can be read in the mental gymnastics forced upon intellectuals. To look at figures like Odum and Ransom is to be struck with the reflection that, as both admitted, Southernism was less than a full-blooded nationalism, but there was no shorthand way of talking about it save as a complete nationalism. The multiplicity of burdens on the idea of the South—its role for historical inquiry, social criticism, the healing of private and social tensions, the mirroring of personal identity in public facts—bred the confusion in which the individual could seem to find himself. The principle of integration existed in defiance of, and ironically because of, formidable evidence of fragmentation. Yet the idea of the South was a common property, on whose broad back one could rear the details of one’s particular vision. So the debate was rooted in a paradox. It was assumed that the South was definable, discrete, and shared, while the “reality” was broken. No man’s South was the same as another’s. Thus, ironically, a community was in fact created, for men could talk
about different things while imagining that they discussed the same entity. Thus, for those who made the effort of self-awareness, the center could hold.