

THE FATHERS: ALLEN TATE'S SOUTHERN FAMILY ROMANCE

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The key to unlock the Southern mind is, fortunately, like Bluebeard's bloody and perilous; there is not the easy sesamé to the cavern of gaping success.

—Allen Tate, "The Profession of Letters in the South"

Darwin, Huxley, Ben Butler, Sherman, Satan—all these came to figure in Southern feeling as very nearly a single person.

—W. J. Cash, The Mind of the South

Your dream, dear brother, was noble.

If there was vanity, fear, or deceit in its condition,

What of that? For we are human and must work

In the shade of the human condition.

—Robert Penn Warren, Brother to Dragons

This thesis begins with a bit of history on the literary movement known as The Southern Renaissance, because Allen Tate was essential to its development and progression. Furthermore, this thesis is informed to a large extent by the ideas in Richard King's book, A Southern Renaissance. In order to eliminate confusion, I should also note that the figures I label as "Southerner" are white.

This thesis will explore what Richard King terms the "Southern family romance" and the ways it relates to Allen Tate's novel, The Fathers. The Southern family romance is not a genre per se, or an explanation for the Renaissance, but a description of what the Renaissance authors were attempting to do: come to terms with their feelings about the past. The Southern family romance, with its many contradictory attitudes, is a myth; and it is properly demystified in Allen Tate's novel, The Fathers, through the characters' notions of history.

THE SOUTHERN RENAISSANCE

It is altogether peculiar, as Thomas Daniel Young points out, that no one completely understands why during specific periods in our nation's history so many significant literary figures seem to have resided in the same geographic region (History 261). First, there was New York, 1790-1830; later Boston, 1830-1860; then Chicago, 1912-1920; and finally, according to Young, we went South from 1920-1950. Of these tentative dates, none seems more provisional than the last set, which contains a literary movement known as The Southern Renaissance.

But was this Renaissance really a movement? Or was it simply a cluster of strangely concurrent thematic tendencies? Even the dates of its occurrence seem debatable. Richard King, author of The Southern Renaissance, adopts a version beginning at 1929, with the publication of Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, and ending at 1955 with the death of James Agee, author of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (3-4). Walter Sullivan, in his A Requiem for the Renaissance, writes that by 1946 "the renaissance was moribund" (19). Robert Penn Warren's All the King's Men did it in, he writes, "in political terms." Warren's novel, according to Sullivan, was the "philosophical swansong" that finished the Renaissance—

forlornly, it seems to Sullivan—except for “a few vagrant exceptions which came later” (19).

Including as it does Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner, Caroline Gordon, Andrew Lytle, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Thomas Wolfe, and Eudora Welty providing the backbone, the Southern Renaissance must certainly be understood as a literary movement. But why the South? And why then—during the years (tentatively) between 1920 and 1955?

Michael O’Brien, in Rethinking the South, writes that the Renaissance “was a wonder, a puzzle, a mystical experience. It needed an explanation the way the ecstasy of Saint Theresa needs one, that is, very little, since those who believe in the miracle understand that rationality would only dissipate its force” (170). That, I believe, is certainly an apt description of the wonder of the thing. But believing in its sheer wonder is not enough; there has to be a reason for the phenomenon. O’Brien seems to disagree, for in order to define it, he asserts, “you need, not a rationalist, but Bernini” (170). Neither a rationalist, nor a Bernini, Allen Tate (1899-1979) wrote continually throughout his life on the subject of the South and its unique social/intellectual situation and its enduring literature. In 1936, in his famous essay “What Is a Traditional Society?” he wrote about what can be termed a “public life” for (essentially) Southerners of an early American Republic:

[They] had a profound instinct for high style, a genius for dramatizing themselves at their own particular moment of history. They were so situated economically and politically that they were able to form a definite conception of their human role: they were not ants in an economic ant hill, nor were they investigating statistically the behavior of other ants. They knew what they wanted because they knew what they, themselves, were. They lived in a social and economic system that permitted them to develop a human character that functioned in every level of life, from the economic process to the county horse race. (Essays 549-50)

The Southern Renaissance has much to do with tradition and its disappearance after the Civil War. Between the years of 1860 and 1912, there was no real national literary capital: any intellectual cohesiveness was, in a way, deconstructed. The War was a time of erasure of sorts; and after the whirlwind of Reconstruction—scalawags and carpetbaggers not the least of the problems of incessant industrialization—Southerners were left wondering, among other things, “what happened?”

In a 1968 introduction to Faulkner’s Sanctuary, Tate wrote: “the art of fiction begins with inner conflict, not in a quarrel with a wicked enemy to the North, or anywhere else” (Memoirs 147). Inner conflict was the genesis. As a

defeated people, Southerners were faced with the problem of re-entry into the world, Tate claims, “and the violent social changes at home brought about a new consciousness” (148). Indeed Tate provides a functioning definition of this consciousness when he writes that this unusual social situation “produced a sentimental literature of Narcissism, in which the South tried to define itself by looking into a glass behind its back: not inward. It was thus not a literature of introspection, but a literature of romantic illusion; and its mode was what I have called elsewhere the Rhetorical Mode” (146). The creation of literature in the “Rhetorical Mode” was, of course, the immediate reaction of authors during the time of Reconstruction. The great literature of the Southern Renaissance, however, was not in a “Rhetorical Mode,” but in a “Dialectical Mode.” The shift between these two, Tate writes, is epitomized by an epigram from W. B. Yeats, which describes the transfer from melodramatic rhetoric to the dialectic of tragedy: ““Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry”” (Essays 592). The need to blame others, the Yankees, “ragged with some cunning and versatility,” but it was not until Southern writers such as Faulkner were able to master the inner conflict and “authentic observation,” that they were to be truly great (Memoirs 146-47).

There was certainly more than just rhetoric in the Southern air during the Renaissance. There were real economic and cultural challenges to be confronted.

As Alexander Karanikas writes, there was an “active sense of tragedy and evil possessed by Southerners as being the only Americans ever to have suffered military defeat—indeed, to have known the violent despoilment of their homes” (11). This sense was a source for art, according to Karanikas, a “deeper and more profound” source than could be found in any other region. The past, a prelapsarian environment in a sense, was seen as a “precious object” lost forever (9). There was, for Southerners, an undeniable feeling of hostility in this supposed loss. The Renaissance was, if we believe Allen Tate’s reasoning, a response to the inner conflict that produced a creative tension between the “Southern past and the pressures of the modern world” (King 4).

In a condensed and reliable explanation of the Southern Renaissance, Richard King writes:

[It was] an attempt to come to terms not only with the inherited values of the Southern tradition but also with a certain way of perceiving and dealing with the past, what Nietzsche called ‘monumental’ historical consciousness. It was vitally important for them to decide whether the past was of any use at all in the present; and, if so, in what ways? (7)

The act of questioning the past—resulting in feelings of hostility and inner conflict—worked to produce such literature as Faulkner’s Go Down, Moses and Allen Tate’s The Fathers.

Yet, before working so triumphantly in this “Rhetorical Mode,” gifted Southerners such as Allen Tate unknowingly sparked the movement that would draw attention almost a century later.

THE FUGITIVES, THE AGRARIANS, AND ALLEN TATE

Aside from rhetoric, many irritated students sought some form of action against the changing world. For a group of young Nashville Southerners attending Vanderbilt University, this action was the formation of a distinct literary community during the summer of 1920.

These precocious young men, who ran in the same social and intellectual circle of certain sympathetic townspeople and university affiliates, began to gather at the home of James M. Frank on Whitland Avenue in Nashville, Tennessee, about two miles from the university (History 319). The clique was formed, initially, in order for the members to read poems and have them criticized by the other members. It proved to be an exceptionally gifted group of writers, including John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren. Two years of meetings culminated in April of 1922, with the publication of a small literary magazine entitled the Fugitive. The magazine published poetry and critical essays that dealt with philosophy, religion, and cultural issues from a uniquely Southern point of view. The founding members and most important contributors, including the aforementioned group, were

known as the “Fugitive Poets.” The magazine ran nineteen issues, until December, 1925.

An interesting paradox soon formed in the ideas and published work of the Fugitives, especially in the cultural philosophy of one of their most influential and talented members, Allen Tate. Tate seemed to oppose the ways of the Old South, with its “peculiar institution” of slavery, while at the same time bolstering and promoting methods of agricultural regionalism. The members of the group, who sympathized with Tate in opinion and artistic contribution, were known simply as the “Agrarians.” The lasting contribution of this “new” group was a collaborative effort published in 1930, entitled I’ll Take My Stand.

Radcliffe Squires, in Allen Tate and His Work, writes that with this publication, the essays by twelve Agrarian members “made their enemy the faceless technology of Northern industrialism to which they attributed the evils of abstraction, despotism, dehumanization, cultural deprivation, and economic imperialism” (6).

For Tate, the issue was more complex than placing blame on Northern industrialism. Although rooted in Agrarian sensibilities, Tate seemed to have a singular understanding of modernism as well. John Crowe Ransom’s “In Amicitia,” published in the Sewanee Review (Autumn, 1959), honoring Tate on his sixtieth birthday, remarked that Tate possessed “a knowledge of literary

matters which were not the property of our own region at that time" (History 319). Tate had a gifted mind; and aside from being an exceptionally astute literary critic, he was also an opinionated cultural critic as well. "Agrarianism," John L. Stewart writes, "provided a momentary focus for a profound but inchoate concern for their region which troubled all thoughtful Southerners" (Burden 172).

"The South," Tate insists, "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" (Essays 521). These forms of European feeling and conduct are, interestingly, systems of aristocracies. All aristocracies, according to Tate, are "obsessed politically," meaning that "The best intellectual energy goes into politics and goes of necessity; aristocracy is the class rule; and the class must fight for interest and power" (523). This obsession, as witnessed in the South, supercedes the drive for intellectual development and a flourishing environment for the creative arts. The concern was manifold, and provided little optimism for resolution to those Southerners, who were, like Tate, emotionally and intellectually indebted to the advancement of an environment that would embrace and promote the arts.

In order for such an artistic environment to exist, as Tate would have it, certain "symbols" are needed. A feudalistic system (rooted in free peasantries),

as opposed to an aristocratic one (rooted in social classes), provides the correct symbols. Rather than political in nature, the correct symbolism—as witnessed in feudal society—would be religious in nature. The difference and the problem with the Southern aristocratic system was that, figuratively, the “distance between white master and black slave was unalterably greater than that between white master and white serf [...]. The peasant is the soil. The Negro slave was a barrier between the ruling class and the soil” (Essays 525). That is, the livelihood of the serf was “rooted” in the soil he tenured. For the black slave, livelihood was dependant on the master. A system of inherent class struggle, so to speak, was instigated, and it created a mock aristocracy that imparted incorrect symbolism for the culture: a political symbolism.

It seemed impossible for the South to incorporate the religious symbolism it needed to acquire the feudal society Tate advocates. For Tate, the reason is not lost in obscurity:

It is just possible to see that Jamestown project as the symbol of what later happened to America: it was a capitalistic enterprise undertaken by Europeans who were already convinced adherents of large-scale exploitation of nature, not to support a stable religious order, but to advance the interests of trade as an end in itself. They stood thus for a certain stage in the disintegration of

the European religion, and their descendants stuck to their guns, which theoretically at least were Protestant, aggressive, and materialistic guns. (Essays 568)

Tate, who converted to Roman Catholicism in 1951, was thoroughly articulate in his argument against the South's unfit religion, which he believed caused the social structure "grievously to break down two generations after the Civil War" (570). Of course, born in 1899, this happened to be Tate's generation. He explains the problem as both political and religious in nature:

The South's religious mind was inarticulate, dissenting, and schismatical. She had a non-agrarian and trading religion that had been invented in the sixteenth century by a young finance-capitalist economy: hardly a religion at all but rather a disguised secular ambition. The Southern politicians quoted scripture to defend slavery, yet they defended their society as a whole with the catchwords of eighteenth-century politics. And this is why the South separated from the North too late, and so lost her cause. (570)

For the youth "full of hot blood," as W. J. Cash writes, the South's disguised secular ambition created a situation in which a political career was "the only desirable career" (96). Indeed it was an intellectually stagnant environment where "the writing of books, the painting of pictures, the life of the mind,

seemed an anemic and despicable business, fit only for the eunuchs" (96). In the much quoted 1917 essay by H. L. Mencken, "The Sahara of the Bozart," he writes of the South, "for all its size and all its wealth and all the 'progress' it babbles of, it is almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert" (Mencken 136).

It is no small wonder, then, why so much attention has been paid to the Southern Renaissance and the enduring literary production of that unique time period. In the essay "A Southern Mode of the Imagination," published in 1959, Tate described the Southern Renaissance as "more precisely a birth, not a rebirth" (Essays 577). Although the situation remained bleak, and at times inscrutable, during the years of the Post-Reconstruction South certain opportunities arose for talented young men and women who found themselves "bemused by the violent transition from the Old South to the irresistible new" (Memoirs 147).

Southern writers such as Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom, John Pearle Bishop, William Faulkner, Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, and Robert Penn Warren had, as Tate writes, "become aware of the great European writers of the half-century preceding them" (148). When W. B. Yeats was asked how Ireland, in the first half of the twentieth century, had a literary renaissance of its own, the answer was simple: poverty and ignorance made it possible (150). In the minds

of gifted writers such as Tate, European literary awareness imbued with a certain Southern historical consciousness was an underlying element in the production of great art in the midst of seemingly inevitable cultural decay.

As Louis Rubin, Jr., writes in The Wary Fugitives, even Tate himself had very concrete notions that the Southern Renaissance (and Southern Agrarianism) was doomed to be an inherently ephemeral movement. A serious writer in that “crumbling community” of the South during the Renaissance will inevitably be drawn toward politics, “to oppose the economic-dominated society of capitalism” (314).

During the years between 1920 and 1955, this unique and ephemeral Renaissance brought names like Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner, Caroline Gordon, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Thomas Wolfe, and Eudora Welty to the foreground. It was a movement set in motion by, among other factors, Allen Tate and the Agrarian group. Southern literature during the Renaissance shifted from a “Rhetorical Mode” to a “Dialectical Mode,” effectively illustrating the mastery of the inner conflict. Tate’s achievements as a poet, essayist, cultural critic, and novelist are many; not the least of them is his only novel, The Fathers. Steeped in inner conflict, The Fathers not only embodies Tate’s cultural criticism, but exemplifies and demystifies the Southern family romance, or what Richard King calls “the South’s dream” (27).

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CHAPTER TWO: THE SOUTHERN FAMILY ROMANCE

The values of honor, the temptations of whiskey, and an abundance of time to enjoy the controversies arising from both assured a continuity with ancient habits wherever Southern herdsmen, half-nomads, gathered for their rowdy amusements.

—Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor

Afterwards they could process us into soap;
Afterwards they would rhyme soap with hope.

—Allen Tate, "Eclogue of the Liberal and the Poet"

FREUDIAN CONCEPTS AND THE ROLE OF THE FATHER

Allen Tate's The Fathers, as a Southern family romance, demonstrates certain Freudian concepts as well as contradictory aspects of the roles of the father and the mother, fully embodying what Richard King claims to be the "collective fantasy" of the South (27). "The Southern family romance," King writes, "was the South's dream." It was, as King defines it, the "collective fantasy which made up the 'structure of feeling' of that culture" (27).

The Southern family romance was a compendium of emotion drawn from the ante-bellum "plantation legend" expressing the "values, attitudes, and beliefs that white Southerners expressed in their attitudes toward the region itself, the family, the relationship between the races and sexes, and between the elite and the masses" (27). The Southern family romance was a myth of sorts, essentially an updated version of the "plantation legend," which centered on a male, patriarchal hero-figure. The plantation was the "family writ large" in the Southern agrarian society lacking extended extra-familial relations (27). And for this updated version of the "plantation legend," its hero—the "Southern Cavalier"—played a critical role in a variation on the Oedipus story.

King bases this psychoanalytic view of the plantation as a fecund oedipal environment on a chapter entitled "Family Romances" in Sigmund Freud's, The Sexual Enlightenment of Children. In it Freud writes:

The freeing of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development.

[...] Indeed, the whole progress of society rests upon the opposition between successive generations. On the other hand, there is a class of neurotics whose condition is recognizable determined by their having failed in this task. (41)

For the young child, this separation was an inherently intense and difficult break from his parents, who are "at first the only authority and the source of all belief" (41). King interprets this as a description of the situation "in which a child begins to view realistically the parents he had originally idealized and taken to be the sum of all human virtue" (27). In the family romance, as King interprets it, the "myth of the hero culminates when the son returns to displace the father and, in the case of Oedipus, to marry the mother. Thereby he assumes the high or noble station which is rightly his" (King 28).

The Southern family romance, King asserts, was Freudian in nature. What made this romance unique, though, was the economic and geographical

distinction which produced a critical tension, or “fear of the family’s dissolution” (29). In a self-protective response, the family enacted a process of idealization of the planter (father). Also involved in this process were the adoration of the feminine (mother) and the sentimentalization of slavery. In essence, what Richard King does in A Southern Renaissance is discern certain psychoanalytic phenomena in the “modern” versions (post-World War Two) of the family romance that seem to be intensified in this unique Southern environment.

The modern versions of the Southern family romance, like Tate’s The Fathers, extended interesting developments from early paradigms of the “plantation legend” into the Southern family romances of the post-Civil War years. “At the center of the family romance, in its patriarchal expression, was the father,” King admits (34). But this changes somewhat as the family romance progresses in time of dynamic social conditions:

As the romance emerged in the post-Civil War years less emphasis was placed upon the Cavalier per se. The “father” came to be the gracious, courteous, but tough planter of the pre-War years who had led the heroic and collective struggle against the Yankees. He was the “presiding presence” in the romance; and, as he faded from the scene, the grandsons in the early years of the century idealized the great hero of the romance even more. (King 34)

This kind of alteration functions in accordance to Freud's theory of separation for the child, as the fathers, according to King, "seemed rather unheroic and prosaic to their sons" (35). The progeny of the plantations had to look further back in history to find what they considered worthy subjects for exultation.

Reconstruction and the succeeding years of the Southern Renaissance did much to further this psychoanalytic progression into what we find in Faulkner's work, or Tate's The Fathers. The economic optimism of these Renaissance years was not only embraced by Southerners, but created a suspicion that heroes were a thing of the past. "Decline," King writes, "was an integral part of the Southern family romance" (35).

With his only novel, The Fathers (published in 1938, reissued in 1960 with an introduction by Arthur Mizener, and revised by Tate in 1977), Allen Tate confronted this integral decline in his adroitly developed version of the Southern family romance.

In the novel, an elder Lacy Buchan remembers fifty years prior, to the events of his youth and his genteel Northern Virginia family during the early stages of the Civil War. It is not surprising, then, the role of the father is the central burden of the story in that time of familial disruption and sacrifice. R. K.

Meiner describes Lacy's situation relating to that burden as "caught between two visions" (86). For Lacy, the first fatherly "vision" is Major Lewis Buchan, his ultra-conservative father. The second is George Posey, a man who, simply put, is a charming outsider from the city. Lacy must decide to which father he will devote himself during this time of crisis. The idea of choice, between these two "visions" as Meiner suggests, is the most appropriate way to interpret the work.

Many critics perceive an iconoclastic battle between Major Buchan and George—a fracas between the polar opposites of traditional and modern, North and South, conservative and nihilistic ideologies. Arthur Mizener proposes such a battle in his frequently quoted introduction to the 1960 edition of The Fathers. He asserts that the novel "discovers a terrible conflict between two fundamental and irreconcilable modes of existence, a conflict that has haunted American experience, but exists in some form at all times" (ix).

Instead, I believe Tate purposefully creates alternatives for young Lacy Buchan. Societal change for the South was inevitable, as Tate well understood; positioned between two extreme "visions," the young Lacy Buchan clearly represents the future of the South. In this difficult position, Lacy witnesses an "accumulation of disasters that brought about in our lives changes that would otherwise have taken two generations" (Fathers 117).

As Lacy says, “memory is not what happened in the year 1860 but is rather a few symbols, a voice, a tree, a gun shining on the wall—symbols that will preserve only so much of the old life as they may, in their own mysterious history, consent to bear” (22). The reader may assume that Major Buchan and George Posey also exist in Lacy’s memory as his respective categorical “symbol.” However, Tate has drawn both characters ambiguously and with such sensitivity that he has avoided the portrayal of mere ciphers or clichés.

Major Buchan is scripted as a relic of sorts and a staunchly traditional man. In the essay, “What Is a Traditional Society?” Tate’s most effective explication of the antiquated and extinct traditional society is his pithy description of the untraditional in our modern times. He quotes the following lines (135-39) of T. S. Eliot’s The Wasteland:

The hot water at ten.

And if it rains, a closed car at four.

And we shall play a game of chess,

Pressing lidless eyes, and waiting for a knock upon

the door. (qtd. in Essays 554)

Tate feels that if the game of chess here seems trivial, a “symbol of aimless intellectuality,” then Mr. Eliot’s intention is received correctly. The game, Tate argues, “symbolizes the inhuman abstraction of the modern mind [...] [It is] a

kind of truth that has no meaning" (554). In our modern age of waning morals, manners, religion, and social codes, men have lost "the forms of human action; it means that they are no longer capable of defining a human objective, of forming a dramatic conception of human nature; it means that they capitulate from their human role to a series of pragmatic conquests [...]" (554). With that in mind, Tate clearly positions Major Buchan on the opposite end of that continuum.

The Major is not lost in abstraction; in fact, quite the opposite. For, as a man of tradition, he has found the necessary "forms of human action." These forms are traditional forms: public and ceremonial. As a precocious fifteen-year-old boy, Lacy is understandably paralyzed by his awareness of the moment, in its "ceaseless flow" (*Fathers* 101). This paralysis is witnessed during the funeral of Lacy's mother, as his mind is temporarily fixated on the swirling abstractions of love, marriage, birth, and death. "None of these," Lacy says, "could draw to itself all the life around it or even all the life in one person" (101). The abstractions were inadequate. The elder Lacy seems to interrupt at this point: "I had to learn this: papa, leading me by the hand into the yard to take his place at the rear of the coffin, behind the six Negro pallbearers, had no need to learn nor even to understand it, for to him there could have been nothing whatever to understand" (101).

According to Tate, the traditional man is surrounded and sustained by the past. Like Major Buchan, he is loyal to it; this loyalty comes spontaneously for a traditional man. The issue for Tate is that "Tradition must, in other words, be automatically operative before it can be called tradition" (Essays 564). Of course, Major Buchan embodies all of these things. Tate though, does not present the Major as a "perfect" character, nor does he present the South as embodying a "perfect" ideology. In compliance to the strictures of the family romance, Lacy eventually discovers his father's shortcomings; and Tate skillfully identifies those shortcomings as indicative of the South's own faults at large.

It should be noted that before writing The Fathers, Tate abandoned writing a biography of Robert E. Lee. As Louis Rubin, Jr., writes in The Wary Fugitives, Tate came to "detest" Lee, for the qualities of character in Lee "represented many of the elements that rendered the South inadequate to prosecute its war for independence successfully" (310). Rubin terms Lee's concern for personal honor, "scrupulosity" (310). An example of this "scrupulosity," according to Rubin, is Lee's early 1861 letter to his son, stating his concern that the dissolution of the Union was a grave mistake, and that he was "'willing to sacrifice everything but honor for its preservation'" (qtd. in Rubin 310). It is no mistake that Major Buchan shares the same characteristic as Lee. It is "scrupulosity" that forces the Major to hang himself when he learns that he

will not be able to defend the family plantation home, Pleasant Hill, against the Union troops. Similarly, as Lacy comments about his sister Susan and her marriage to George Posey, we can hear Allen Tate criticizing the South's fatal flaw as well:

To Susan the life around her in childhood had been final; there could be no other, there never had been any other way of life—which is, I suppose, a way of saying that people living in formal societies, lacking the historical imagination, can imagine for themselves only a timeless existence: they themselves never had any origin anywhere and they can have no end, but will go on forever. (183)

Major Buchan, as the provider of such an environment, is properly demystified in Tate's family romance. As Rubin succinctly relates, this situation is the difference between Tate's The Fathers and Stark Young's So Red the Rose "and many another historical romance of the fall of the Old South—these events [the deaths of Major Buchan and Semmes Buchan and the burning of Pleasant Hill] came from within the family as well as without, and were ultimately made possible by a social and moral situation interior to the society" (317).

Lacking a necessary historical imagination, the Major is blind to the economic quandaries of Pleasant Hill. Lacy soon becomes wise to his father's

incompetence in managing the fiscal complexities of the plantation; he admits that the realization was “the beginning of my introduction to the world where people counted and added things, the first intrusion of change into my consciousness” (19). The emotional separation between Lacy and the Major continues as Lacy begins to process the criticism of his father by his brother, Semmes Buchan. He says, “The image of papa rose up before me, strange for the first time—his head bowed in humiliation as if he had been accused of wrong; that at least was the role I thought in my ignorance that Semmes had put him in” (20).

Major Buchan’s lack of “historical imagination” becomes more apparent to Lacy as the conflict between the North and the South approaches. When the Major forbids Lacy to take part in any Confederate activities, Lacy envisions his father speaking to him “from a great distance, as if he were a man preoccupied with some private mystery that could not be connected with what was going on in the world” (155). “For papa,” Lacy says, “these young men did not exist; all that country from below the James to the Rio Grande was a map, and the ‘war’ was about to be fought between the ‘government’ and the sons of his neighbors and kin in the old Northern Neck of Virginia” (155). Lacy felt the separation from his heroic ideal of Major Buchan intensely. He describes it in negative terms, as a “sense of loss” as if “I had forgotten something” (155).

It was a time of war, whether Major Buchan admitted it or not. According to Lacy, it was also a time in which placing blame on either side resulted in only “a pharisaical jumble of ifs and buts” (218). “Who is to blame?” Lacy asks. It was a time of evil, he says, that “from our senses come the metaphors through which we know the world, and in turn our senses get knowledge of the world by means of figures of their own making” (218). In an often quoted passage, Lacy explains that during these troubled times when, “we can hear the night” and “crave its coming, one must have deep inside one’s secret being a vast metaphor controlling all the rest: a belief in the innate evil of man’s nature, and the need to face that evil, of which the symbol is the darkness, of which again the living image is man alone” (218-19). There is no answer for Lacy; his perception of that arduous time is that “some of us behaved a little better than the others; but not much better” (218). From Lacy’s complex ideological struggles, the nontraditional but imaginative George Posey emerges as an attractive alternative to Major Buchan’s traditional ethos bereft of historical imagination.

The Fathers, as Richard King writes, “achieves a certain tragic stature because Tate did not load the scales all on one side and make his version of the family romance a popular novel of the Gone With the Wind variety or an

untroubled evocation of the plantation society as depicted in Stark Young's So Red the Rose" (105). It is, King asserts, "an elegy for a lost way of life" and a "subtle but devastating dissection of the historical inadequacies of the Virginians" (105).

George Posey, the counterpoint to that "historical inadequacy" of the Virginian Buchan clan, is a man "of considerable energy and charm" (King 107). Thomas Daniel Young describes him as "the prototypical modern nontraditional man who is dominated by the means of life" (50). George Posey then, as a nontraditional man, has not achieved what Tate describes as "unity between his moral nature and his livelihood" (Essays 556). This is an exceptionally accurate description of George, for he is utterly dominated by the modern "means of life" — money.

After the death of the Major's wife, and the evacuation of the Buchan family from Pleasant Hill, George Posey assumes control of the financial responsibilities of the property. As Radcliffe Squires writes in Allen Tate, this action is the "superficial emblem of something more profound. When we understand how profound we begin to understand Lacy's love of George Posey" (139). George's control soon results in dramatic changes at Pleasant Hill; the Major, a man incapable of action, is left ignorant of these events:

But Brother George had sold the whole [slave] family to a dealer in Georgia [...] doubtless the horse too, and applied the couple of thousand dollars to papa's debt at a bank in Alexandria. I could not tell whether papa knew it, but everybody else in the family knew, and took sides [...] I took no sides; I learned about it so gradually, and I was so young, that when I knew everything it was too late to judge it, and there was too much to be said on both sides.

(131-32)

Lacy continually resists passing judgment on George and his predictably impulsive activity. For Lacy, George was always standing "squarely though easily on both feet" (6). And in return, George continually reminds Lacy, "You're my friend, Lacy boy" (7). George's exceptional character is infectious, even for the Major, as Lacy tells us, "I had heard my father say that George could make anybody do anything" (10). Lacy envisions George sympathetically, as an impulsive man of continuous motion: "I thought of him always boldly riding somewhere, and because I couldn't see where, I suppose I thought of a precipice" (10). Louis Rubin, Jr., accurately describes the situation between the Major and George not in terms of a conflict between two men, but as emblematic of the Old South's integral problems:

Had the traditional society of Major Buchan been sufficient to define the experience of his children, Lacy would never have been drawn to George Posey, any more than would his sister Susan, who married him, or his brother Semmes, who connived with him to convert Pleasant Hill into a profitable economic unit. The society of Pleasant Hill, though it had appeared invulnerable to time and change, fit to provide its family with the best that civilized life might afford, was not lasting. The very conditions that made it possible doomed it. The advent of George Posey was inevitable; and for Lacy Buchan there was finally no choice but to accept George's burden, and face the world in whatever guise it presented itself. (323)

Although the advent of George Posey was immediately and deeply attractive to Lacy, George was not without his flaws, just as the Major was not without his. Lacy realizes that although George was seemingly a generous man in helping the family preclude economic insolvency, there were things about George that Lacy, a son of tradition, could not understand. "Why was it that George took everything to himself?" Lacy asks (145). He answers by supposing that George "had too much imagination and he could not confine the things that people said to what lay right before him, under his nose" (145). George's

expansive “imagination” and his inability to comprehend the fixtures of tradition in the country area of Northern Virginia, twenty-five miles away from his home in Georgetown, were atypical qualities which prompted Lacy to understand that George was a uniquely personal man “who received the shock of the world at the end of his nerves” (185).

To communicate with the Posey family, Lacy says, was impossible. They were “like children playing a game, they had their fingers perpetually crossed—which permitted them to do as they pleased” (185). Lacy searches for reason, but the Posey family is devoid of any such thing. Indeed they are people who “did not live by rigid order wherein everything meant something, whose meaning had been long agreed upon” (184). As Lacy says, George and his Posey family simply “did not recognize the assumptions of the game” (185). According to Lacy, George always seemed to be trying to win his own game against abstractions he could not ascribe to reason. For George, money was merely a tool in this game. It was the only thing he was able to chase continually, thereby becoming a part of something larger than himself; all the while defining his own set of rules. As Radcliffe Squires writes, “Profit and loss take the place of life and death—or tradition—for him” (141).

Throughout these circumstances, however, Lacy remains excessively loyal to George: “I have never been able to say to myself that George Posey, that

remarkable fellow, was not right about everything, even to the point of rectitude" (132). In spite of the Buchans' traditional "communion with the abyss," Tate permits certain provisions to exist between George and Lacy. Although the ceremony attached to his mother's funeral allowed for a "completeness of death," Lacy "could not face that death" (91). Instead, he felt "excitement" at the visage of "George Posey in the shadows of the back hall"; Lacy then forms a rationale for his incomprehensible crosscurrent of feelings that are unassailable by way of public ritual: envy, rage, desire, humiliation (92). "The meaning," he decides, "of what happens to us is never a phrase but lies rather in its own completeness, and the completion of that scene [the funeral] was the glimpse I had got of the presiding face of George Posey in the hall" (93).

Although George Posey is the "presiding face" for Lacy throughout the novel, a third fatherly "vision" emerges in the form of Lacy's grandfather, Dr. John Buchan.

After witnessing the murder of his brother Semmes by the gun of George Posey, Lacy—confused and scared—runs home to Pleasant Hill. Along the way, he speaks poetically on the Southern condition in a strikingly beautiful passage:

The color of the road had changed from the whitish gray of the soil below the fall line to the blood brown of old rusty iron. It is an old country, I thought, as my toes sank into the rusty clay, powdered by the sun; an old country, and too many people have lived in it, and raised too much tobacco and corn, and too many men and women, young and old, have died in it, and taken with them into the rusty earth their gallantry or their melancholy, their pride or their simplicity, after their humors or their condition of life; and too many people have loved the ground in which after a while they must all come to lie. I tried to think of the first man who had ever walked that road but I could see only the face of my grandfather Buchan in the portrait hanging in the front parlor at Pleasant Hill.

(266)

Exhaustion and/or dehydration overtake Lacy and the full vision of his grandfather appears. Radcliffe Squires notes that this appearance is the “identical experience” in the first part of Tate’s poem, “Records,” written in 1928 (142). The poem opens with:

At nine years a sickly boy lay down
 At bedtime on a cot by mother’s bed
 And as the two darks merged the room became

So strange it left the boy half dead:

The boy-man on the Ox Road walked along

The man he was to be and yet another,

It seemed the grandfather of his mother,

In knee-breeches silver-buckled like a song,

His hair long and a cocked hat on his head,

A straight back and slow dignity for stride;

The road, red clay sun-cracked and baked,

Led fearlessly through scrub pines on each side

Hour after hour—the old road cracked and burned,

The trees countless, and his thirst unslaked. (Poems 43)

The poem does, in fact, match the description of the grandfather, down to his “long chestnut hair [and] the black cocked hat” (Fathers 267). For Squires, the poem can be taken as “a vision of the intensity of Tate’s feeling about his ancestors: their secret bond with each other; the way that one generation dies into the birth of the next; and the way all the generations are bound together by love...and evil” (143).

The purpose of this vision, and the subsequent conversation between Lacy and the grandfather, is to console Lacy in the death of his brother; and it is also,

as Squires writes, to offer “a final comprehension of Posey” (144).

Comprehension comes in the form of an allegorical analogy between Jason, Medea, and the Golden Fleece with George, Susan, and Jane (George’s younger sister).

As grandfather Buchan tells the story, Jason (representing George, of course) was a man for whom “nothing ordinary interested him [...] he had to master certain rituals, and it was there that he failed” (268). In a perfect reflection of George, it was “Jason’s misfortune to care only for the Golden Fleece and the like impossible things, while at the same time getting himself involved with the humanity of others, which it was not his intention but rather of his very nature to betray” (268). Jason also required the help of Medea to “subdue a certain number of savage bulls” (268). More important, he desecrated his fathers’ graves; and after Medea discovered “his perfidy,” she “went mad.” Lacy’s grandfather closes the analogy by stating that Jason “was a noble fellow in whom the patriarchal and familial loyalties had become meaningless but his human nature necessarily limited him, and he made an heroic effort to combine his love of the extraordinary and the inhuman with the ancient domestic virtues” (269).

All of it fits perfectly, and Lacy responds to his grandfather appropriately: “You know everything” (269). This acknowledgement, however, fails to persuade Lacy one way or the other. For as the grandfather says, Semmes’ death

“was not the intention of your brother-in-law [...]. It is never, my son, [George’s] intention to do any evil but he does evil because he has not the will to do good” (267). If anything, Dr. Buchan’s speech only reinforces Lacy’s decision to side with George. I believe that Radcliffe Squires puts it best:

He loves Posey because his unpremeditated evil is evidence of his life. Even his passion for commerce, a passion based not on greed but the need to act, is evidence of life. Major Buchan is not quite alive. He is the continuation of a form of life rather than life, and toward the end of the novel the boy sees that his father is beautiful the way pure forms are beautiful, but that he also is foolish and “arrogant.” (144-45)

THE ROLE OF THE MOTHER

If the Southern society, even in post-Civil War years, was the "family writ large," then the role of the mother is certainly a crucial one. In the paradoxical world of the Southern family romance, she was not only denied sexuality and erotic appeal, she was "stripped of any emotional, nurturing attributes at all" (King 35). The mother, or virtually any female figure, assumed a "quasi-Virgin Mary role as the asexual mother of the Southern male hero" (35). The apparent reality forced by Victorian morality in the late nineteenth century, was that sexuality is a matter of shame.

In Southern Honor, Bertram Wyatt-Brown writes, "Honor and interest combined to repress feminine lustfulness, but basically the sanction was external: fear of social ostracism. As proprietors and protectors of female virtue, fathers, brothers, and husbands were brought to public shame by the tarnished woman" (294). Wyatt-Brown adds that male vice was excused, and as a result, "hard custom, undergirded by common-law jurisprudence, held the South to the traditional 'double standard'" (294).

In her book, Reconstructing Dixie, Tara McPherson reminds us that “Dixie, after all, is a woman’s name” (19). The Southern lady, McPherson writes, is

a central player in the aggrandizement of Dixie, a figure who, along with her younger counterpart, the belle, served as the linchpin of nineteenth-century revisionist versions of the Old South, in which the Lost Cause ideology of southern nationalism conveniently fused the figure of the southern lady onto a celebration of the rebirth of a ‘nation’ defeated. The South, responding to its own feminized position vis-à-vis the North—a feminization that was both literal, owing to the loss of a large portion of the male population, and figurative, given the South’s status as defeated—turned to a hyperfeminized figure of the southern woman as discursive symbol for the region, with the land itself being figured as feminine as well. (19)

McPherson’s description of the Southern lady is certainly apropos for the character of the ante-bellum “plantation legend” and early Southern family romance. During the Southern Renaissance, however, things did change as writers such as Tate and Faulkner used the paradigm of the Southern belle to

demystify the contradictory family romance.

“The Southern woman,” Richard King writes, “was caught in a social double-bind: toward men she was to be submissive, meek and gentle; with the children and slaves and in the management of the household, she was supposed to display competence, initiative, and energy” (35). This sort of duplicity resembles what McPherson categorizes as “lenticular logic” in her interpretation of the Southern female as seen through the lens of, among other things, mass media (McPherson 24-31). Although McPherson is referring to racial, cultural, and historical commonality and mixture, the same “logic” can certainly be applied to the “social double-bind” of the Southern lady.

In The Fathers, the absence of a strong Southern belle-type such as McPherson’s “hyperfeminized figure” is significant in setting the tone for a story centered almost entirely on male relationships. It is interesting, and presumably quite symbolic, that Tate opens the novel with the announcement of the death of Lacy’s mother, Sarah Buchan: “The death of my mother is a suitable beginning for my story” (4). Even the pictures of his mother “became lifeless” (18). The absence of Lacy’s mother is certainly reinforced throughout the novel—he is twice referred to as a “motherless boy.” His aunt Myra says to “no one in

particular" in a room filled with Southern ladies, "A motherless boy becomes an unsatisfactory husband" (86). This comment, however, also describes George Posey, whose mother is completely self-obsessed, and effectively, not a mother at all. During his mother's burial ceremony, the Presbyterian minister, Mr. McBean, includes a prayer for Lacy, "the motherless boy" (104). Thus Tate creates a symbolic analogy between Lacy and George, both of whom eventually lose their parents (mother and father) by the end of the novel.

Although Lacy's eventual "parentless" circumstance matches what Daniel G. Hoffman describes as a typically American version of the folk hero, it is George Posey who fully embodies the description. In his "Caveat Lector" preface to the revised 1977 edition of The Fathers, Tate describes Posey, "who may have seemed to some readers like a villain," as a "modern romantic hero." In his Form and Fable in American Fiction, Hoffman discerns a pattern that is "strikingly different from most of the great heroes of myths or of Märchen [a German folk tale or fairy story]" (78). The American folk hero, as Hoffman describes him, bears an uncanny resemblance to George Posey:

His characteristic virtues are the qualities of youth: indomitable self-confidence, and a courage in his adaptation to the world which proves almost an heroic denial that tragedy can be possible for him.

In his easy progress from one role to another without ever being

compelled to accept the full commitment of spirit to any, the ever-popular image of the American folk hero exists on a psychological plane comparable to that of adolescent or pre-adolescent fantasy.

(79)

Kathryn Lee Seidel, in her book, The Southern Belle in the American Novel, describes The Fathers as, “a powerful, well-crafted novel in which the characters are enveloped in an atmosphere of tension generated by the contradictions inherent in the old order” (152). “Unlike his fellow Agrarian Stark Young,” she writes, “Tate perceives that the ethic of purity for southern women conflicts with the coquetry they are also encouraged to develop” (152).

George’s sister, Jane, with whom Lacy is in love, is “the epitome of the submissive woman—exceptionally quiet, a ‘normal’ girl who attracts men because of her docility” (Seidel 152). This subdued characterization of Jane might, however, be more typical than not. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown writes, “men alone were given the privilege of expressing their feelings openly” (226). Female honor in the Old South, according to Wyatt-Brown, “had always been the exercise of restraint and abstinence” (227).

The role of the females is strongest in the third section of the novel, entitled, "The Abyss." A pivotal event in the section is Jane's acceptance of a marriage proposal from Lacy's brother, Semmes Buchan. What follows is a well orchestrated scene in which Lacy is awakened from a pastoral dream by the sound of water "getting louder, or the water changing its tone, as if a flute had altered its timbre from lucid trickle to the whine of the hautboy" (223). Lacy soon identifies the sound as the scream of a panther "rising to a high wail" (223). After waking, Lacy navigates through the dark hall of the Posey house and finds Yellow Jim (George's and Jane's half-brother) "crouching" as if "he were shielding himself from an expected blow" (224). We learn that Jim has startled from her sleep George's reclusive hypochondriac mother, Jane Anne, who subsequently dies of fright; Jim then attacked George's sister, Jane, leaving her arm with "four shallow scratches about an inch apart and an inch long" (226). For Tate, all of this seems to have been instigated by three important factors: an inferior perception of blacks in Southern family romance; Lacy's sister and George's wife, Susan; and the historical truth of the event.

In the Southern family romance, the white mother and father assume dominant roles. Blacks, according to King, "occupied the role of permanently delegitimized and often literally illegitimate children" (36). The contradiction here exists in the perception of blacks as "childlike," yet an inclusion for them

into the Southern “family” would be to “soil the purity of the racial-social lineage,” which was, of course, the “infrastructure of the tradition” (36). Yellow Jim was described by Lacy as “the best Negro I ever saw; he was the most refined Negro, a gentleman in every instinct” (205). Although a legitimate member of the Posey family, Jim was sold by George in order to buy an impressive mare to ride in the annual jousting tournament. After three years, Jim has now returned to the Posey family as a runaway slave, but because of Jim’s deviant status, Jane assumed him to be a threat to her. “I am afraid of that man,” she tells Lacy (208). Misinterpreting Jim’s strong loyalty as her former nurse, she exclaims to Lacy, “He’s always handing me things!” (209). This remark had an operative effect on Jim, as he tells Lacy after the attack: “Seem lak I couldn’t do no good after I hearn Miss Jane say she’s afeared of me” (230). It is in Yellow Jim’s relationship to the rest of the Posey family—notably his being thought of by his half-brother as “liquid capital”—that Tate effectively presents his view of what Lewis Simpson calls Tate’s “awareness of the most essential aspect of the inner history of the South, its suppressed image of its existence” (43-44). According to Simpson, this suppressed “image” is “in contrast to its official image of itself as a harmonious community of benevolent masters and happy servants—as a tortured and unwilling community of white masters and black slaves” (44).

The second factor of the attack is Lacy's sister and George's wife, Susan. In appearance, Susan was "not beautiful, but she was lovely [...] she was like pear blossoms against a lingering winter landscape" (10, 11). Although married, she is presented as asexual and vapid; her child, in this male-dominated novel, is viewed by Lacy as an object that could just as well have been a worn-out boot. Lacy describes his niece as "a baby girl in whom I took no interest" (6). When Lacy and Susan inspect Jane after the attack, Susan's reaction is not quite as it should be:

Didn't I know what had happened? I thought I did, and I still think what I then thought, which was what any man would have thought. I suppose Susan's continued stare ought to have started a little doubt in my mind, had I been able to take it in, but nobody at that time could have seen in sister more than agitation and horror, emotions that certainly dominated me out of all observation. (225)

Susan is neither discussed nor described as a typical Southern belle; and as Lacy and Susan plot the disappearance of Yellow Jim, Lacy whispers to her, "You can't get out of it" (243).

Even the suspicion of rape, or anything close to it, was enough for Jane to be taken into the Church by the Mother Superior. As Father Monahan says to Lacy, "There's no other way. The girl can never be the bride of any man" (236).

But the reader, like Lacy, is uncertain of the actual events and their causes. Tate's skillfully drawn ambiguity in this emotionally charged situation is, according to Kathryn Seidel, a testament to his sensitivity in dealing with the image of the Southern lady:

This confusion on Tate's part is admirable in a way. While the racist explanation that blacks are animalistic and the sexist notion that women are 'asking for it' are both objectionable, Tate realizes (ahead of his time) that the reasons for acts of rape are many and complicated. [...] To his credit, Tate avoids the argument that all women wish to be raped, the central rationalization in the most popular novel of the 1930's, Gone with the Wind, in which a husband rapes his wife and 'she loves it.' (154)

The third factor of the attack on Jane Posey was the historical truth of the event. In October 1938, fellow Agrarian Donald Davidson wrote Tate a letter in response to his newly completed novel:

I was troubled somewhat by the final incident of Yellow Jim's doings, & what followed. I shall have to read it again to check this. But you seem here to play into the hands of our Yankee torturers just a little. I don't so much mind Susan's monstrous connivance. I do mind the (to me) unnecessary blood-kinship of Yellow Jim & his

own white folks. And certain other things, possibly—because they will be misunderstood. By the way, O'Donnell assures me that Yellow Jim did not rape the girl. I got the impression he did. Maybe you have been a little too subtle there for me to follow you. (Correspondence 318)

Tate promptly responds to Davidson with an October 6, 1938, letter:

As to Yellow Jim, I was perhaps led too far by certain actual circumstances pertaining to a negro in my grandfather's family. [...] He tried to assault one of the ladies after he had heard her say she was afraid of him. I followed that tale pretty literally because I knew that it contained a profound truth of the relation of the races. I wouldn't have felt so secure with an invented incident. (319)

Tate was dealing with the sensitive issue of female honor in the crucial attack scene of The Fathers. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, quoting Thomas R. Dew of Virginia, writes that "a woman ought not be touched 'even by the breath of suspicion,' and could never fully recover her good name once it was blemished" (294).

Tate reveals his distaste for a stringent "aristocratic" system of honor and stoicism with Jane's and Susan's fate. Jane, having her honor forever tainted, is reduced to a semi-comatose state, and apparently without alternatives, is hastily

admitted to the Church. Atha (Yellow Jim's mother) comments humorously on the tragic situation: "I ain't white folks, praise be de lawd" (243). And Susan, having gone mad, is simply a product, Cleanth Brooks writes, of the "transplantation" from "the family world of Pleasant Hill in Virginia to the Posey establishment in Georgetown" (American 179). "She succumbs," as a female without viable alternatives, "to what for her has become a radically disordered world" (American 179).

Thus the Southern family romance was a myth of sorts—an updated version of the ante-bellum "plantation legend." It was an intensified Freudian family romance that involved idealization of the father, adoration of the mother, and sentimentalization of slavery. In The Fathers, Tate does more than repeat those issues; he successfully demystifies the Southern family romance using a unique historical consciousness.

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CHAPTER THREE: HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Death greets us all without civility
And every color of the sea is cold,
Even as now, when sensual greens advance
Under the contrary waves' propensity
Toward desirable blues.

—John Peale Bishop, “A Subject of Sea Change”

We do need history, but quite differently from the jaded idlers in the garden of
knowledge, however grandly they may look down on our rude and
unpicturesque requirements.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, The Use and Abuse of History

PERCEIVING THE PAST

The Southern Renaissance, according to Richard King, was a time for writers and intellectuals after the late 1920s to “come to terms” not only with “inherited values of the Southern tradition,” but with the past itself (7). Authors such as Tate were involved in perceiving and dealing with the past during this period of regional socio-economic change in an effort to decide whether or not the past was of any use to them in the present.

“The prototypical historical consciousness of the modern period,” King writes, “is obsessed with the past and the precarious possibilities of its survival” (18-19). This obsession produced a uniquely Southern predicament in which the preoccupation with the past (and its survival) included manifestations of cultural modernism. Extreme ambivalence and ambiguity, according to King, defined the Southerner’s attitude toward the relationship between present and past. King interprets the historical consciousness at work during the Renaissance as a period of emerging “self-consciousness in Southern culture, a quasi-Hegelian process as it were” (8). During those years, and in novels such as The Fathers, the inherited traditions of the culture were not only “raised to awareness,” they were “demystified and rejected” (8).

While exploring the historical consciousness of the Southern family romance, King is quick to explain historical consciousness is not the same as “philosophy of history.” “William Faulkner,” King explains, “was neither an interesting thinker nor a profound philosopher” (8). Thus for King, the historical consciousness is not “a philosophically rigorous discussion of the ultimate constituents of historical reality, the driving force(s) of the historical process, or the telos of that process” (8). Although not a strictly philosophical position per se, it is a position leaning towards Freudian psychoanalysis:

For the way Freud went about his explorations of the psyche—his own and others’—exemplifies the difficult role of the historian and the vicissitudes of historical consciousness in general. As in Freud and his patients, so in the writers of the Renaissance: repetition and recollection, the allure of the family romance, the difficult attempt to tell one’s story and be freed of the burden of the past, and the desire to hold onto the fantasies of the past, were all powerfully at work. (8)

For King, there were three movements, or modes, of the historical consciousness which present analogies to the “unfolding” and “transformation” of memory in psychoanalysis. In both the unfolding and the transformation, the past, King writes, is “problematic” (18). The past is debilitating as it oscillates in

ones' memory from completely overpowering to completely absent. This burden, according to King, must be transferred from a perception of "mine" to "other." And when memory is in this stage of "otherness," King writes, "it is demystified and reassimilated after having been worked through" (18). It is "incorporated into a new synthesis" (18).

King ascribes particular literary texts and distinct characteristics of the historical consciousness and its stage of "reassimilation" to three distinct movements. The first, or beginning movement, includes Faulkner's Flags in the Dust and Light in August and William Alexander Percy's Lanterns on the Levee. It is a movement of historical consciousness focused on cultural melancholia embodied in "figures of death, at once idealized and feared because of their powerful hold over the present" (King 17). This initial consciousness, King writes, is the "monumental or reactionary form of historical consciousness" (17). It is not wrong in any "moral or substantive sense," because there are traditions one might wish to revitalize. It is wrong, though, "insofar as it desires the impossible—repetition—rather than the necessary recollection and working through of the past" (17).

The second movement includes Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! and Tate's The Fathers and "Ode to the Confederate Dead." This form of historical consciousness, King writes, "ends in a tragic confusion between past and

present, fantasy and reality" (18). The recollection involved in this stage of historical consciousness reveals "the violence and horror at the heart of the tradition itself, or its weakness and contradictions" (18).

In the third and final movement of the historical consciousness, the past, according to King, makes its final move to self-consciousness. It is a movement toward "a reconstitution of 'reality' after having carried through on a demystification of the family romance" (18). It incorporates the Southern tradition as previously conceived. Faulkner's "The Bear" and the writings of W. J. Cash and Lillian Smith are examples of this movement in the way that recollection triumphs over repetition. "Not only the impossibility," King explains, "but the undesirability of resurrecting the tradition become clear" (18). The third movement King describes is, essentially, a sort of transcendence:

The movement is from incapacitating repetition to recollection and then to self-consciousness, from identity to estrangement and back to incorporation at a higher level. [...] One awakens from the nightmare of history. (King 18)

The higher level, King explains, is clear of "Nietzsche's monumental and critical forms of historical consciousness" (18). It is a new form: an ironic form.

Although the dissection of historical consciousness in the writings of the Southern Renaissance is not a "philosophically rigorous discussion," King's

paradigm for the three movements of historical consciousness is clearly Friedrich Nietzsche's The Use and Abuse of History.

Hayden White proposes something similar to King's movements of historical consciousness in his book Metahistory. Discussing Alexis de Tocqueville, the eminent French political writer and statesman, White describes the two modes of history: aristocratic and democratic. The aristocratic historian tends to focus on a small number of individuals who control their own destinies. This mode of history, and its respective historian, is "insensitive to the force which general causes exert upon the individual, how they frustrate him and bend him to their will" (201). The democratic mode takes the opposite approach by discovering a larger meaning in the "mass of petty details which [the historian] discerns on the historical stage. He is driven to refer everything, not to individuals at all, but only to great, abstract, and general forces" (201). These two opposing modes, or ideas, of history are what White calls Formist and Mechanistic. They operate under two different modes of historical consciousness: Metaphorical and Metonymical. As the two forms of historical consciousness were found inadequate, Tocqueville proposed a third form, or as

White writes, it “was not a third form but rather a combination of the aristocratic and democratic forms” (202).

The necessity for a new form of historical consciousness applies to the Southern family romance, because difficulties arise with the interpretation of historical events. The Southern Renaissance has given us grand examples of the predicament that results when writers cannot find “the dominant causal principle in operation in the kind of society being studied” (202). In attempting to relieve the burden of the past, writers employed a monumental (or aristocratic) historical approach to lift the burden, but in reality that approach is the very burden itself. White explains,

If I want to explain the decline of an aristocratic society, I will not be enlightened very significantly by the application of that society’s own conception of the true nature of historical reality to the phenomena to be analyzed. [...] After all, Tocqueville’s problem was to explain to a displaced aristocratic class why it had been displaced, a problem which the spokesmen for that class had been unable to solve satisfactorily by the application of the mode of historical consciousness that was ‘natural’ to it by virtue of its ‘aristocratic’ nature. (202)

To reveal the true nature of a society, Tocqueville needed some way of “translating perceptions” from one social system into comprehensible terms to men of a completely different perspective and set of loyalties. This meant a meditation between two modes of consciousness. As White explains, “the ground on which this meditation had to be effected was Irony” (203).

The writers of the Renaissance faced a similar situation in a largely agrarian social system deeply rooted in a monumental historical consciousness. They needed some meditation or transformation that would allow them to view the past with an ironic detachment. As the social system was transforming itself—from agrarian to industrial in a conquered state of Reconstruction—the writers of the period, in an effort to relieve themselves of the burden of the past and its glorious hero-figures, must themselves transfer perception. This burden, as King writes, must shift from “mine” to “other.” Anything less will be a stationary position in one of King’s three movements of the historical consciousness. A transcending movement is needed: from the monumental to the ironic form of historic consciousness. Here, in the ironic form, the Southern family romance is “demystified and reassimilated” (18).

Of course, as King admits, Freud and Nietzsche play a large part in these ideas. The very conceit of the family romance, Freudian in principle with the oedipal power struggle between father and son, is also hugely Nietzschean in its

progress through a monumental historical consciousness. Hayden White writes, "Nietzsche noted [,] with considerably more insight than Freud, each generation feels a sense of juridical obligation to the ancestors that is much stronger than any emotional one" (366). This sense of obligation seems tailor-made for a Southern historical consciousness. And as Nietzsche observed, the ancestors could never, of course, be fully repaid (366-67).

NIETZSCHE AND THE FATHERS

In The Use and Abuse of History, Nietzsche writes that “man is always resisting the great and continually increasing weight of the past; it presses him down and bows his shoulders” (13). For any small bit of happiness to exist for a man, he must learn the “power of forgetting,” or more specifically, “the capacity of feeling ‘unhistorically’” (14). Man must, in other words, be more like the wild beast—unhistoric and experiencing each moment of life as an all-new phenomenon. Otherwise, according to Nietzsche, man “loses himself in the stream of becoming.”

For Nietzsche, “History is necessary to the living man in three ways: in relation to his action and struggle, his conservatism and reverence, his suffering and his desire for deliverance” (20). These three “relations” echo the three kinds of history: the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical (20). While comparing Nietzsche’s three kinds of history with King’s three movements of historical consciousness, one might expect to find them congruent. If this were true, then King’s reading of Tate’s The Fathers would situate it in what Nietzsche defines as “antiquarian history.” However, the categories are not, to King’s

credit, congruent. King's three movements of historical consciousness are, I believe, levels of progression within monumental history.

Nietzsche, in explicating monumental history, demonstrates why Southerners, in particular, are likely prey to the "preoccupation with the rare and classic" (22). "It is knowledge that the great thing existed and was therefore possible, and so may be possible again," Nietzsche writes (22). This is a falsehood, though:

[M]onumental history will never be able to have complete truth; it will always bring together things that are incompatible and generalize them into compatibility, will always weaken the differences of motive and occasion. [...] Sometimes there is no possible distinction between a 'monumental' past and a mythical romance, as the same motives for action can be gathered from the one world as the other. (Nietzsche 23)

With that in mind, Richard King's three movements of historical consciousness are an interesting delineation of monumental history. The result of this delineation is that once the past is identified, estranged, and incorporated, the historical consciousness becomes something new. It becomes something "ironic," in fact. King explicates this ironic historical consciousness:

[T]he unmasking of illusions and ambitions is not the exclusive province of the ironic consciousness. The monumental form of historical consciousness can demystify present realities in the name of past greatness. The Agrarians showed that quite well. And the critical view of the past exhibited in the work of the Regionalists, Cash and Smith, demystified past claims to achievement by showing their inadequacy measured against the needs of the present and future. What is different about the ironic historical consciousness is that it dissolves certainty, questions achievements, in the name of consciousness itself. A certain detachment becomes an ideology itself rather than a strategy in the service of some higher value. (288)

According to King, The Fathers is, surprisingly, something other than ironic historical consciousness. According to his description of the second movement of the historical consciousness, it is something that “ends in a tragic confusion between past and present, fantasy and reality” (18). I disagree with that assessment. I believe The Fathers is much more than a snapshot of a progression from monumental history to ironic historical consciousness. The

novel is, in fact, much more complex and complete than that.

In his essay, “The Past Alive in the Present,” Cleanth Brooks writes, “[A] true ‘historical consciousness’ includes an awareness of change and of the need to cope with it” (American Letters 223). He is referring to Major Buchan in The Fathers. The major, he writes, “entirely lacks such an awareness” (223). “Did he have,” Brooks asks, “as a southerner, a ‘peculiar historical consciousness’? My reading of the text of The Fathers makes it quite plain that he did not” (223). Readers must question the characters’ historical consciousness in The Fathers, I believe, if they are to fully understand the text. The text, however, denies any definitive answer—and Tate has reached well beyond what I call the “snapshot” approach.

In The Fathers, Tate has created a tableau vivant using Nietzsche’s three kinds of history. Rather than demonstrating a stasis of historical consciousness, the novel demonstrates the three kinds of history—monumental, antiquarian, and critical—as they are embodied by the characters themselves. Lacy as both a young boy and an old man; Major Buchan; Dr. John Buchan, the Major’s father; and George Posey—all embody a certain kind of history. This structure results

in a more complete assimilation of the past for the older Lacy, as he develops his own ironic detachment throughout the novel.

I agree with Richard King that the ironical historical consciousness is a way of forgetting. In his interpretation of what Nietzsche meant by learning to forget as a way of progressing beyond the monumental historical consciousness, King writes:

This movement of consciousness [from monumental to ironic] involves forgetting in two senses. First, it refers to the ability to forget the impossibility of ever doing anything new or anything different from the past. For as Nietzsche pointed out, if one fully remembers, he can never do anything. It has all been tried and accomplished—or failed—before. Second, forgetting involves wiping from memory the grievance against the past, a much more difficult accomplishment than the first sort of forgetting. (292)

By viewing his relatives as history types (consciously or unconsciously), the elder Lacy is able to accomplish the type of forgetting Nietzsche and King discuss. If one is unable to properly forget, the history of change “becomes a history of attempts to ‘get even’” (292). The process of successfully synthesizing the past is, according to both King and Nietzsche, not only a matter of forgetting, but also of learning.

Lacy Buchan seems to hold no real malice toward the past, only a true desire to learn from it. He opens his story with this explanation:

I cannot understand why [the Posey family] came out, in the old phrase, 'at the little end of the horn,' as they grievously did. That, perhaps more than anything else, is the reason why an unmarried old man, having nothing else to do, with a competence saved from the practice of medicine, thinks he has a story to tell. Is it not something to tell, when a score of people whom I knew and loved, people beyond whose lives I could imagine no other life, either out of violence in themselves or the times, or out of some misery or shame, scattered into the new life of the modern age where they cannot even find themselves? (5)

Lacy continues by asking a series of "whys": "Why cannot life change without tangling the lives of innocent persons? Why do innocent persons cease their innocence and become violent and evil in themselves that such great changes may take place?" (5). These questions, he says, are unanswerable. "I have a story to tell," Lacy says, "but I cannot explain the story" (5). In other words, at this moment in the narrative the elder Lacy does not understand why the past happened the way it did. He cannot explain it. He cannot change it. He can only tell his story. Lacy is ironic and subdued here, as he expresses his feelings

toward the events of his story; he is indeed what Nietzsche refers to as a “super-historical” man.

Like all super-historical men, Lacy is “against all merely historical ways of viewing the past, they are unanimous in the theory that the past and the present are one and the same, typically alike in all their diversity, and forming together a picture of eternally present imperishable types of unchangeable value and significance” (18-19).

Nietzsche’s three types of history—monumental, antiquarian, and critical—are embodied, respectively, by the young Lacy Buchan, Major Buchan, and George Posey. The elder Lacy, from a position of ironic detachment, uses his memory of these characters to demystify the Southern family romance and its endemic weakness and contradictions.

Beginning with Major Buchan, it is possible to see how Lacy, in the oedipal sense, strives to and succeeds in separating and sublimating his father with his choice for survival in the form of George Posey. Therefore, by rejecting Major Buchan, the young Lacy actively demonstrates not only the completion of this necessary psychological separation, but more importantly, a disavowal of what Nietzsche calls “antiquarian history.” For the Major, like George Posey,

seems to be lifted straight from the pages of Nietzsche's The Use and Abuse of History. Nietzsche describes the man of antiquarian history as a man

of conservative and reverent nature, who looks back to the origins of his existence with love and trust; through it he gives thanks for life. He is careful to preserve what survives from ancient days, and will reproduce the conditions of his own upbringing for those who come after him; thus he does life a service. The possession of his ancestors' furniture changes its meaning in his soul; for his soul is rather possessed by it. [...] The history of his town becomes the history of himself; he looks on the walls, the turreted gate, the town council, the fair, as an illustrated diary of his youth, and sees himself in it all [...]. (25-26)

Of course, this description also applies to Lacy's grandfather, another man of antiquarian history. As he rejects the Major, young Lacy likewise rejects his grandfather. Lacy remembers that his grandfather suddenly disappeared after consoling him in the death of his brother, Semmes Buchan, and advising him on the irreverent nature of George Posey. Lacy was then utterly alone, he remembers, "I have nobody to guide me now" (269). "My grandfather was dead," Lacy says abruptly, "dead as a herring. I started for the bend of the road, thinking only that far" (269). He remembers the death of his father at the end of

the novel with much of the same detached tone. However, as Nietzsche writes, there is some value to the antiquarian history: “[T]he greatest value of this antiquarian spirit of reverence lies in the simple emotions of pleasure and content that it lends to the drab, rough, even painful circumstances of a nation’s or individual’s life [...]” (26). Although the elder Lacy would most likely agree in the value of an antiquarian historical consciousness, stark limitations become apparent via the contradictions of the mythical Southern family romance. The antiquarian sense “of a man, a city or a nation has always a very limited field. Many things are not noticed at all; the others are seen in isolation, as through a microscope” (27).

After the death of Major Buchan, the elder Lacy admits to (in the revised 1977 edition) venerating the memory of George Posey “more than the memory of any man” (307). This veneration is important when considering the fact that George embodies Nietzsche’s idea of critical history. The elder Lacy certainly learns about forgetting (becoming unhistorical, as Nietzsche suggests) from George Posey and from his memory of George as a man critical of history. Nietzsche describes the men who are such critical historians as “dangerous” to themselves and to others. Condemning the errors of those before us, attempting to “shake off this chain” as George does, leads to “a conflict between our innate, inherited nature and our knowledge, between a stern new discipline and an

ancient tradition; and we plant a new way of life, a new instinct, a second nature, that withers the first" (Nietzsche 29). "Though we condemn the errors," Nietzsche writes, "we cannot escape the fact that we spring from them" (29). The elder Lacy understands this; and I believe he demonstrates this fact by choosing to venerate the memory of George as he (Lacy) rides off to rejoin the Civil War.

If it were not for the catalyst of George Posey and the War, young Lacy Buchan would have become a victim of monumental history, like Faulkner's Quentin Compson. With Pleasant Hill in fast decline, and an impatient temperament Lacy ascribes to being a child "whose discipline is incomplete" (Fathers 44), Lacy could have easily looked to the past for a "model of imitation" (Nietzsche 23). Young Lacy, like Quentin, would not have understood that monumental views of history are half-truths at best:

Whole tracts of [history] are forgotten and despised; they flow away like a dark unbroken river, with only a few gaily colored islands of fact rising above it. [...] Monumental history lives by false analogy; it entices the brave to rashness, and the enthusiastic to fanaticism by its tempting comparisons. (Nietzsche 23)

Richard Law, in his article entitled "'Active Faith' and Ritual in The Fathers," writes, "The tenuous connection between the events to be told—the actual events in which the narrator, Dr. Buchan, had some part as a youth—and

his present remembrance of them in the telling of the story is the governing concept [...] of the entire narrative" (350). Law sees (correctly) something extraordinary in Tate's development of memory and historical consciousness: "The present memory, then, is a new thing and, in a sense, a made thing, like a poem, although the making is not conscious. [. . .] In other words, through his narrator and the unfolding of his tale, Tate has tried to dramatize the process by which a culture molds the forms of perception and memory" (351).

What Tate has done in The Fathers, with Lacy's use of memory and ironic detachment, is unique and undervalued. Tate was able to not only demystify the Southern family romance, outlining the inadequacies and contradictions within the social structure, but also to reject any mode of historical consciousness other than the ironic.

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CHAPTER FOUR: DEMYSTIFICATION

The little cousin is dead, by foul subtraction,
A green bough from Virginia's aged tree,
And none of the country kin like the transaction,
Nor some of the world of outer dark, like me.

—John Crowe Ransom, "Dead Boy"

The historical narrative does not, as narrative, dispel false beliefs about the past, human life, the nature of the community, and so on; what it does is test the capacity of a culture's fictions to endow real events with the kinds of meaning that literature displays to consciousness through its fashioning of patterns of "imaginary" events.

—Hayden White, The Content of the Form

THE MODERN ROMANTIC DILEMMA

The inspection and eventual demystification of the family romance had much to do with what Tate calls the “modern romantic dilemma”: the separation between thought and feeling, intellect and emotion, and tradition and energy. These contradictions were not entirely unique to the twentieth century, Tate argues; these were issues of the ante-bellum south as well. As King writes, the modern romantic dilemma was a “central concern” for Tate’s entire body of work (101). In his two biographies—of Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis—and especially his novel, The Fathers, Tate directs attention to the modern romantic dilemma not only to expose what he considered the fatal flaw of the South, but also to reject the myth of the Southern family romance.

Regarding the two biographies, Louis Rubin, Jr., writes: “Tate had already decided what Jackson’s and Davis’s lives were supposed to mean before he began the books, and mainly he worked at fitting the biographical material into his thesis (98). Hayden White, Professor of the History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in his books, Metahistory and Content of the Form, argues that this approach is common in all professional

historiography. White discusses Roland Barthes' essay, "Le discours de l'histoire," as it relates to narrative in contemporary historical theory:

Barthes purported to demonstrate that "as we can see, simply from looking at its structure, and without having to invoke the substance of its content, historical discourse is in its essence a form of ideological elaboration, or to put it more precisely, an imaginary elaboration," [...] [Barthes] finds it paradoxical that "narrative structure, which was originally developed within the cauldron of fiction (in myths and first epics)," should have become, in traditional historiography, "at once the sign and the proof of reality." (Content 36)

With that in mind, it is easy to believe Rubin's opinion that although The Fathers is fiction, "it is far more profound history than the two biographies" (99). Rubin asserts that both biographies are polemical works: "Tate is arguing for his modern interpretation of southern history, not trying to uncover that history" (98). Tate's modern interpretation includes an acknowledgement of the modern romantic dilemma—of which both Jackson and Davis seem to be obvious victims. Radcliffe Squires writes in Allen Tate, Davis also had a certain "emotional infantilism" similar to the condition found in many of Herman Melville's characters (99). According to Squires, "Tate blames [Jefferson Davis

for] in large part (he was reserving a share of the blame of Robert E. Lee) the loss of what he saw as good in the antebellum South" (98).

Tate began, and then abandoned, a biography of Robert E. Lee. According to Rubin, Tate did not finish the project because he eventually discerned qualities of Lee's character which "represented many of the elements that rendered the South inadequate to prosecute its war for independence successfully" (310). These qualities, which are effectively mirrored by Major Lewis Buchan in The Fathers, were Lee's "scrupulosity, his concern for personal honor [...] and his unwillingness to enforce his will upon others [...]" (310). These were qualities that were "emblematic of the aristocratic Virginia virtues," Rubin writes, "but what the Confederacy had needed to survive was the single-minded will to win at all costs, or else the society that made possible the exercise of those patrician virtues was doomed" (310).

Tate's view of the proper function of history, as Richard Gray writes in The Literature of Memory, is not to demonstrate "'the scientific ideal of...truth-in-itself' but rather a 'cultural truth which might win the allegiance of the people'" (83). In a traditional society, history is a "repository of dramatized value," and represents a "distillation of the best possibilities, the ideals, of the

group—as, say, the Homeric vision of the past does, or the narratives of Herodotus” (83). Tate uses myth to represent possibilities by presenting it as “an extension of fact rather than a denial of it,” thus deliberately and explicitly recomposing history (83). Gray writes:

That is to say, his purpose in describing the plantation South in the way he does is not to present a complete distortion of the historical past, but to articulate what might have happened if its best energies had been realized. As Tate never tires of pointing out, the Old South was comparatively near to the feudal prototype; and all he does in his imaginative work, consequently, is to develop this proximity into identity so as to supply his readers with a corrective legend—an argument in narrative and metaphor for the principles his own generation has betrayed. (83)

I believe Gray is partially correct, but it is also true that Tate’s effort to demystify the Southern family romance provides the reader a glimpse at the integral flaws of the Old South.

George Posey, a vital component to the destruction of the Buchan family—and in a metaphorical sense, the Old South at large—did exist and infiltrate the family. Tate labels George as a “modern romantic hero” in the preface to the revised 1977 edition of *The Fathers*; and like Tate’s version of

Jefferson Davis, George Posey was a man caught in the modern romantic dilemma. George's infiltration of the traditional family and society was inevitable. The Buchans' most reliable servant, Coriolanus, points out to Lacy in the novel, "Set still, boy, set still. Ain't nothin' you can do about hit" (47).

In the preface to the 1977 edition of The Fathers, Tate describes Major Lewis Buchan, the figure-head of the family, as "the classical hero, whose hubris destroys him." The society itself, then, may be seen as destroyed by its hubris. For the Major, the rest of the Buchan family, and the Old South at large, it was hubris and the accompanying lack of historical imagination that permitted George, the modern romantic hero, to bring about, as Lacy says, "changes that would otherwise have taken two generations" (117). In a November 19, 1938, letter to John Peale Bishop, Tate reacts to critics' wonderment at how a staunch Agrarian Southerner could promote the Old South as a fitting society while simultaneously criticizing its limitations:

Well, I see the limitations beside the great cultures of the past; its virtues in the limited perspective I've mentioned. For some reason Northern critics always assume that a Southerner's awareness of the South's historic defects means his acknowledgement of the superiority of the North. It doesn't follow! (Republic 146)

It is right to assume that George Posey did not cause the destruction of the Old South; he was merely a catalyst. He was also an embodiment of the modern romantic dilemma, used by Tate to demystify the Southern family romance. It is not by accident that George's father dies when George is very young, leaving him, as King explains, without "anyone to master his energies and give them form" (108). George's heaviest burden in the romantic dilemma seems to be the separation between tradition and energy. As a fatherless man—without a guide to tradition—George is utterly alone. He is full of energy, yet lacking entirely of tradition. During his brief visitation, Lacy's dead grandfather describes George as "alone like a tornado" (Fathers 268). Full of energy, but without the proper ceremony and tradition to channel it, "His one purpose is to whirl and he brushes aside the objects in his way" (268). George's wife, Susan, eventually goes mad from her immersion into a traditionless void. We should think of George as the quintessential modern man when Lacy's grandfather relates his opinion that, "The only expectancy that [George] shares with humanity is the pursuing grave, and the thought of extinction overwhelms him because he is entirely alone" (267-8). His fundamentally "modern" condition here—his separation from a culture—is something Nietzsche estimates in the soul of all modern men. In The Use and Abuse of History, Nietzsche writes:

The modern man carries inside him an enormous heap of indigestible knowledge-stones that occasionally rattle together in his body, as the fairy tale has it. And the rattle reveals the most striking characteristic of these modern men—the opposition of something inside them to which nothing external corresponds; and the reverse. (31)

George Posey is presented throughout The Fathers as a tragic figure, neither wholly good nor wholly bad, and operating under the spell of impulsive, yet good intention. Unlike the Buchan family, who lacked any sort of imagination at all, George “did everything,” Lacy says, “by surprise” (24). This includes, of course, selling his half-brother, Yellow Jim, and shooting Lacy’s brother, Semmes Buchan. Regarding these unfortunate events, Lacy’s all-knowing grandfather observes that “it was not the intention” of George to kill Semmes, “he does evil because he has not the will to do good” (267). A lack of will is ostensibly George’s tragic fortune. According to the grandfather, this sort of tragic character is nothing new:

It was Jason’s misfortune [like George’s we may assume in this allegory] to care only for the Golden Fleece and the like impossible things, while at the same time getting himself involved with the

humanity of others, which it was not his intention but rather of his very nature to betray. (268)

However, depending on which edition of The Fathers is read, George may or may not be left with a tragic onus.

In the first edition, published in 1938, the last thing we hear about George is, "He cantered away into the dark" (306). Lacy then rides back to the Civil War and announces to himself: "If I am killed it will be because I love him [George] more than I love any man" (306). Cleanth Brooks instigated a revision to the original ending because, as Cleanth writes, he was stricken with a "failure to understand" Lacy's final attitude toward George Posey (Vinh 259). Cleanth writes in a June 9, 1975, letter:

But you do put a heavy load on your reader's powers of comprehension; hence, my plea for a little more help with the last sentences. That is to say, Lacy is writing his account of the events many years later, and he has come to understand so much of what is essentially wrong with George—has isolated so clearly George's part in the family disaster—that the reader, unless he is very discerning indeed, may find it hard to believe that Lacy now, a half-century later, can still say "I love him more than I love any man." (259)

The 1977 edition contains the revised ending in which George does canter away into the dark, but then Lacy informs the reader of a certain propitious turn of events:

I went back and stayed until Appomattox four years later. George could not finish it; he had important things to do that I knew nothing about. As I stood by his grave in Holyrood cemetery fifty years later I remembered how he restored his wife and small daughter and what he did for me. What he became in himself I shall never forget. Because of this I venerate his memory more than the memory of any other man. (306-7)

In this passage, it appears that George, unlike Major Buchan, was able to change. He “restored his wife and small daughter.” And what did he do for Lacy? Knowing that Lacy is a retired medical doctor, it seems likely that George, ever the sagacious business man, financed young Lacy’s education. This benevolence is not entirely out of character, for Lacy does, after all, venerate George’s memory for what George eventually “became in himself.”

An heroic view of George is supported by Tate’s “Caveat Lector” preface to the 1977 edition: George does indeed become a “modern romantic hero.” In the process, Major Buchan and the Southern family romance are destroyed and demystified.

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE BUCHAN FAMILY

The destruction of the Buchan family culminates with the suicide of Major Buchan and the ruin of Pleasant Hill at the hands of Yankee soldiers. In his introduction to the 1960 edition of The Fathers, Arthur Mizener writes:

The central tension of The Fathers, like that of its structure, is a tension between the public and the private life, between the order of civilization always artificial, imposed by discipline, and at the mercy of its own imperfections, and the disorder of the private life, always sincere, imposed upon by circumstances, and at the mercy of its own impulses. (xi)

This tension is fundamental to Tate's demystification of the Southern family romance. The Buchan family represents a society wherein the public life and the private life are essentially one form; in turn, the Buchan family, is "always artificial, imposed by discipline, and at the mercy of its own imperfections" (xi). In stark contrast, the Posey family is entirely personal: "always sincere, imposed upon by circumstances, and at the mercy of its own impulses" (xi).

It is important to note, however, that this tension is not set between two utterly opposed structural systems; it is not a battle between North and South.

The Posey family has its origins in the Old South, as does the Buchan clan. As C. Hugh Holman writes in his essay, "The Fathers and the Historical Imagination," the Posey family has "lost the sense of community, family, and oneness together with the traditions and the customs that bind a family into a functioning unit" (Literary 89). With his unique view of the tensions between the Buchan family and Posey family, Lacy becomes a spectator in a uniquely American-style Bildungsroman. Lacy observes both sides, both of which

constitute symbolic statements that have an historical validity, an imaginative aesthetic validity, and a thematic validity when viewed as aspects of the public or private life, as well as a moral validity. [...] They stand in one sense at the far end of a spectrum from allegory and yet do not lose their quality of suggesting interpretations at a variety of levels of meaning. (89-90)

Holman's analysis dovetails with Mizener's, which contends that the Buchans represent the "static condition a society reaches when, by slow degrees, it has disciplined all personal feeling to custom so that the individual no longer exists apart from the ritual of society and the ritual of society expresses all the feelings the individual knows" (xi). Mizener also describes the Posey family as representatives of "the forces that exist—because time does not stand still—both

within and without the people who constitute a society, that will destroy the discipline of its civilization and leave the individual naked and alone" (xi).

Indeed it may be said that those veritable "forces," represented by the Posey family, are the eventual victors in the situation. Tate presents the Posey family, George especially, as the not-too-distant future. They are the survivors that way. And Lacy, as a spectator who is "straddling two ages" is a survivor as well (Fathers 134). "If a traditional society," Richard Law writes,

is one which possesses an adequate religious "myth," the symbols, forms, and rituals of which pervade the community and the individual consciousness at every level, and if the gift which myth bestows is not consciousness, per se, but a capacity to act, then one test of the adequacy of such a myth would be its power to galvanize community members into heroic action and self-sacrifice on a scale and intensity comparable, say, to the struggle for Southern independence. (349)

The Buchan family, representing the "best" of traditional society could not act, even when faced with a self-forgetful opportunity. In "Religion and the Old South," Tate writes: "The South did not achieve that inward conviction of destiny that empowers societies no less than individuals to understand their

position and to act from inner necessity: we do nothing without symbols and we cannot do the right thing with the wrong symbol" (Essays 569).

Through the eccentric character of Jarman Posey, Tate tells us that the situation for the Old South amounted to this: "Time—time! Our great enemy, sir" (233). Time does triumph with the destruction of Buchan family.

Destruction was inevitable; Tate knew this, for The Fathers is a Scott-like conflict; and Allen Tate, like Sir Walter Scott, "feels a strong affection for the dying old culture, but also like Scott, he sees that it must go, no matter how much he may dislike the new" (Literary 92). Richard King writes, "In the world of Lewis Buchan time has been frozen, almost abolished, and replaced by the presence of tradition" (107). Tate demonstrates that an inability to face chance—a lack of historical imagination—is indeed folly.

Lacy's cousin, John Semmes, understands the transformations taking place during the crisis of the Civil War. He tells Lacy, "Damn it, Lacy, it's just men like your pa who are the glory of the Old Dominion, and the surest proof of her greatness, that are going to ruin us. They can't understand that reason and moderation haven't anything to do with the crisis" (124). Lacy explains the problem with living in such a timeless state of tradition: "People living in formal societies, lacking the historical imagination, can imagine for themselves only a timeless existence: they themselves never had any origin anywhere and they can

have no end, but will go on forever" (183). Lacy correlates this timeless state of tradition to his mother's ritual of dishwashing after dinner every night:

If this little ritual of utility—not very old to be sure but to my mother immemorial—had been discredited or even questioned, she would have felt that the purity of womanhood was in danger, that religion and morality were jeopardized, and that infidels had wickedly asserted that the State of Virginia (by which she meant her friends and kin) was not the direct legatee of the civilization of Greece and Rome. (184)

A lack of historical imagination leads to Major Buchan's suicide when confronted with the possibility of losing Pleasant Hill to the Yankees. It is a dramatic and inevitable scene once the Major is given a half-hour to evacuate the house. Mr. Wiggins, a family servant, tells the story to Lacy and George:

"When the officer says I'll give you half an hour, the major looked at him. You know how the major is," he said in a pure voice. His eyes shone. "The major looked at him. He held himself up and, Mr. Posey, you know how he is when he don't like folks. Polite. That's what he was. He was polite to that Yankee. He come down to the bottom step and said, 'There is nothing that you can give to me, sir,' and walked back into the house." (305)

How else could the Major have acted in this situation? “When he didn’t come out after half an hour,” Mr. Wiggins continues, “the officer waited a while and went up and knocked at the door. He went in with some of his men and they brought the major out and laid him on the grass” (305).

In the world of Major Buchan, the political and the domestic were entwined inseparably. It was, as Lacy explains, “the way men had of seeing themselves at that time: as in all highly developed societies the line marking off the domestic from the public life was indistinct” (125). The Major, therefore, perceived the threat from the Union troops as ultimately devastating. It was, indeed, a matter of honor. Richard King writes that when faced with such a crisis, “Major Buchan is helpless” and “In terms of the larger world, he is not very smart” (107). This statement seems to ring true, but in terms of demystifying the Southern family romance, the Major’s actions are absolutely necessary.

Major Buchan’s suicide demonstrates the eventuality of a man who lacks entirely an historical imagination. He is, in fact, helpless when faced with a crisis wrought from the cultural transmutation of time. “It is the glory—and the fatal weakness—of the world of Major Buchan,” King writes, “that it cannot imagine itself historically; that is, it takes itself as eternal” (107).

During its literary Renaissance, the South was caught between two worlds. As an underdeveloped periphery of the nation, the South was trapped between the old and the new. The “ramshackle structure,” as Richard King terms it, was flanked by two traditions as well—regional and national (26). It was in this context that, during the 1930's, Allen Tate and the Agrarian group engaged in an intellectual reassessment of the South. In Memoirs and Opinions, Tate described the situation as a “double focus, a looking two ways, which gave a special dimension to the writings of our school” (33). This sort of “double focus” helped Tate, and other Southerners, address contradictory issues in the Southern family romance. The issues of slavery and monumental historical consciousness had to be scrutinized and rejected in a time of world-wide economic depression.

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CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

I knew that I had achieved my full measure of darkness.

—Lacy Buchan

The times have changed. Why do you make a fuss

For privilege when there's no law of form?

Who of our kin was pusillanimous,

A fine bull galloping into a storm?

Why, none; unless you count it arrogance

To cultivate humility in pride, to look but casually and half-askance

On boots and spurs that went a devil's ride.

—Allen Tate, "Sonnets of the Blood"

FAILURE AND THE FATHERS: A FEW OPINIONS

Richard King characterizes the Southern family romance not as an explanation for the Renaissance, but as “part of the description of what the Renaissance was about—an attempt to come to terms with that ‘structure of feeling’” (“Cultural” 713). And according to King, The Fathers is “firmly in the tradition of the family romance” (Southern 110). In this respect, the novel is certainly successful, for The Fathers does lucidly explore and demystify Freudian and Nietzschean elements of the family romance and historical consciousness.

Although Tate’s novel is indubitably a successful Southern family romance, King labels it as “cerebral and without passion,” in the way the narrative consistently skirts aberrant and violent behavior (Southern 109). He also claims “the wider fault of the novel” is that “the culture which Tate depicts can hardly bear the weight of significance he claims for it. [...] It is difficult, for instance, to take seriously the jousting tournaments which were favorite pastimes of the Virginia gentry” (Southern 109).

Despite King’s sometimes shallow assessment of Tate’s novel (after all, it comprises a shockingly inadequate six pages), his final comment on the Agrarian’s attempt to resolve the conflict between past and present is entirely

accurate: “The Southern past had proven much more complex and more divided against itself than Tate or the others had initially thought” (Southern 111).

When studying Allen Tate’s contribution to the Southern Renaissance, one does not immediately discover his novel, The Fathers. First, there is Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” a poem, as Louis Rubin, Jr., writes, that will be read when the famous Agrarian symposium, I’ll Take My Stand, is “no more than a footnote in American cultural history” (160). Then there are Tate’s essays which span more than forty years. George Core proposes that at least “a half dozen” of Tate’s essays will endure as some of the most important contributions of the Fugitives and Agrarians (American 303). And finally, there is Tate’s novel, The Fathers. Should this fine novel play a subsidiary role to what is considered Tate’s more prominent contributions? Cleanth Brooks writes a post script to Tate in a June 9, 1975, letter, mentioning the potential legacy of the novel:

p.s. I must not close this letter, however, without writing my more and more confident prediction that The Fathers is going to turn out to be one of the great novels of the twentieth century. It contains, in [my] opinion, the finest intellectual analysis of the clash of cultures in the War Between the States—you show how it was truly

a conflict between states of mind—and yet the ideas are never allowed to “violate” the human drama. (260)

John L. Stewart, author of The Burden of Time, was a scholar whom Tate came to nearly despise for his interpretation of Tate’s life and work. Stewart wrote this about The Fathers:

This is a splendid novel. Though it is not as widely read as it should be, it is well and properly esteemed among those who know it. If Tate had managed a little more skillfully the fusion to the narrative of the critically important explanations of the Major’s bafflement, of Susan’s disintegration, and of Posey’s lack of the will to do good—if, in short, he had brought a little nearer to perfection the unity of symbolism and naturalism, The Fathers would belong among the very best American novels. (340)

Arthur Mizener, in his introduction to the 1960 edition of the novel, wrote that The Fathers “is in fact the novel Gone With the Wind ought to have been” (ix). It is a novel, he writes,

with an action of a certain magnitude that satisfies the demands of probability and is, at the same time, a sustained, particularized, and unified symbol. Because it is, its meaning is not merely a lyric and personal response to experience but takes on the full, public life

that only a probable action can give, as George Posey's self could not, as Major Buchan's did. (xix)

Mizener ends his introduction by stating the highest compliment yet written for the novel: "It is an imitation of life" (xix).

Walter Sullivan, in Death by Melancholy, writes that the Civil War "is the pregnant moment in southern history, that instant which contains within its own limits a summation of all that has gone before, an adumbration of the future" (69). He claims (correctly) Tate used the "most significant image of all" — The Civil War — "to convey an entire civilization and the moral code on which that civilization was constructed" (69).

Tate's true reaction to the decidedly lukewarm popular and critical reception of his novel is impossible to know. However, in a June, 1931, letter to John Peale Bishop, Tate writes:

I think that Southerners are apt to identify the great political and social failure with their characters, or if they are poets and concerned with themselves, with their own failure. The older I get the more I realize that I set out about ten years ago to live a life of failure, to imitate, in my own life, the history of my people. For it was only in this fashion, considering the circumstances, that I could completely identify myself with them. We all have an instinct—if

we are artists particularly—to live at the center of some way of life
and to be borne up by its innermost significance. (Republic 34)

Of course, Tate did not live a life of failure as he predicted. Thirty-nine years after its initial publication, The Fathers was revised and reissued by Tate, demonstrating the demand and the necessity for this integral work of the Southern Renaissance.

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