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# Allen Tate and The Catholic Revival

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*Tate's Catholic  
imagination  
little studied.*

The conversion of southern poet Allen Tate to Roman Catholicism is a well-known episode in modern American literary history.<sup>1</sup> His countercultural defense of what Lewis P. Simpson once called "authoritarian Christianity"<sup>2</sup> has so fascinated Tate's interpreters that few have neglected to speculate on the significance of the Catholic tradition in the formation of his life and artistic imagination. Yet while the "southern mode of the imagination"<sup>3</sup> in Tate's work has received extensive scrutiny, the Catholic mode of imagination in his writings has been left largely to conjecture. With the exception of studies by Paul Giles, Robert Dupree, and Robert H. Brinkmeyer,<sup>4</sup> forays into the subject have proved tentative and unconvincing.

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to express thanks to Mrs. Helen H. Tate for granting permission to quote from the unpublished writings of Allen Tate, and to Father Walter J. Ong, S.J., for making his unpublished correspondence with Allen Tate available for examination.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis P. Simpson, "The Southern Republic of Letters and *I'll Take My Stand*," *A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years*, ed. William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 91.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Allen Tate, "A Southern Mode of the Imagination," *Essays of Four Decades* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1968), 577-92.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Paul Giles, *American Catholic Arts and Fictions: Culture, Ideology, Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Robert S. Dupree, *Allen Tate and the Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983). Robert H. Brinkmeyer, *Three Catholic Writers of the Modern South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985). See also Thomas Daniel Young, "Religion and Literature," *Mississippi Quarterly* 39 (Spring 1986): 126-32.

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“No one,” as Marquette University critic Joseph Schwartz makes clear, “has handled [Tate’s Catholicism] in a satisfactory way as yet.”<sup>5</sup>

One of the “lost-generation” literary converts to Catholicism, Allen Tate entered the church in 1950, after a twenty-year quest for a satisfying faith which led him far beyond the culturally dominant evangelical Protestantism of his geographic region. Critical of the dehumanizing trends of modern life, he sought in the Catholic tradition the solution to the intellectual and social problems of secular modernity. As poetic modernist, Southern Agrarian social theorist, and formalist New Critic, Tate appropriated Catholic themes, hoping to synthesize traditional Catholicism and aesthetic modernism into a Christian humanism revitalizing contemporary culture. Though he is primarily remembered today for his part in the Southern Literary Renaissance, at the height of his career Tate aspired to the role of the American Catholic critic whose work would embody the highest standards of his craft and witness to the moral authority of his adopted faith.

*Sought synthesis of Catholicism and aesthetical modernism.*

The famous convert Jacques Maritain believed that Tate would “serve as a guide to many among the intellectual youth of America,”<sup>6</sup> just as the priest-critic William Lynch reportedly thought him “one of the most Catholic minds in America,” the possessor of an “extraordinary vocation” in the church.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, shortly after Tate’s conversion, Jesuit scholar Walter Ong judged him “an exceedingly zealous and inspiringly humble Catholic,” who would undoubtedly contribute to the republic of American Catholic letters.<sup>8</sup> Fellow convert Marshall McLuhan even prophesied that Tate’s would be “the nearest American equivalent to Newman’s conversion.”<sup>9</sup>

*Conversion sparked great expectations.*

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Schwartz, letter to author, 26 October 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Maritain to Msgr. R. Fontenelle, 24 August 1952, *Exiles and Fugitives: The Letters of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, Allen Tate, and Caroline Gordon*, ed. John M. Dunaway (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 104.

<sup>7</sup> Caroline Gordon to Jacques Maritain, 18 October 1956, *Exiles and Fugitives*, 62. William Lynch, letter to Allen Tate, 3 February 1953. Published with permission of the Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries.

<sup>8</sup> Walter J. Ong, letter to Wilfred M. Mallon, 9 May 1953.

<sup>9</sup> Marshall McLuhan, letter to Allen Tate, 2 October 1951. Published with permission of the Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries.

Allen Tate, however, was no Newman. As the English cardinal himself put it, "Saints are not literary men."<sup>10</sup> While preparing his biography of Tate during the 1960s, Radcliffe Squires wrote to the subject of his study informing him that "I don't know what to do about your relationship to the Roman Catholic Church."<sup>11</sup> The fact is, curiously, that neither did Tate. Naturally at home in the cosmopolitan world of literature and plagued by chronic personal problems that led him through three marriages, the convert Tate lived a life which, according to one observer, was "a poor advertisement for the Catholic faith."<sup>12</sup> Though he endeavored to give currency to the Catholic tradition in contemporary literature, Tate was never recognized as an exemplary practitioner of his faith nor honored as a model of the ideal Catholic writer. Unlike that of John Henry Newman, the iconic convert of the previous century, Allen Tate's Catholic experience was one of gain and loss.

Some have suggested that Tate's self-confessed "problems as a Catholic writer"<sup>13</sup> stemmed from awkward attempts to compensate for his failed experiment in Agrarianism and his lifelong engagement with modernism.<sup>14</sup> While these theories have merit, Tate's complex relationship to Catholicism can best be described as the consequence of a fateful affiliation with the Catholic Literary Revival, the early twentieth-century flowering of Catholic intellectual life that many thought analogous to the cultural achievements of the Christian Middle Ages. Known also as the Catholic Intellectual Renaissance, the wave of renewed interest among Western intellectuals in the Catholic religion stimulated a spirit of confidence within the Catholic community that characterized the church's experience for nearly half a century. According to a sympathetic critic, the

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<sup>10</sup> Newman, quoted in Brian Martin, *John Henry Newman: His Life and Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 156.

<sup>11</sup> Radcliffe Squires, letter to Allen Tate, 2 August 1967. Radcliffe Squires Papers, Washington University Libraries, St. Louis.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Sullivan, *Allen Tate: A Recollection* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 110.

<sup>13</sup> Allen Tate to Robert Fitzgerald, 1 March 1952, *Exiles and Fugitives*, 101.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Richard Foster, "Allen Tate: From the Old South to Catholic Orthodoxy," *The New Romanticism: A Reappraisal of the New Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), 107-29. Daniel Joseph Singal, "The Divided Mind of Allen Tate," *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 232-60. Reed Whittemore, "The Secret Wisdom of Allen Tate," *Six Literary Lives: The Shared Impiety of Adams, London, Sinclair, Williams, Dos Passos, and Tate* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 132-212.

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Catholic Revival sought to foster “a new synthesis of Christian faith and life, a Christian humanism, rooted in and continuous with the tradition of the church, but responsive to the modern world.”<sup>15</sup> Tate identified strongly with the movement’s vision of a new Christendom and viewed his religious criticism as contributing to the advance of a revived Catholic humanism addressing the needs of the modern world. The mid-century entrance of U.S. Catholicism into mainstream American culture, however, subverted the Revival’s drive for a distinctively Catholic cultural renaissance. With his spiritual fortunes tied to those of the Catholic Revival, Tate was displaced by historical forces transforming the nature of the modern Catholic mission and identity.

This essay will argue that Tate’s attraction to the values of the Catholic Revival contributed to his acceptance of the Catholic religion as well as, ironically, to his eventual sense of alienation from the church. It will endeavor to assess the impact of the international Revival on Tate’s religious imagination and his insecure place in the twentieth-century community of American Catholic intellectuals. Shaped by the Revival’s unique history, from its rise in the anti-Catholic climate of the 1920s to its dissipation in post-World War II pluralism, Tate’s troubled Catholic quest sheds light on the dilemma of the intellectual convert and the crisis of the lay apostolate in an era of shifting symbols, fleeting loyalties, and moral uncertainty.

### *“A Condition of the Spirit”*

A salient feature of the Catholic Revival was its negative assessment of modern culture.<sup>16</sup> Advocating a creative confrontation between the church and world, it nevertheless opposed many of the social and philosophical currents coterminous with modernity. In fact, it was a commonplace of the Catholic Revival that the world produced by the sixteenth century had unleashed chaotic trends in modern thought and destructive tendencies in modern political life. This antagonism toward modernity, registered most clearly in the church’s official condemnation of theological modernism, did not, however, *et cetera* (ugurate a stagnant period in Catholic thought. As his-

*Catholic Revival resisted modernity.*

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<sup>15</sup> Dolores Elsie Brien, “The Catholic Revival Revisited,” *Commonweal* 106 (21 December 1979): 714.

<sup>16</sup> Arnold Sparr, *To Promote, Defend, and Redeem: The Catholic Literary Revival and the Cultural Transformation of American Catholicism, 1920-1960* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1990), 51-83.

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torian James Hitchcock has observed, the caricature of early twentieth-century Catholicism as timid and inane fails to reckon with the significant number of elite intellectuals who were drawn to the faith precisely because of its antimodernist stance.<sup>17</sup>

*"A literature of protest."* For example, Jacques Maritain's long association with the illiberal *Action Française* movement—nearly fifteen years—while often treated by admirers of the Thomist as an embarrassing episode in the philosopher's life, is now recognized as more than the misguided right-wing backlash of a naive convert. As John Hellman has shown, the celebrated theocentric humanism articulated in Maritain's mature work "was inspired by hostility to the modern world."<sup>18</sup> In similar fashion historian Christopher Dawson's faith in the Western humanist tradition was derived not from confidence in the progress of culture but rather from a gloomy prophecy of Europe's post-Catholic future.<sup>19</sup> American proponents of the Revival, too, founded the dream of a re-Christianized world on frankly antimodernist premises. Jesuit educator Calvert Alexander, who dubbed contemporary Catholic writing "a literature of protest" against the post-Renaissance West, marshalled evidence to show that a revived Christian civilization would emerge only from the "double collapse of Protestantism and the dreams of the Science and Progress cult."<sup>20</sup> Self-declared spiritual heirs to Newman's supposed antiliberalism, the intellectuals of the Catholic Revival were stimulated by the church's critique of modernity. For many, particularly those engaged in programs of Catholic Action, a warmly imaginative medievalism helped to humanize an otherwise cranky antimodernism.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the professed atheism of his college days, Allen Tate initially developed an appreciation for Catholicism as an extension of

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. James Hitchcock, "Postmortem on a Rebirth: The Catholic Intellectual Renaissance," *American Scholar* 49 (1980): 211-25. See also Hitchcock's *What is Secular Humanism?* Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Books, 1982), 122.

<sup>18</sup> John Hellman, "The Humanism of Jacques Maritain," *Understanding Maritain: Philosopher and Friend*, ed. Deal W. Hudson and Matthew J. Mancini (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1987), 120.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Christopher Dawson, *The Judgment of the Nations* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1942).

<sup>20</sup> Calvert Alexander, *The Catholic Literary Revival* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1935), 4, 12, 308.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Philip Gleason, "American Catholics and the Mythic Middle Ages," *Keeping the Faith: American Catholicism Past and Present* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 11-34.

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his own antimodernist sympathies. As a Vanderbilt undergraduate and member of Nashville's Fugitive poetry group, he displayed keen interest in T. S. Eliot's peculiar brand of modernism—a modernism with deep reservations about modernity. In early works for the *Nation* and *New Republic*, taking contemporary culture to task for its vapid romanticism and myopic naturalism, Tate juggled a revolt against Victorian aesthetic moralism with contempt for the conventions of American progressive thought. Repulsed by both the "genteel tradition" of American letters and what George Orwell called the "spiritual emptiness of the machine age,"<sup>22</sup> Tate, like Eliot, earned a dual reputation among "lost-generation" intellectuals. On the one hand, he was a prime American architect of the modernist period style—what many considered a risky departure from the canons of literary propriety. On the other, he was one of Marshall Berman's "modern mandarins and would-be aristocrats of the twentieth-century right,"<sup>23</sup> a leading figure in the interwar resurgence of American conservatism—what William Barrett referred to as the "Counter-Enlightenment."<sup>24</sup> Joining in the cultural polemics of so-called "traditionalist moderns" like James Joyce, Tate identified the reactionary rejection of decadent modernity as "the right kind of modernism."<sup>25</sup>

*A traditionalist modernism.*

As a free-lance writer in Greenwich Village and a Guggenheim fellow in left-bank Paris, Tate looked to his southern heritage for traditional resources to resist the meaninglessness he found in modernity. In his highly acclaimed poetry and prose of the period he employed southern themes, figuratively rendering the premodern South as the last remnant of classical European civilization. While in Paris, however, completing a biography of Confederate president Jefferson Davis, Tate ultimately turned to the classics of the French Catholic Revival to bolster his retrograde cultural criticism. Reading

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Angus Calder, *T. S. Eliot* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1987), 161.

<sup>23</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 28.

<sup>24</sup> George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic, 1976), 57.

<sup>25</sup> Lewis P. Simpson, *The Man of Letters in New England and the South: Essays on the History of the Literary Vocation in America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 231. Tate quoted in Singal, 252. For a recent study of Tate's kind of modernism, see Langdon Hammer, *Hart Crane & Allen Tate: Janus-Faced Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

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Protestantism  
"virtually  
naturalism."

authors such as Henri Bergson, Charles Peguy, Leon Bloy, and François Mauriac, he came to recognize the Catholic church as the historic carrier of the tradition for which he longed.<sup>26</sup> In a *Criterion* essay solicited by the recently baptized Anglo-Catholic Eliot, Tate stressed the necessity of "an objective religion, a universal scheme of reference" in culture.<sup>27</sup> Approximating Irving Babbitt's claim that "the Catholic Church may perhaps be the only institution left in the Occident that can be counted on to uphold civilized standards,"<sup>28</sup> Tate intimated that the Roman Catholic tradition was the vital force in Western history, the only coherent system of thought which could save the culture from fragmentation. Denouncing contemporary Protestant liberalism as "virtually naturalism," he admitted, "I am more and more heading towards Catholicism. We have reached a condition of the spirit where no further compromise is possible."<sup>29</sup>

#### *"A Fanatical Devotion to the Cause of the Land"*

The Catholic Revival's antimodernist spirituality that Tate encountered as an expatriate entailed a charged critique of the capitalist culture dominating Western nations. Industrialism, aggravating the breakdown of the modern mind, came to represent for many Catholic observers the debilitation of the body of Western civilization, divorced from meaningful contact with the land. Fueled by the call of recent papal encyclicals for "reconstruction of the social order," Catholic critics argued for the retrieval of premodern social structures to establish a "third way" between the twin totalitarian threats of capitalism and communism. Along with secular promoters of back-to-the-land schemes and economic decentralization, Catholic theorists advanced programs for social change based on the conviction that "Christianity was incompatible with an urbanized industrial order."<sup>30</sup> The Catholic Land Movement in Britain, including Distributists G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, labored to restore the spirit of the medieval guild system and private owner-

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<sup>26</sup> Allen Tate, *Memoirs and Opinions 1926-1974* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), 50.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>28</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), 186.

<sup>29</sup> Allen Tate to Donald Davidson, 18 February 1929, *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*, ed. John Tyree Fain and Thomas Daniel Young (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), 223-24.

<sup>30</sup> David J. O'Brien, *American Catholics and Social Reform: The New Deal Years 1929-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 102.

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ship, as neo-feudalists like Eric Gill practiced a “higher agrarianism” yoking social prophecy to peasant culture.<sup>31</sup> In the United States, Catholic Worker volunteers attempted to arrest the dehumanizing drive of modern industry with the agricultural personalism of Peter Maurin’s “Green Revolution,” while Catholic Rural Life enthusiasts, inspired by agrarian apostle Edwin O’Hara, commended “the spiritual riches of farm living.”<sup>32</sup> In all its eccentricity and idealism, the agrarian tradition of the Catholic Revival achieved its summation in Pope Pius XII’s declaration: “Before there was any sin, God gave man the earth for his cultivation as the most beautiful and honorable occupation in the natural order.”<sup>33</sup>

By the time he returned to America in 1930, Allen Tate had been corresponding with fellow southern intellectuals on the subject of a symposium to defend their region’s “agrarian way of life” against the intrusion of northern industry. Impressed by the way Distributist historian Christopher Hollis linked Catholic social teaching to a justification of the American South, Tate, though still an unbeliever, brought a uniquely Catholic approach to the “utopian conservatism” of what would become the Southern Agrarian Movement, comparing it in his own mind to the *Action Française* effort.<sup>34</sup> “Remarks on the Southern Religion,” his essay in the movement’s manifesto *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian*

*Southern  
Agrarian  
Movement’s  
Catholic  
impetus.*

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<sup>31</sup> Jay P. Corrin, *G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc: The Battle Against Modernity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981). Thomas J. Lyon, ed. *This Incomperable Land: A Book of American Nature Writing* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 87. For the basic texts of English Distributism, see Hilaire Belloc, *The Servile State* (New York: Henry Holt, 1946) and *The Restoration of Property* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1936); G. K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity* (London: Methuen, 1926).

<sup>32</sup> Abigail McCarthy, *Private Faces/Public Places* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), 109. Cf. Timothy Michael Dolan, “Some Seed Fell on Good Ground”: *The Life of Edwin V. O’Hara* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992). Christopher Kauffman, *Mission to Rural America: The Story of W. Howard Bishop, Founder of Glenmary* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991).

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Martin E. Schirber, “American Catholicism and Life on the Land,” *Social Order* 12 (May 1962): 204.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Allen Tate to Donald Davidson, 12 April 1928, *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*, 212. Virginia J. Rock, “The Making and Meaning of *I’ll Take My Stand*: A Study of Utopian Conservatism, 1925-1939,” diss., University of Minnesota, 1961. Allen Tate to Andrew Lytle, 31 July 1929, *The Lytle-Tate Letters: The Correspondence of Andrew Lytle and Allen Tate*, ed. Thomas Daniel Young and Elizabeth Sarcone (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 34. For an understanding of Christopher Hollis’s Distributist view of American history, see his *The American Heresy* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1927).

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*Tradition* (1930), though supposed to be an apology for southern institutions, departed from the program of the movement by wedding Southern Agrarian concerns to Catholic Revival principles. In it Tate suggested that the culture of the Old South failed because "it could not create its appropriate religion." Drawing parallels between the South and the traditional agrarian societies of Catholic Europe, Tate insinuated that Catholicism, rather than evangelical revivalism or Jeffersonian naturalism, would have been the proper faith for the section. Consequently, he claimed, the Old South "was a feudal society without a feudal religion," and the contemporary South, by implication, was bereft of a spiritual legacy.<sup>35</sup>

Well documented by Paul Conkin's history of the Southern Agrarians,<sup>36</sup> Tate's role in the movement set the stage for collaborative involvement with representatives of the Catholic Revival. From 1933 to 1937, Tate contributed regularly to the newly founded *American Review*, designed by its neo-conservative editor Seward Collins as an instrument for patrician New Humanists, southern regionalists, and other "Radicals of the Right."<sup>37</sup> In the journal, dismissed by Samuel Eliot Morison as "the organ of an American fascist party,"<sup>38</sup> Tate's works appeared next to articles by Catholic Distributist writers Chesterton, Belloc, Gill, and anti-machinery extremist Arthur J. Penty. During the same period Tate planned a joint Agrarian-Distributist symposium with southern journalist Herbert Agar. A coalition of anti-industrialist Catholics, Protestants, and secular humanists, it published *Who Owns America?* (1936), a collection of Depression-era essays arguing that "monopoly capitalism is evil and self-destructive."<sup>39</sup> While editing the anthology, Tate was also instrumental in organizing a national Alliance of Agrarian and Distributist Groups, a network of non-Marxist critics of capitalism which included Jesuit John C. Rawe of St. Mary's College in Kansas,

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<sup>35</sup> Allen Tate, "Remarks on the Southern Religion," *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, Twelve Southerners (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 166, 168.

<sup>36</sup> Paul K. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 89-126.

<sup>37</sup> "Editorial Notes," *American Review* 1 (April 1933): 126.

<sup>38</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 970.

<sup>39</sup> Herbert Agar, introduction, *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence*, ed. Herbert Agar and Allen Tate (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1936), ix.

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the political philosopher who catechized the *Modern Schoolman's* neo-scholastic readers in doctrines of agrarian orthodoxy.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps Tate's most important contact with the agrarian wing of the Catholic Revival came in 1936 when he renewed his acquaintance with lay activist Dorothy Day. A friend from their Greenwich Village period, Day met with Tate and his wife, novelist Caroline Gordon, just prior to establishing Maryfarm, the first Catholic Worker agricultural commune. Later presenting the couple with a confirmation gift of religious relics, Day functioned as a concrete example of "lost-generation" Catholic spirituality. Enthusiastic over their meeting, Tate wrote to a Southern Agrarian colleague about the *Catholic Worker*: "The editor . . . is greatly excited by our whole program. . . . A very remarkable woman. Terrific energy, much practical sense, and a fanatical devotion to the cause of the land!"<sup>41</sup>

### "Philosophy for a Catholic Humanism"

Closely allied with the antimodernist and agrarian aspects of the Catholic Revival was the novel philosophical synthesis of Neo-Thomism.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, it would be impossible to imagine the force of Catholicism's resistance to the "acids of modernity" or the fervor with which it defended the "agrarian way of life" without that modern assimilation of scholastic thought. William Halsey has characterized Neo-Thomism as a "philosophical structure of innocence," a

*Neo-Thomism  
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Catholic  
"intellectual  
awakening."*

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. John C. Rawe, "Agrarianism: An Economic Foundation," *Modern Schoolman* 13 (November 1935): 15-20 and "The Agrarian Concept of Property," *Modern Schoolman* 14 (November 1936): 4-6. See also Luigi G. Ligutti and John C. Rawe, *Rural Roads to Security: America's Third Struggle for Freedom* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1940). For more on the early twentieth-century Jesuit interest in social problems, see Stephen Anthony Werner, "The Life, Social Thought and Work of Joseph Caspar Husslein, S.J.," diss., Saint Louis University, 1990, and Peter McDonough, *Men Astutely Trained: A History of the Jesuits in the American Century* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

<sup>41</sup> Allen Tate to Donald Davidson, 23 February 1936, *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*, 297. Cf. Veronica A. Makowsky, *Caroline Gordon: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 132-33, 198-99. Just as Day impressed the Tates, the Agrarians made an impact on Catholic Worker founder Peter Maurin, who also identified himself with the "Radicals of the Right." See his *Easy Essays* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1984), 100, 111-14.

<sup>42</sup> For studies of the history of Neo-Thomism and its varieties see Gerald A. McCool, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century: The Quest for a Unitary Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977) and *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989).

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facile instrument by which Catholics insulated their minds from the complexities of life between two world wars.<sup>43</sup> Challenging this thesis, Arnold Sparr credits the revival of scholasticism with sparking an “intellectual awakening” unparalleled in modern Catholic history.<sup>44</sup> Certainly, the modern appreciation of Aquinas provided the Catholic Revival with such impressive intellectual coherence that Calvert Alexander, among others, considered it the “official philosophy” of the literary flowering.<sup>45</sup> According to Patrick Carey, Neo-Thomism furnished “a satisfying intellectual framework” for realizing the aim of a restored Catholic culture.<sup>46</sup>

*Maritain a  
pervasive  
influence.*

Had Tate not discovered the enticing system of Neo-Thomism his interest in Catholicism would have remained perverse spiritual flirtation. The conversion of his protégé Robert Lowell in 1941 and that of Caroline Gordon in 1947, arguably, moved him closer to formal affiliation with the church. Of considerable importance, however, was Tate’s association with Princeton University during the 1940s. As poet in residence there he came under the influence of what Gerald A. McCool calls the “second stage” of twentieth-century neo-scholasticism.<sup>47</sup> Specifically, Tate’s encounter and ensuing friendship with the distinguished visiting professor Jacques Maritain, the chief intellectual of the Revival, provided him with the personal model and public language he required for full acceptance of the Catholic faith.<sup>48</sup> As Tate himself later put it, “Jacques Maritain’s influence on me was pervasive from the time I first knew him.”<sup>49</sup>

Tate’s appropriation of the Catholic Revival’s philosophy coincided with the rise of what came to be known as New Criticism, the

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<sup>43</sup> William Halsey, *The Survival of American Innocence: Catholicism in an Era of Disillusionment, 1920-1940* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 159.

<sup>44</sup> Sparr, xiii.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Sparr, 40.

<sup>46</sup> Patrick W. Carey, “American Catholic Religious Thought: An Historical Review,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 4 (1985): 138.

<sup>47</sup> Gerald A. McCool, “Twentieth Century Scholasticism,” *Journal of Religion* (1978 Supplement): S209-15.

<sup>48</sup> For an impression of Tate’s influence on Maritain, see Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) and *Reflections on America* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958). See also Judith Suther, *Raissa Maritain: Pilgrim, Poet, Exile* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990).

<sup>49</sup> Allen Tate to John M. Dunaway, 4 May 1976, *Exiles and Fugitives*, 9. Cf. Bernard Doering, “Maritain and America—Friendships,” *Understanding Maritain: Philosopher and Friend*, 27-55.

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mid-century approach to literary analysis famous for its emphasis on a formalist “close reading” of texts. In the aftermath of the Agrarian crusade, already losing steam by the mid-’30s, members of the original symposium, primarily writers by training, returned to more literary pursuits. Attempting to retain the creative edge of his Agrarianism in an enlarged campaign of cultural criticism, Tate gained fresh recognition for his accomplishments in the controversial literary theory. Works such as *Reason in Madness* (1941) and *On the Limits of Poetry* (1948)<sup>50</sup> established him as a premier figure in the New Criticism movement along with colleagues John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren. In these collections of essays Tate continued to lace his defense of avant-garde modern literature with a traditionalist polemic against modern society. New Criticism’s call for an “ontological” criticism, affirming a form of real knowledge by means of the concrete literary image, distinct from that obtained through rational, scientific cognition, echoed traditional points of Aristotelian literary theory and made the novel interpretive approach attractive to English departments in Catholic colleges across America. Often decried for its erudite classicism, its endorsement of the idea of a hierarchy of values, and its apparent sanction of traditional authority, the New Criticism movement struck its intellectual opponents as manifesting an absolutism strangely akin to Roman Catholic doctrine.<sup>51</sup>

*Agrarianism  
joined to the  
New Criti-  
cism.*

Though other New Critics turned for metaphysical support to the aesthetic theory of Immanuel Kant or the Neo-Orthodox realism of Reinhold Niebuhr, Tate capitalized on New Criticism’s apparent similarities to Catholic thought, infusing his criticism with philosophical resources borrowed from Neo-Thomism. In 1950, in reply to the accusation that New Critics advocated a reactionary dogmatism at variance with the spirit of American democracy, Tate asked, “Why can’t an American who happens to be a Catholic espouse an authoritarian tradition in religion and exhibit it for what it’s worth?”<sup>52</sup> Within months of those remarks, Tate was himself that American Catholic striving to articulate religious criticism informed by a Catholic vision. Encouraged by his godparents Jacques and

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<sup>50</sup> Allen Tate, *Reason in Madness: Critical Essays* (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1941); *On the Limits of Poetry: Selected Essays, 1928-1948* (New York: Alan Swallow, 1948).

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Robert Gorham Davis, “The New Criticism and the Democratic Tradition,” *American Scholar* 19 (Winter 1949-50): 9-19.

<sup>52</sup> Allen Tate, “The New Criticism,” *American Scholar* 20 (1950-51): 93.

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*Thomistic  
analogical  
imagination  
as paradigm.*

Raissa Maritain, he was baptized into the church on December 22 of that year at the rural Benedictine priory of St. Mary's near Morristown, New Jersey, just over an hour's drive from the Princeton campus.<sup>53</sup>

Tate's writings of the next decade reveal how the Thomistic analogical imagination provided the integrative interpretive paradigm capable of unifying his literary and social criticism. Addressing a Boston College audience in 1952, for example, he employed Maritain's Thomistic categories to define the dilemma constituting modern existence as the "Cartesian split" wrenching the self from the world. The spiritual and social responsibility of the contemporary poet, he said, is to subvert the sterile abstractions and dualisms of modernity, to "do his work with the body of this world, whatever that body may look like to him, in his time and place."<sup>54</sup> Similarly, at the International Congress for Peace and Christian Civilization in Florence, Tate interpreted the postwar danger of totalitarianism as the product of a Gnostic secularism insidiously disjoining human experience from the moral and physical restraints of the authentic humanity revealed in the Incarnation.<sup>55</sup> According to Radcliffe Squires, Tate's last great efforts in poetry during this period were also "ordained by [his] Catholicism."<sup>56</sup>

Apparently the urbane man of letters long awaited by Catholic America,<sup>57</sup> the convert Tate anxiously sought to define the nature of his apostolate in the church. Asking Pius XII for a blessing on "American Catholic men of letters,"<sup>58</sup> he implicitly recognized the lay intellectual's awkward place in the church. Though numerous

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<sup>53</sup> Father Hugh Duffy, the prior of the Benedictine community from 1947 to 1952, attempted to make St. Mary's a haven for intellectual converts like Tate. Because baptisms were rare occurrences at the priory, Tate's baptism was registered at St. Margaret Catholic Church in Morristown, New Jersey. In 1951, taking the name of Augustine, Tate was confirmed at St. Paul Church, the sole Catholic parish in "Presbyterian" Princeton. Father Beatus T. Lucey, O.S.B., personal interview, 17 August 1993. Church records, St. Paul Catholic Church, Princeton, New Jersey.

<sup>54</sup> Allen Tate, *The Forlorn Demon* (Chicago: Regnery, 1953), 36.

<sup>55</sup> Allen Tate, "Christ and the Unicorn," *Sewanee Review* 63 (1955): 175-81.

<sup>56</sup> Radcliffe Squires, "Allen Tate's Terzinas," *Allen Tate and His Work: Critical Evaluations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1972), 294.

<sup>57</sup> After his baptism, a biographical sketch of Tate appeared in *Catholic Authors*, ed. Matthew Hoehn (Newark, N.J.: St. Mary's Abbey, 1952).

<sup>58</sup> Allen Tate, letter to Caroline Gordon, 30 August 1952. Published with permission of the Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries.

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Catholic colleges and universities invited him to speak on their campuses, and Assumption University in Windsor, Ontario, even considered creating a chair in Christian Humanism and Culture for him, Tate's relationship with the Catholic establishment was uneasy. Dissatisfied with the activist posture of the elite Committee of Catholics for Cultural Action, which prized the membership of eminent lay Catholic intellectuals, he made various attempts to organize an alternative academy of Catholic writers that would promote Catholic values in society without endorsing a specifically political agenda.<sup>59</sup> One such plan called for the establishment of a school of writing "in a Catholic atmosphere," modeled after the *Entretiens de Pontigny* of prewar France. Naming it "Conversations at Newburgh," Tate arranged to house the academy's facilities at Dorothy Day's Maryfarm in the New York Hudson Valley.<sup>60</sup> Having already redefined his old Agrarian commitment in terms of restoring "humane life" based on "the order of a unified Christendom," he announced the purpose of this new project as the propagation of a "far-reaching philosophy for a Catholic humanism" in self-conscious opposition to the growing secularism of Western culture.<sup>61</sup> Publicly bemoaning the mediocre state of American Catholic literature, Tate was eager to launch a genuinely Catholic renaissance governed by the modern literary standards that he was largely responsible for raising.<sup>62</sup> Though he expressed his hope for "the reappearance of a Catholic intelligence" in his generation, he lamented Catholic America's domination "by the mass mind."<sup>63</sup>

*Dominance of secular "mass mind" lamented.*

His correspondence with likely participants in such ventures, however, proved disappointing. More seriously, in 1955, just as church historian John Tracy Ellis was challenging his coreligionists to foster the intellectual life of American Catholicism, Tate and his

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. Allen Tate to Jacques Maritain, 2 March 1952, *Exiles and Fugitives*, 41-43.

<sup>60</sup> Allen Tate, letter to Walter J. Ong, 11 April 1953. Cf. Marshall McLuhan to Walter J. Ong, 31 May 1953, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, ed. Matie Molinaro, Corinne McLuhan, and William Toye (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987), 237. Gale H. Carrithers, Jr., *Mumford, Tate, Eiseley: Watchers in the Night* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 140.

<sup>61</sup> Allen Tate, "A Symposium: The Agrarians Today," *Shenandoah* 3 (Summer 1952): 29. Allen Tate to Robert Fitzgerald, 1 March 1952, *Exiles and Fugitives*, 102.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Allen Tate, "Orthodoxy and the standard of Literature," *New Republic* 128 (5 January 1953): 24-25.

<sup>63</sup> Allen Tate, address, Assumption University, Windsor, Ontario, 1958, pp. 3, 6. Published with permission of the Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries.

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wife Gordon separated. Tate's subsequent divorce and remarriage clearly placed his status as a Catholic intellectual in jeopardy. Catholic colleagues, upon whom Tate relied for lecture invitations, increasingly found themselves in the awkward position of having to speculate on the canonical validity of his marriage.<sup>64</sup>

*The Revival  
expires.*

Compounding these problems, public and private, was the declining force of the Catholic Revival itself. By the 1950s even faithful participants noticed that the movement had begun to wane. As Arnold Sparr makes clear, the mainstreaming tendencies of postwar American Catholicism led proponents of the Revival to question the wisdom of a distinctively Catholic alternative culture. Even members of the Catholic Renaissance Society were convinced to abandon the quest for a uniquely Catholic literature in favor of less provincial and more ecumenical ambitions.<sup>65</sup> In the broader society, the Revival's countercultural worldview that Tate had found so inspiring was now undermined by the rising fortunes of a U.S. Catholic community anxious to form lasting ties with capitalist prosperity and academic respectability. Catholic agrarianism, once the prophetic vogue, seemed embarrassingly anachronistic to liberal Catholics finding a niche in the environment of the postwar economy,<sup>66</sup> while the *Nouvelle Theologie* of a younger theological generation, destined to triumph among the clerical *periti* at Vatican II, gradually eclipsed the reigning Neo-Thomism in the halls of Catholic academia.

In addition to these developments, the educated Catholic public, once the dependable audience of Revival literature disseminated by Catholic publishers Frank Sheed and Maisie Ward, began to turn to new sources of inspiration. The young lay intellectuals of the '50s known as "*Commonweal* Catholics" sought their muses without regard to sectarian questions of ecclesiastical affiliation. The leading writers of the Revival slipped from their once-privileged position of unquestioned authority. Chesterton had died in 1936 leaving no heir to his post as intellectual propagandist for the Revival, and Belloc,

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<sup>64</sup> Father Walter Ong was asked for his opinion on the matter by an inquirer representing Catherine Spalding College in Louisville, Kentucky. Walter J. Ong, letter to Sister Lucy Marie, 8 April 1964. Walter J. Ong, personal interview, 9 September and 15 October 1991.

<sup>65</sup> Sparr, 163-70.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Donald Attwater, "The Decline of Distributism," *Commonweal* 53 (2 February 1951): 421-22.

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who did not live beyond 1953, produced no work of significant merit after the Depression. Other Revival figures, such as Christopher Dawson and Maritain, survived long enough to witness what one historian has called the “slaying of the fathers” characteristic of post-Vatican II popular spirituality.<sup>67</sup> Maritain’s highly critical assessment of the conciliar enthusiasm, expressed in his controversial *The Peasant of the Garonne* (1968), gave eloquent testimony to his generation’s sense of spiritual loss and alienation.<sup>68</sup>

James Terence Fisher has recently produced a provocative portrait of convert Dorothy Day making her way into the old-fashioned Catholic subculture of personal piety and sacrificial obedience precisely at the moment when her birthright Catholic followers, seeking to rid themselves of alien citizenship, were fleeing from the immigrant ghetto into the pluralism of America’s secular city.<sup>69</sup> In a sense, Allen Tate was engaged in a similarly ill-timed pilgrimage. By mid-century the Catholic spirituality that had seemed to the young poet the “universal scheme of reference” capable of promoting coherence in a turbulent world was on the verge of passing away.

An “ill-timed pilgrimage.”

### *“A Traveller Lost in a Forest”*

After his marriage to Helen Heinz, a trained nurse and former Catholic religious, Tate, according to Walter Sullivan, was eventually successful in regularizing his relationship to the church.<sup>70</sup> For a brief season prior to his death the wayward convert was reconciled to the sacramental life of his church. Though irritated by the “neo-modernist” theological fads of the age and uncomfortable with the liturgical experimentation popular after the Second Vatican Council, Tate never ceased to view himself as a believing Catholic. Rarely, however, did he speak again with the confidence and authority of the committed convert. An evaporating cultural milieu coupled with his own internal moral struggles militated against faithful ob-

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<sup>67</sup> Hitchcock, “Postmortem on a Rebirth,” 224. Cf. James Hitchcock, *The Recovery of the Sacred* (New York: Seabury, 1974), 55.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*, trans. Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968). Another classic account of this critical period, written from a different perspective, is Garry Wills, *Bare Ruined Choirs: Doubt, Prophecy, and Radical Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972).

<sup>69</sup> James Terence Fisher, *The Catholic Counterculture in America, 1933-1962* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 1-69.

<sup>70</sup> Sullivan, 59.

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servance of his chosen religion. His, though, was not the familiar story of the ordinary lapsed believer, unsettled by intellectual doubts or resentful of ecclesiastical institutions. As *Renaissance* editor Joseph Schwartz has observed, Tate was “a rotten Catholic, to use Hemingway’s phrase, but a Catholic who never argued with the dogma or the authority of the Church. He just had a hard time leading a formal Catholic life.”<sup>71</sup>

During a long tenure on the English faculty of the University of Minnesota, Tate continued to address religious issues in his critical prose, as he persisted, with some uneasiness, in his search for the cultural incarnation of what he called genuine religious humanism. His 1969 lecture at Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville revealed the unsettled spirituality that marked his final years. On the perennial topic of faith and literature, “Mere Literature and the Lost Traveller” addressed the discomfiting fact of religion’s “obscure” relation to art. Confessing what in another place he called “our modern unbelieving belief,”<sup>72</sup> Tate borrowed a conceit from Blake, comparing himself to “a traveller lost in a forest, who thinks he will get out by walking a straight line to the perimeter, but being right-handed always bears a little to the right, and after hours of fatigue returns to the place where he was first aware that he was lost.”<sup>73</sup>

*Belief and  
unbelief.*

Literary historians have often wondered whether Tate’s “late acceptance of Catholicism came as an authentic conversion or as only the next step in his intellectual response” to the modern world’s disturbing loss of tradition<sup>74</sup>—whether, that is, it was the sure decision of a veteran traveler or the panicky reflex of a restless fugitive. One thing is certain: the question cannot be addressed adequately without an examination of the Catholic Revival’s influence in Tate’s life and thought. Just prior to his baptism, Tate confessed:

As I look back upon my own verse, written over more than twenty-five years, I see plainly that its main theme is man suffering from unbelief; and I cannot for a moment suppose that this man is some other than myself.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Joseph Schwartz, letter to author, 26 October 1992.

<sup>72</sup> Allen Tate, *Essays of Four Decades* (Chicago: Swallow, 1959), 357.

<sup>73</sup> Allen Tate, “Mere Literature and the Lost Traveller” (Nashville: George Peabody College for Teachers, 1969), n. page.

<sup>74</sup> Elizabeth Sarcone, “Andrew Lytle: A Modern Traditionalist,” *The Vanderbilt Tradition: Essays in Honor of Thomas Daniel Young*, ed. Mark Royden Winchell (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 155.

<sup>75</sup> Allen Tate, “Religion and the Intellectuals,” *Partisan Review* 17 (March 1950): 250.

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Careful examination of his public and private writings reveals that one factor instrumental in Tate's retreat from that state of unbelief was his acquaintance with the literature, spirituality, and leadership of the Catholic Revival. Throughout his career, over the course of a quarter century, as he looked for an enduring tradition to counter the negative effects of modernity and to sustain the internal requisites of his art, the intellectual ferment of the Catholic Literary Revival shaped Tate's personal understanding of Christianity as it molded his sympathies toward the church. Unlike other traditions, including his proud regional heritage, it seemed the only trustworthy alternative to the decadence of modernity.

A cunning convergence of personal and historical factors, however, rendered attraction to the Catholic Revival problematic for an intellectual convert like Tate. His conversion brought with it the ironic experience of spiritual displacement, for Tate entered a church engaged in a dramatic phase of reorientation and found himself lacking the spiritual constitution to weather the change wisely or well. His peculiar fate of living when a world was about to fall imperiled any possibility of easy belief or spiritual resolution. Lost in the dark wood of the twentieth century, his conversion marked Tate as a tireless pilgrim turning toward the fading light of a singular tradition of Catholic imagination, unable to discern whether the twilight promised dusk or dawn.