

States of the Union

A GENEROUS TEACHER

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

"The wind whirrs without recollection...."

—FROM ALLEN TATE'S
"ODE TO THE CONFEDERATE DEAD"

IN THE WINTER of 1952, while malingering during the Korean War as a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, I signed up for a seminar in short-story writing taught by Allen Tate, the brightest star in Folwell Hall. Our once-a-week sessions took place in a dingy room that must have seen better days. Through tall, unwashed windows we could make out a few of the granite slabs fronting Fraternity Row across the avenue, and occasionally we could hear "Greeks" shouting or singing. Our own earnest band, of course, felt above all that. We sat with Tate in a tight little circle and gravely read our manuscripts to each other. Shafts of dust eddied around us in the amber light.

I can remember very little of those seminars other than my own sense of inadequacy and Tate's air of restless detachment. His appearance was dapper and compact—starched white shirt and bow tie beneath a neatly trimmed moustache and dreamy blue eyes—and his manners were impeccable. They did not, however, quite conceal his impa-

tiency with our attempts at artistry; as we droned on, he would drum his knee and stare into space. He never smiled.

Tate and I rarely ever exchanged a word. Not only was he a distant star, but in my ignorance of the literary world I apprehended him through the wrong end of my telescope. Yet, for reasons to be recounted in a moment, I have always felt grateful to him. He proved to be a generous teacher.

At that time, I now learn from Walter Sullivan's *Allen Tate: A Recollection* (Louisiana State, 118 pp. \$16.95), Tate was only 53; but to me, a youth with futures to spare, he already seemed a literary Lazarus, a figure risen from the Agrarian dead. Most of us knew him as a famous "Fugitive" of the '30s, who along with John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren and others had written the slightly infamous manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, in defense of the Old South. Only the most diligent among us, those who kept up with journals like the *Sewanee Review*, understood that Tate had since become a formidable presence—an elder statesman of Modern Lit. Crit. In academia, at least, his opinions more than mattered; they were often decisive.

Minnesota may have seemed an unlikely place for Allen Tate to roost, but I

don't recall any of us thinking so. Homegrown literature did not excite us. Sinclair Lewis and Carl Rolvaag, to name two of our best regional bets, were seldom mentioned and never taught. Southern fiction was then all the rage, as were Catholic esthetics. William Faulkner and T.S. Eliot, with their weighty airs or dim rituals, improbably served as our northern lights.

Tate filled both bills. A Kentucky Bible-Belt native, he had fled fundamentalism (becoming an instant fugitive) in search of a creed more literate if not less literal, a theology of poetic fire and brimstone. I knew nothing back then about his Catholic conversion, which had occurred only two years before, to the satisfaction of Tate's passionately Catholic wife, the estimable Caroline Gordon. As it happened, a Ford Foundation fellowship brought Sullivan to Minnesota soon after. "Allen told me," recalls Sullivan, "that ... he had heard a voice inside his mind admonishing him to follow Caroline into the Roman Catholic church, and, of course, he had."

He may have followed Caroline in other ways as well. In class we used their wonderful "anthology of the short story," *The House of Fiction*, a collaborative effort that Scribner's had just brought out. To this day I return to it with astonishment and delight. Their commentaries on "The Dead" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," among others, remain the last word on those stories. Nobody else has come close.

But what I remember most clearly about *The House of Fiction* is Appendix B, "Faults of the Amateur," a tart two-and-a-half page warning to beginning writers. "An amateur writer," it cautioned at the outset, "usually only puts half of his story on paper, and this half, made up often of lame sentences and thin incidents, does not make the same impression on him as it makes on other people. The half of the story which remains unwritten ... sheds a glow over the thin written half."

Other faults of the amateur included "Lack of Proportion," "Neglect of the Reader" and that most terrifying of disabilities, "Dead Dialogue." "The be-

ginning writer,” snapped Gordon and Tate, “will do well to remember that in life one rarely succeeds in emitting more than three sentences at a time.... Each sentence that we utter is like a bullet moulded in the heat of our desire to communicate....”

I read Appendix B with great care, and the results were devastating. Instead of encouraging me to write more intelligently, it had the effect of discouraging me from writing at all. Fear of finally being found out for what I was—an *amateur*—drained me of any ambition. By semester’s end I had handed in just one story, a puny fragment that Tate had the kindness to ignore.

He gave me a “D” in the course. The grade was just, but because it put me in danger of flunking out of graduate school, I went to him and asked for a reprieve. His response consisted of three bullets: *Read Gordon and Tate on “The Dead.” Submit three pages of analysis. Then we’ll see.* In the end Tate changed my grade to a “B”—an act of pure compassion.

Sullivan was in Minneapolis while all this was going on. He writes that he found Tate “still euphoric about his conversation.” There was “much conversation from him and Caroline ... about doctrine and practice and bishops and priests. They had priests over for dinner....” The euphoria, though, did not prevent Tate from criticizing Cardinal Spellman in a letter to the *New York Times*. Tate took delight in being adversarial; he was forever on the attack. When he could find no one else to argue with, he would argue with himself.

I can offer no special proof, but always I think of Tate’s religious tastes in connection with his quarrelsome ways, and of those, in turn, with his poetic strategies. He wrote poetry, he said, by playing the role of a hawk, “gradually circling round the subject, threatening it, filling it with suspense, and finally accomplishing its demise without ever quite using the ultimate violence upon it.” Those are fighting words.

Like his faith, Tate’s verse carried plenty of doctrinal punch along with a load of ambiguity; often at its center lurked a mystery not to be solved. One

could say the same for the man, and Sullivan does. An English professor at Vanderbilt University, Sullivan has favored us not with biography but with reminiscence, a series of candid snapshots—at times, *very* candid—of his old friend and mentor. Tate emerges as a bristling paradox. High-minded in his art, even on occasion sublime, in daily discourse he could be petty, manipulative and mean-spirited. Sullivan is painfully honest but affectionate. His final judgment, given after an account of Tate’s funeral, is characteristic of the temper of the book: “[Tate] always expected to be forgiven and usually he was.”

APPARENTLY there was no shortage of opportunities to forgive. “Like many other artists,” Sullivan comments early on, Tate “was bored by quotidian existence.” For both him and Faulkner “the problems came when they were not working, when the book or poem or story or essay was finished and they had to wait for the next project to form in their minds. Then Faulkner turned to drink and surliness. Allen turned to controversy and sex and, along with sex, the exciting risk of being discovered.”

In fact, the risks in most instances seemed near certainties. Few of Tate’s associates, including his first two wives (one of whom, Caroline Gordon, married him twice), failed to take note of his prodigious adulteries, and he in any case made little effort to camouflage them. His exploits as a house guest were legendary. In the wee hours he would forsake his wife’s bed for another’s down the hall. The illicit lovemaking would awaken fellow guests, who later did not hesitate to offer critical opinions concerning Tate’s amatory talents.

Tate’s compulsions appear to leave Sullivan bemused: “To ask why Allen chased women is, in a way, to ask a silly question. People eat because they are hungry, drink because they are thirsty, make love because they are filled with desire. Some libidos are stronger than others; but Allen seemed driven by motives that transcended the satisfaction of the flesh.”

Much of what Sullivan presents con-

cerns Tate’s post-Minnesota years, from 1966 until his death, due to emphysema and pneumonia, in 1979. Tate spent those years in Monteagle, Tennessee, where he could discourse with old friends from Vanderbilt and the University of the South while keeping an editorial eye on the *Sewanee Review*, which he had helped to found but no longer presided over. (Positions and other formal boundaries rarely inhibited Tate, who, as Sullivan remarks, liked to meddle “in business that was not necessarily his.”)

By then he had again divorced Caroline and remarried, this time to an ex-nun from Minnesota named Helen Heinz, who still “in habit” had enrolled in his modern poetry class. For Tate, typically, it was love at first touch. After “one of his Crane lectures,” writes Sullivan, she joined the throng at the door waiting to congratulate him. The way Tate told it to Sullivan: “When I touched her hand and looked at the white flesh of her wrist, I knew I was going to marry her.” Love and epiphany had much in common for Tate: The experience of each was overwhelming but temporary.

It was not a happy marriage. Helen possessed none of the charm or wit that Tate prized in his female companions. Besides, she had caught Tate on the wane: The big moments in his career, certainly the most creative ones, were already behind him. What chiefly remained, to judge from Sullivan’s recollections, were lectures and campus politics, plus partying, drinking and feuding with friends.

Helen had little interest in any of those enterprises. Her constant concern, which grew into an obsession, was money. She feared Allen would die and leave her poverty-stricken. Allen responded wearily but resourcefully. Among other things, according to Sullivan, he began to write more letters to famous literary friends. Naturally they wrote back, thereby increasing the eventual market value of Tate’s personal papers.

My own thank you note to Tate may still be buried there. It was written in May 1952, in gratitude for his brusque but timely dispensation. I hope it made him smile.