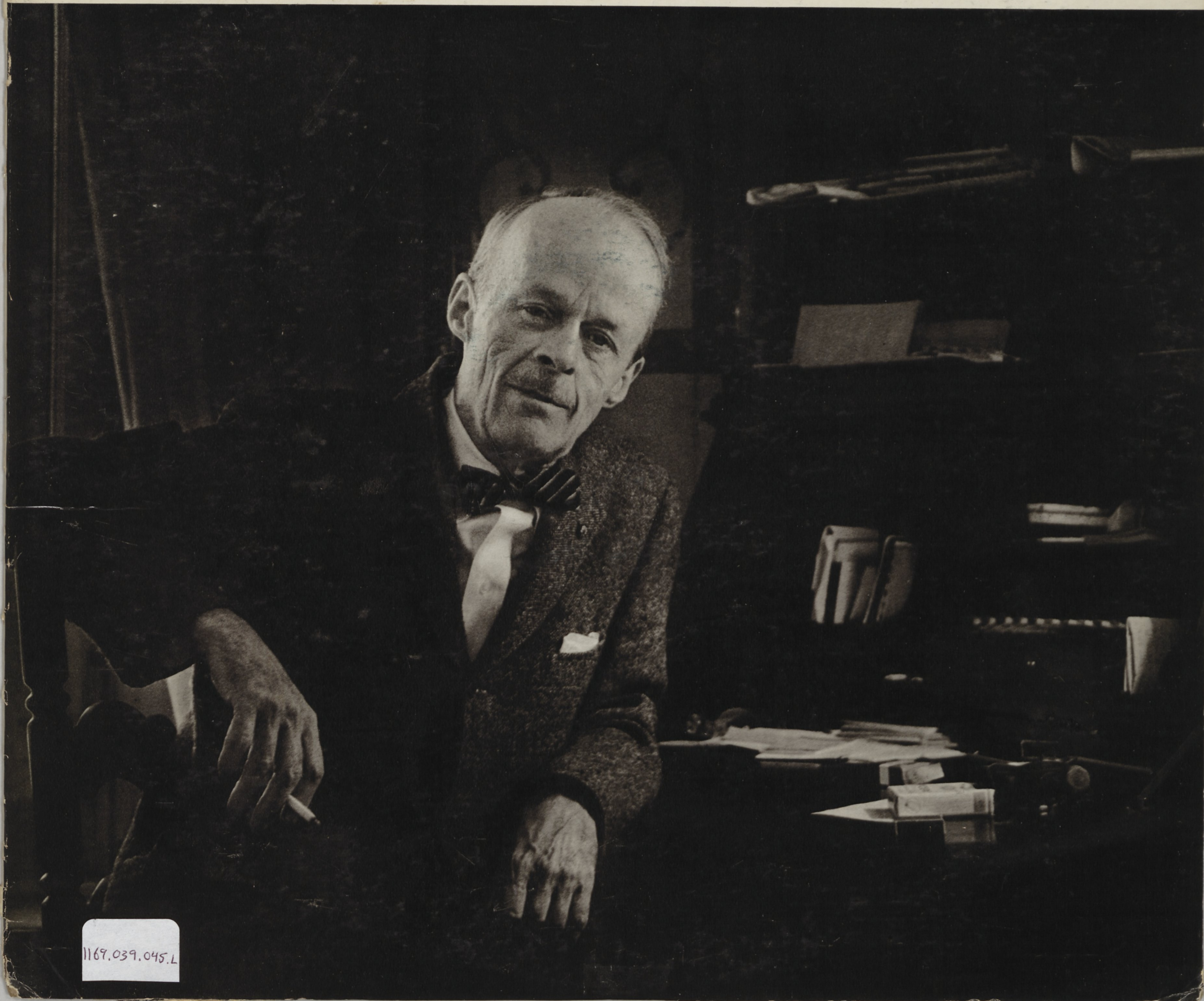


# Yale series of recorded poets Allen Tate

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Allen Tate reads from his own works

## Yale Series of Recorded Poets

Produced by the Yale University Department of English and Audio Visual Center

Edited by Cleanth Brooks

Much has been made of the fact that Allen Tate is a Southern poet and a great deal of effort has gone into the attempt to define the special Southern quality of his poetry. He is indeed Southern; but his is not a "regional" poetry if one means by regionalism mere celebration of local pieties and an exhibition of local color. Even the famous "Ode to the Confederate Dead" finds its true subject matter elsewhere. Tate uses his native South as a special vantage point from which to view and comment upon Everyman, specifically the modern Everyman, who, deprived and emptied, rootless and uncommitted, is attempting to live in a world which has lost its values in the process of making a gigantic extension of its technology. The South is itself obviously involved in this general loss of value and order, but it constitutes a special piece of wreckage: the lesion between it and the traditional society of the past is more recent, the wound still tender. Its sense of history is not yet quite numb. The very concreteness of personal relationships within Southern society throws into startling relief the fragmentation and abstraction which have befallen the society as a whole.

In poems like "The Ode," "The Mediterranean" and "Aeneas at Washington" the Southern material has just this significance. The fact that the old South could see its own image mirrored in the world of ancient Rome or that Southerners could feel a spiritual community with the heroes of the Roman republic is the sort of thing that allows Tate in Aeneas to associate "the glowing fields of Troy" with "the thickening Blue Grass" of Kentucky, seeing them both in one context "lying rich forever in the green sun."

Like William Butler Yeats, Tate finds in history, not only the ground for his discourse, but the central excitement of his poetry. With the possible exception of Yeats, no poet of our time has possessed a more penetrating discernment of the predicament of modern man with reference to nature and history. In the old Christian synthesis, nature and history were related in a special way. With the break-up of that synthesis, man has found himself torn between a meaningless cycle and the more preposterous notions of progress, between nature oblivious of man and the man-made "unnatural" Utopia. In Tate's poetry nature comes in for a great deal of attention—"The Seasons of the Soul" is a typical instance—but nature is rarely exhibited for its own sake and never as a kind of innocently pastoral backdrop for man's activities. How could it be otherwise? For modern man, who had once thought his journey had a destination, the return to the meaningless round of the seasons is not comforting but terrifying.

Because of his preoccupation with history and human society, one does not often think of Tate as a "nature poet," and yet in no poet of our time does the detail of nature make itself felt with more poignance and dramatic power. Characteristically it is the detail of a nature ominous with meaning, or doubly ominous in its beautiful meaninglessness. I find absolutely electrifying a line like: "... one peeled aster drenched with the wind all day"/"extends a fear to you." Or lines like: "the singular screech-owl's tight/Invisible lyric seeds the mind..." Or, "A sky of glass" ... "Blue, empty and tall .../Where burn the equal laws/For Balaam and his ass ..."

Yet if this poet can take small comfort in the immortal cyclic changelessness of nature, he cannot ignore the great multiform fact of nature and see history as slicing through it with an assured and triumphant straight line. The oversimplifications of the short cut and the abstractness of the undeviating line are glanced at in Tate's satiric poems. But Tate's characteristic tone is tragic and ironic as he contemplates man struggling with his impossible task, inevitably defeated but preserving his dignity and manifesting proper courage.

Tate is sometimes thought to be an obscure poet, and his poetry has its difficulties. But its essential difficulty is not that of poetry filled with esoteric references nor that of poetry burdened with a complex message. Rather Tate's is a poetry that refuses on principle to pass on to the reader little commentaries on events, and instead insists that the reader participate in the total drama of the situation. Indeed, if the reader will for the moment put any notion of comments and "messages" out of his head and simply listen to the poem, trying to apprehend it in all of the fullness of its being,

he will come to "understand" it well enough, and quickly enough.

In "Mother and Son," for example, the poet has deliberately left out of account the previous history of the pair. What disappointments he has cost her, what psychic wounds she has inflicted on him, we are not told. We are given only intimations of this past experience as implied in the present situation, while the mother sits by the dying son's bedside. But we have all that we need if we are willing to participate in this powerful dramatization of the "dry fury" of the woman's mind as it envelops the son who yearns for the "impalpable night." Again, we shall go on in the poem in the wrong way if instead of listening to it and trying to participate in it we bring out our textbooks of Freudian analysis in order to "explain" the poem—all of which is *not* to say that this poem, properly experienced and realized by the reader, might not be enjoyed by, might even yield fresh insight to, the devoted Freudian.

Because the essential difficulty of these poems comes from the interpenetration of thought and feeling, attitude and theme, one of the best means to approach them is through the poet's own reading of his work. That reading will frequently dramatize the play of attitudes which go on at the center of the essential drama. The literal tone of the poet's voice may make clearer the developing tone of the poem.

A few remarks about the structure of the poems may be pertinent to this matter of difficulty. In this very condensed poetry reversals of expectation, wrenchings of diction, and even paradoxes frequently occur. Death and life, for example, often interchange meanings. Our normal expectations are upset and the poetry vibrates with a series of shocks calculated to startle us out of our usual associations and to make us look freshly at the matter in hand. This is a poetry which resists every cliché, abounds in metaphor, and means its metaphor.

It is also a poetry which frequently uses a kind of dream logic; or even, as in "The Buried Lake," a logic of nightmare. Indeed the poet has said that this particular poem puts together three actual nightmares that he has experienced. But the phrase "dream logic" must not be allowed to suggest to the reader surrealism or automatic writing or even stream-of-consciousness techniques. The violations of everyday logic are not simply the result of releasing the subconscious and letting the associations run where they will. On the contrary, Tate's nightmares are reflections of the nightmare distortions of the modern world, and are means for commenting on that world and indeed salvaging normal human response from the aberrations of such a world.

The difficulties of Tate's poetry, in short, are not frivolous or gratuitous, the marks of the author's carelessness or of his lack of concern for truth. They are the means to truth if one is to tell the whole truth in a world which more or less systematically falsifies the truth by breaking it down into separate layers of abstraction. As the poet says himself in one of his essays, "My verse or anybody else's is merely a way of knowing something." And he goes on to observe that "if the poem is a real creation, it is a kind of knowledge that we did not possess before. It is not knowledge 'about' something else; the poem is the fullness of that knowledge." Herein consists the real difficulty of Tate's poetry: his poems are not observations, remarks, comments "about" something else. They dramatize the total human response in which a man embodies his encounter with some aspect of reality and comes to terms with it. Those interesting poems entitled "The Meaning of Life" and "The Meaning of Death" bear upon this theme, for those poems have to do with the distinction between a commentary on life—all the observations and platitudes and generalizations, necessarily abstract, which we make *about* life—and the thing itself, the all but unanalysable concretion, or as the poet calls it, "the immaculate /Conception of its essence in itself."

The poems that Mr. Tate reads in this record range from some quite early poems—"The Death of Little Boys" was published in 1925 when he was twenty-six years old—on down to his latest work. Most of the poems are whole works, which of course receive light from the general body of his work, but which are free-standing as artistic wholes finished in themselves. This is as it should be, but I have felt it wise to include two long poems,

"The Buried Lake" and "The Swimmers," which are sections of a long poem now in progress. They seem essential to the present collection because they are so fine in themselves, so exciting in their technical power, and because they represent Tate's latest and most mature work.

Allen Tate was born in Winchester, Kentucky, November 19, 1899. After his graduation from Vanderbilt University in 1922, where he was a member of the Nashville group of poets called the Fugitives, he began his career as a man of letters by free-lance writing in New York. The phrase "man of letters" has a precise application to Allen Tate, for his literary gift has been large and many-sided. He has performed with great distinction as poet, novelist, critic, essayist, editor, teacher, and lecturer.

Allen Tate's first volume, *Mr. Pope and Other Poems* (1928), immediately established him as a poet of first importance. Subsequent volumes include *Selected Poems* (1937), *The Winter Sea* (1944) and *Poems, 1922-1947*. Tate's poetry has won him numerous awards including, in 1956, the Bollingen Prize.

Scarcely less important has been Tate's impact as a critic, first decisively made in his *Reactionary Essays* (1936), and sustained through some four further volumes, the latest of which is *The Man of Letters in the Modern World* (1955).

Tate's one venture into the novel resulted in what may well be the best "first novel" of our period, *The Fathers* (1938). His interest in history, so powerfully evident in his essays, has produced biographical studies of Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis. He edited *The Sewanee Review* from 1944 to 1946. He has taught at a number of universities, including Princeton, the University of Chicago, New York University, and most recently at Oxford University. He is presently Professor of English at the University of Minnesota.

—Cleanth Brooks

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### Side 1

(24 min. 25 sec.)

1. *The Mediterranean*
2. *Aeneas At Washington*
3. *The Buried Lake*
4. *The Cross*
5. *Seasons Of The Soul*
  - I. *Summer*
  - II. *Autumn*
  - III. *Winter*
  - IV. *Spring*

### Side 2

(24 min. 20 sec.)

1. *Mother And Son*
2. *Winter Mask*
3. *The Wolves*
4. *Last Days Of Alice*
5. *The Meaning Of Life*
6. *The Meaning Of Death*
7. *Death Of Little Boys*
8. *Ode To The Confederate Dead*
9. *The Swimmers*

The poems in this recording were selected from the Lee Anderson Collection of Recorded Poets

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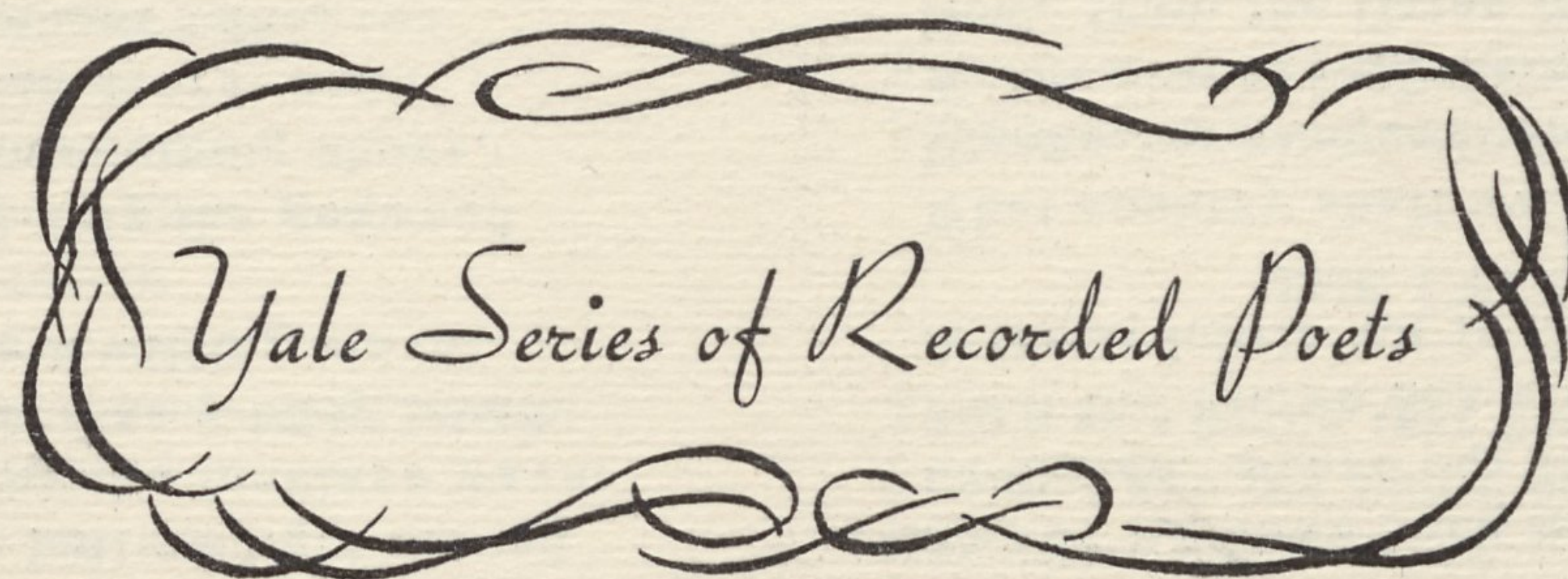
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Allen Tate

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## YALE SERIES OF RECORDED POETS

### ALLEN TATE

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#### THE MEDITERRANEAN

Quem das finem, rex magne, laborum?

Review I, l. 241.

Where we went in the boat was a long bay  
A slingshot wide, walled in by towering stone--  
Peaked margin of antiquity's delay,  
And we went there out of time's monotone:

Where we went in the black hull no light moved  
But a gull white-winged along the feckless wave,  
The breeze, unseen but fierce as a body loved,  
That boat drove onward like a willing slave:

Where we went in the small ship the seaweed  
Parted and gave to us the murmuring shore,  
And we made feast and in our secret need  
Devoured the very plates Aeneas bore:

Where derelict you see through the low twilight  
The green coast that you, thunder-tossed, would win,  
Drop sail, and hastening to drink all night  
Eat dish and bowl to take that sweet land in!

Where we feasted and caroused on the sandless  
Pebbles, affecting our day of piracy,  
What prophecy of eaten plates could landless  
Wanderers fulfil by the ancient sea?

We for that time might taste the famous age  
Eternal here yet hidden from our eyes  
When lust of power undid its stuffless rage;  
They, in a wineskin, bore earth's paradise.

Let us lie down once more by the breathing side  
Of Ocean, where our live forefathers sleep  
As if the Known Sea still were a month wide--  
Atlantis howls but is no longer steep!

What country shall we conquer, what fair land  
Unman our conquest and locate our blood?  
We've cracked the hemispheres with careless hand!  
Now, from the Gates of Hercules we flood

Westward, westward till the barbarous brine  
Whelms us to the tired land where tasseling corn,  
Fat beans, grapes sweeter than muscadine  
Rot on the vine: in that land were we born.



## AENEAS AT WASHINGTON

I myself saw furious with blood  
 Neoptolemus, at his side the black Atridae,  
 Hecuba and the hundred daughters, Priam  
 Cut down, his filth drenching the holy fires.  
 In that extremity I bore me well,  
 A true gentleman, valorous in arms,  
 Disinterested and honourable. Then fled:  
 That was a time when civilization  
 Run by the few fell to the many, and  
 Crashed to the shout of men, the clang of arms:  
 Cold victualing I seized, I hoisted up  
 The old man my father upon my back,  
 In the smoke made by sea for a new world  
 Saving little--a mind imperishable  
 If time is, a love of past things tenuous  
 As the hesitation of receding love.

(To the reduction of uncitied littorals  
 We brought chiefly the vigor of prophecy,  
 Our hunger breeding calculation  
 And fixed triumphs)

I saw the thirsty dove  
 In the glowing fields of Troy, hemp ripening  
 And tawny corn, the thickening Blue Grass  
 All lying rich forever in the green sun.  
 I see all things apart, the towers that men  
 Contrive I too contrived long, long ago.  
 Now I demand little. The singular passion  
 Abides its object and consumes desire  
 In the circling shadow of its appetite.  
 There was a time when the young eyes were slow,  
 Their flame steady beyond the firstling fire,  
 I stood in the rain, far from home at nightfall

By the Potomac, the great Dome lit the water,  
 The city my blood had built I knew no more  
 While the screech-owl whistled his new delight  
 Consecutively dark.

Stuck in the wet mire  
 Four thousand leagues from the ninth buried city  
 I thought of Troy, what we had built her for.

## THE CROSS

There is a place that some men know,  
 I cannot see the whole of it  
 Nor how I came there. Long ago  
 Flame burst out of a secret pit  
 Crushing the world with such a light  
 The day-sky fell to moonless black,  
 The kingly sun to hateful night  
 For those, once seeing, turning back:  
 For love so hates mortality  
 Which is the providence of life  
 She will not let it blessed be  
 But curses it with mortal strife,  
 Until beside the blinding rood  
 Within that world-destroying pit  
 --Like young wolves that have tasted blood,  
 Of death, men taste no more of it.  
 So blind, in so severe a place  
 (All life before in the black grave)  
 The last alternatives they face  
 Of life, without the life to save,  
 Being from all salvation weaned--  
 A stag charged both at heel and head:  
 Who would come back is turned a fiend  
 Instructed by the fiery dead.



## SEASONS OF THE SOUL

To the memory of John Peale Bishop, 1892-1944

Allor porsi la mano un poco avante,  
e colsi un ramicel da un gran pruno;  
e il tronco suo gridò: Perchè mi schiante?

## I. SUMMER

Summer, this is our flesh,  
The body you let mature;  
If now while the body is fresh  
You take it, shall we give  
The heart, lest heart endure  
The mind's tattering  
Blow of greedy claws?  
Shall mind itself still live  
If like a hunting king  
It falls to the lion's jaws?

Under the summer's blast  
The soul cannot endure  
Unless by sleight or fast  
It seize or deny its day  
To make the eye secure.  
Brothers-in-arms, remember  
The hot wind dries and draws  
With circular delay  
The flesh, ash from the ember,  
Into the summer's jaws.

It was a gentle sun  
When, at the June solstice  
Green France was overrun  
With caterpillar feet.  
No head knows where its rest is  
Or may lie down with reason  
When war's usurping claws  
Shall take the heart escheat--  
Green field in burning season  
To stain the weevil's jaws.

The southern summer dies  
Evenly in the fall:  
We raise our tired eyes  
Into a sky of glass,  
Blue, empty, and tall  
Without tail or head  
Where burn the equal laws  
For Balaam and his ass  
Above the invalid dead,  
Who cannot lift their jaws.

When was it that the summer  
(Daylong a liquid light)  
And a child, the new-comer,  
Bathed in the same green spray,  
Could neither guess the night?  
The summer had no reason;  
Then, like a primal cause  
It had its timeless day  
Before it kept the season  
Of time's engaging jaws.

Two men of our summer world  
Descended winding hell  
And when their shadows curled  
They fearfully confounded  
The vast concluding shell:  
Stopping, they saw in the narrow  
Light a centaur pause  
And gaze, then his astounded  
Beard, with a notched arrow,  
Part back upon his jaws.



## II. AUTUMN

It had an autumn smell  
 And that was how I knew  
 That I was down a well:  
 I was no longer young;  
 My lips were numb and blue,  
 The air was like fine sand  
 In a butcher's stall  
 Or pumice to the tongue:  
 And when I raised my hand  
 I stood in the empty hall.

The round ceiling was high  
 And the gray light like shale  
 Thin, crumbling, and dry:  
 No rug on the bare floor  
 Nor any carved detail  
 To which the eye could glide;  
 I counted along the wall  
 Door after closed door  
 Through which a shade might slide  
 To the cold and empty hall.

I will leave this house, I said,  
 There is the autumn weather--  
 Here, nor living nor dead;  
 The lights burn in the town  
 Where men fear together.  
 Then on the bare floor,  
 But tiptoe lest I fall,  
 I walked years down  
 Towards the front door  
 At the end of the empty hall.

The door was false--no key  
 Or lock, and I was caught  
 In the house; yet I could see  
 I had been born to it  
 For miles of running brought  
 Me back where I began.  
 I saw now in the wall  
 A door open a slit  
 And a fat grizzled man  
 Come out into the hall:

As in a moonlit street  
 Men meeting are too shy  
 To check their hurried feet  
 But raise their eyes and squint  
 As through a needle's eye  
 Into the faceless gloom, --  
 My father in a gray shawl  
 Gave me an unseeing glint  
 And entered another room!  
 I stood in the empty hall

And watched them come and go  
 From one room to another,  
 Old men, old women--slow,  
 Familiar; girls, boys;  
 I saw my downcast mother  
 Clad in her street-clothes,  
 Her blue eyes long and small,  
 Who had no look or voice  
 For him whose vision froze  
 Him in the empty hall.

## III. WINTER

Goddess sea-born and bright,  
 Return into the sea  
 Where eddying twilight  
 Gathers upon your people--  
 Cold goddess, hear our plea!  
 Leave the burnt earth, Venus,  
 For the drying God above,  
 Hanged in his windy steeple,  
 No longer bears for us  
 The living wound of love.

All the sea-gods are dead.  
 You, Venus, come home  
 To your salt maidenhead,  
 The tossed anonymous sea  
 Under shuddering foam--  
 Shade for lovers, where  
 A shark swift as your dove  
 Shall pace our company  
 All night to nudge and tear  
 The livid wound of love.

And now the winter sea:  
 Within her hollow rind  
 What sleek facility  
 Of sea-conceited scop  
 To plumb the nether mind!  
 Eternal winters blow  
 Shivering flakes, and shove  
 Bodies that wheel and drop--  
 Cold soot upon the snow  
 Their livid wound of love.



Beyond the undertow  
The gray sea-foliage  
Transpires a phosphor glow  
Into the circular miles:  
In the centre of his cage  
The pacing animal  
Surveys the jungle cove  
And slicks his slithering wiles  
To turn the venereal awl  
In the livid would of love.

Beyond the undertow  
The rigid madrepore  
Resists the winter's flow--  
Headless, unageing oak  
That gives the leaf no more.  
Wilfully as I stood  
Within the thickest grove  
I seized a branch, which broke;  
I heard the speaking blood  
(From the livid wound of love)

Drip down upon my toe:  
"We are the men who died  
Of self-inflicted woe,  
Lovers whose stratagem  
Led to their suicide."  
I touched my sanguine hair  
And felt it drip above  
Their brother who, like them,  
Was maimed and did not bear  
The living wound of love.

#### IV. SPRING

Irritable spring, infuse  
Into the burning breast  
Your combustible juice  
That as a liquid soul  
Shall be the body's guest  
Who lights, but cannot stay  
To comfort this unease  
Which, like a dying coal,  
Hastens the cooler day  
Of the mother of silences.

Back in my native prime  
I saw the orient corn  
All space but no time,  
Reaching for the sun  
Of the land where I was born:  
It was a pleasant land  
Where even death could please  
Us with an ancient pun--  
All dying for the hand  
Of the mother of silences.

In time of bloody war  
Who will know the time?  
Is it a new spring star  
Within the timing chill,  
Talking, or just a mime,  
That rises in the blood--  
Thin Jack-and-Jilling seas  
Without the human will?  
Its light is at the flood,  
Mother of silences!

It burns us each alone  
Whose burning arrogance  
Burns up the rolling stone,  
This earth--Platonic cave  
Of vertiginuous chance!  
Come, tired Sisyphus,  
Cover the cave's egress  
Where light reveals the slave,  
Who rests when sleeps with us  
The mother of silences.

Come, old woman, save  
Your sons who have gone down  
Into the burning cave:  
Come, mother, and lean  
At the window with your son  
And gaze through its light frame  
These fifteen centuries  
Upon the shirking scene  
Where men, blind, go lame:  
Then, mother of silences,

Speak, that we may hear;  
Listen, while we confess  
That we conceal our fear;  
Regard us, while the eye  
Discerns by sight or guess  
Whether, as sheep foregather  
Upon their crooked knees,  
We have begun to die;  
Whether your kindness, mother,  
Is mother of silences.



## MOTHER AND SON

Now all day long the man who is not dead  
 Hastens the dark with inattentive yees,  
 The woman with white hand and erect head  
 Stares at the covers, leans for the son's replies  
 At last to her importunate womanhood--  
 Her hand of death laid on the living bed;  
 So lives the fierce compositor of blood.

She waits; he lies upon the bed of sin  
 Where greed, avarice, anger writhed and slept  
 Till to their silence they were gathered in:  
 There, fallen with time, his tall and bitter kin  
 Once fired the passions that were never kept  
 In the permanent heart, and there his mother lay  
 To bear him on the impenetrable day.

The falcon mother cannot will her hand  
 Up to the bed, nor break the manacle  
 His exile sets upon her harsh command  
 That he should say the time is beautiful--  
 Transfigured by her own possessing light:  
 The sick man craves the impalpable night.

Loosed (betwixt) eye and lid, the swimming beams  
 Of memory, blind school of cuttlefish,  
 Rise to the air, plunge to the cold streams--  
 Rising and plunging the half-forgotten wish  
 To tear his heart out in a slow disgrace  
 And freeze the hue of terror to her face.

Hate, misery, and fear beat off his heart  
 To the dry fury of the woman's mind;  
 The son, prone in his autumn, moves apart  
 A seed blown upon a returning wind.  
 O child, be vigilant till towards the south  
 On the flowered wall all the sweet afternoon,  
 The reaching sun, swift as the cottonmouth,  
 Strikes at the black crucifix on her breast  
 Where the cold dusk comes suddenly to rest--  
 Mortality will speak the victor soon!

The dreary flies, lazy and casual,  
 Stick to the ceiling, buzz along the wall.  
 O heart, the spider shuffles from the mould  
 Weaving, between the pinks and grapes, his pall.  
 The bright wallpaper, imperishably old,  
 Uncurls and flutters, it will never fall.

## WINTER MASK

To the memory of W. B. Yeats

## I

Towards nightfall when the wind  
 Tries the eaves and casements  
 (A winter wind of the mind  
 Long gathering its will)  
 I lay the mind's contents  
 Bare, as upon a table,  
 And ask, in a time of war,  
 Whether there is still  
 To a mind frivolously dull  
 Anything worth living for.



## II

If I am meek and dull  
 And a poor sacrifice  
 Of perverse will to cull  
 The act from the attempt,  
 Just look into damned eyes  
 And give the returning glare;  
 For the damned like it, the more  
 Damnation is exempt  
 From what would save its heir  
 With a thing worth living for.

## III

The poisoned rat in the wall  
 Cuts through the wall like a knife,  
 Then blind, drying, and small  
 And driven to cold water,  
 Dies of the water of life:  
 Both damned in eternal ice,  
 The traitor become the boor  
 Who had led his friend to slaughter,  
 Now bites his head--not nice,  
 The food that he lives for.

## IV

I supposed two scenes of hell,  
 Two human bestiaries,  
 Might uncommonly well  
 Convey the doom I thought;  
 But lest the horror freeze

ALLEN TATE 7

The gentler estimation  
 I go to the sylvan door  
 Where nature has been bought  
 In rational proration  
 As a thing worth living for.

## V

Should the buyer have been beware?  
 It is an uneven trade  
 For man has wet his hair  
 Under the winter weather  
 With only fog for shade:  
 His mouth a bracketed hole  
 Picked by the crows that bore  
 Nature to their hanged brother,  
 Who rattles against the bole  
 The thing that he lived for.

## VI

I asked the master Yeats  
 Whose great style could not tell  
 Why it is man hates  
 His own salvation,  
 Prefers the way to hell,  
 And finds his last safety  
 In the self-made curse that bore  
 Him towards damnation:  
 The drowned undrowned by the sea,  
 The sea worth living for.



## THE WOLVES

There are wolves in the next room waiting  
With heads bent low, thrust out, breathing  
At nothing in the dark; between them and me  
A white door patched with light from the hall  
Where it seems never (so still is the house)  
A man has walked from the front door to the stair.  
It has all been forever. Beasts claw the floor.  
I have brooded on angels and archfiends  
But no man has ever sat where the next room's  
Crowded with wolves, and for the honor of man  
I affirm that never have I before. Now while  
I have looked for the evening star at a cold window  
And whistled when Arcturus spilt his light,  
I've heard the wolves scuffle, and said: So this  
Is man; so--what better conclusion is there--  
The day will not follow night, and the heart  
Of man has a little dignity, but less patience  
Than a wolf's, and a duller sense that cannot  
Smell its own mortality. (This and other  
Meditations will be suited to other times  
After dog silence howls his epitaph.)  
Now remember courage, go to the door,  
Open it and see whether coiled on the bed  
Or cringing by the wall, a savage beast  
Maybe with golden hair, with deep eyes  
Like a bearded spider on a sunlit floor  
Will snarl--and man can never be alone.

## LAST DAYS OF ALICE

Alice grown lazy, mammoth but not fat,  
Declines upon her lost and twilight age;  
Above in the dozing leaves the grinning cat  
Quivers forever with his abstract rage:

Whatever light swayed on the perilous gate  
Forever sways, nor will the arching grass,  
Caught when the world clattered, undulate  
In the deep suspension of the looking-glass.

Bright Alice! always pondering to gloze  
The spoiled cruelty she had meant to say  
Gazes learnedly down her airy nose  
At nothing, nothing thinking all the day.

Turned absent-minded by infinity  
She cannot move unless her double move,  
The All-Alice of the world's entity  
Smashed in the anger of her hopeless love,

Love for herself who, as an earthly twain,  
Pouted to join her two in a sweet one;  
No more the second lips to kiss in vain  
The first she broke, plunged through the glass alone

Alone to the weight of impassivity,  
Incest of spirit, theorem of desire,  
Without will as chalky cliffs by the sea,  
Empty as the bodiless flesh of fire:



All space, that heaven is a dayless night,  
A nightless day driven by perfect lust  
For vacancy, in which her bored eyesight  
Stares at the drowsy cubes of human dust.

--We too back to the world shall never pass  
Through the shattered door, a dumb shade-harried  
crowd  
Being all infinite, function depth and mass  
Without figure, a mathematical shroud

Hurled at the air--blessed without sin!  
O God of our flesh, return us to Your wrath,  
Let us be evil could we enter in  
Your grace, and falter on the stony path!

### THE MEANING OF LIFE

#### A Monologue

Think about it at will: there is that  
Which is the commentary; there's that other,  
Which may be called the immaculate  
Conception of its essence in itself.  
It is necessary to distinguish the weights  
Of the two methods lest the first smother  
The second, the second be speechless (without the  
first).  
I was saying this more briefly the other day  
But one must be explicit as well as brief.

When I was a small boy I lived at home  
For nine years in that part of old Kentucky  
Where the mountains fringe the Blue Grass,  
The old men shot at one another for luck;  
It made me think I was like none of them.  
At twelve I was determined to shoot only  
For honor; at twenty not to shoot at all;  
I know at thirty-three that one must shoot  
As often as one gets the rare chance--  
In killing there is more than commentary.  
One's sense of the proper decoration alters  
But there's a kind of lust feeds on itself  
Unspoken to, unspeaking; subterranean  
As a black river full of eyeless fish  
Heavy with spawn; with a passion for time  
Longer than the arteries of a cave.

### THE MEANING OF DEATH

#### An After-Dinner Speech

I rise, gentlemen, it is the pleasant hour.  
Darkness falls. The night falls.

Time, fall no more.  
Let that be life--time falls no more. The threat  
Of time we in our own courage have forsworn.  
Let light fall, there shall be eternal light  
And all the light shall on our heads be worn



Although at evening clouds infest the sky  
 Broken at base from which the lemon sun  
 Pours acid of winter on a useful view--  
 Four water-towers, two churches, and a river:  
 These are the sights I give in to at night  
 When the long covers loose the roving eye  
 To find the horror of the day a shape  
 Of life: we would have more than living sight.  
 Past delusions are seen as if it all  
 Were yesterday flooded with lemon light,  
 Vice and virtue, hard sacrifice and crime  
 In the cold vanity of time.

Tomorrow

The landscape will respond to jocund day,  
 Bright roofs will scintillate with hues of May  
 And Phoebus' car, his daily circuit run,  
 Brings me to the year when, my time begun,  
 I loitered in the backyard by the alley;  
 When I was a small boy living at home  
 The dark came on in summer at eight o'clock  
 For Little Lord Fauntleroy in a perfect frock  
 By the alley: mother took him by the ear  
 To teach of the mixed modes an ancient fear.  
 Forgive me if I am personal

Gentlemen, let's

Forget the past, its related errors, coarseness  
 Of parents, laxities, unrealities of principle.  
 Think of tomorrow. Make a firm postulate  
 Of simplicity in desire and act  
 Founded on the best hypotheses;  
 Desire to eat secretly, alone, lest  
 Ritual corrupt our charity,  
 Lest darkness fall and time fall

In a long night when learned arteries  
 Mounting the ice and sum of barbarous time  
 Shall yield, without essence, perfect accident.

We are the eyelids of defeated caves.

DEATH OF LITTLE BOYS

When little boys grown patient at last, weary,  
 Surrender their eyes immeasurably to the night,  
 The event will rage terrific as the sea;  
 Their bodies fill a crumbling room with light.

Then you will touch at the bedside, torn in two,  
 Gold curls now deftly intricate with gray  
 As the windowpane extends a fear to you  
 From one peeled aster drenched with the wind all  
 day.

And over his chest the covers in the ultimate dream  
 Will mount to the teeth, ascend the eyes, press back  
 The locks--while round his sturdy belly gleam  
 Suspended breaths, white spars above the wreck:

Till all the guests, come in to look, turn down  
 Their palms, and delirium assails the cliff  
 Of Norway where you ponder, and your little town  
 Reels like a sailor drunk in a rotten skiff,

The bleak sunshine shrieks its chipped music then  
 Out to the milkweed amid the fields of wheat.  
 There is a calm for you where men and women  
 Unroll the chill precision of moving feet.



## ODE TO THE CONFEDERATE DEAD

Row after row with strict impunity  
 The headstones yield their names to the element,  
 The wind whirrs without recollection;  
 In the riven troughs the splayed leaves  
 Pile up, of nature the casual sacrament  
 To the seasonal eternity of death;  
 Then driven by the fierce scrutiny  
 Of heaven to their election in the vast breath,  
 They sough the rumour of mortality.

Autumn is desolation in the plot  
 Of a thousand acres where these memories grow  
 From the inexhaustible bodies that are not  
 Dead, but feed the grass row after rich row.  
 Think of the autumns that have come and gone!--  
 Ambitious November with the humors of the year,  
 With a particular zeal for every slab,  
 Staining the uncomfortable angels that rot  
 On the slabs, a wing chipped here, an arm there:  
 The brute curiosity of an angel's stare  
 Turns you, like them, to stone,  
 Transforms the heaving air  
 Till plunged to a heavier world below  
 You shift your sea-space blindly  
 Heaving, turning like the blind crab.

Dazed by the wind, only the wind  
 The leaves flying, plunge

You know who have waited by the wall  
 The twilight certainty of an animal,  
 Those midnight restitutions of the blood  
 You know--the immitigable pines, the smoky frieze  
 Of the sky, the sudden call: you know the rage,  
 The cold pool left by the mounting flood,  
 Of muted Zeno and Parmenides.  
 You who have waited for the angry resolution  
 Of those desires that should be yours tomorrow,  
 You know the unimportant shrift of death  
 And praise the vision  
 And praise the arrogant circumstance  
 Of those who fall  
 Rank upon rank, hurried beyond decision--  
 Here by the sagging gate, stopped by the wall.

Seeing, seeing only the leaves  
 Flying, plunge and expire

Turn your eyes to the immoderate past,  
 Turn to the inscrutable infantry rising  
 Demons out of the earth--they will not last.  
 Stonewall, Stonewall, and the sunken fields of hemp,  
 Shiloh, Antietam, Malvern Hill, Bull Run.  
 Lost in that orient of the thick-and-fast  
 You will curse the setting sun.

Cursing only the leaves crying  
 Like an old man in a storm

You hear the shout, the crazy hemlocks point  
 With troubled fingers to the silence which  
 Smothers you, a mummy, in time.



The hound bitch

Toothless and dying, in a musty cellar  
Hears the wind only.

Now that the salt of their blood

Stiffens the saltier oblivion of the sea,  
Seals the malignant purity of the flood,  
What shall we who count our days and bow  
Our heads with a commemorial woe  
In the ribboned coats of grim felicity,  
What shall we say of the bones, unclean,  
Whose verdurous anonymity will grow?  
The ragged arms, the ragged heads and eyes  
Lost in these acres of the insane green?  
The gray lean spiders come, they come and go;  
In a tangle of willows without light  
The singular screech-owl's tight  
Invisible lyric seeds the mind  
With the furious murmur of their chivalry.

We shall say only the leaves  
Flying, plunge and expire

We shall say only the leaves whispering  
In the improbable mist of nightfall  
That flies on multiple wing;  
Night is the beginning and the end  
And in between the ends of distraction  
Waits mute speculation, the patient curse  
That stones the eyes, or like the jaguar leaps  
For his own image in a jungle pool, his victim.  
What shall we say who have knowledge  
Carried to the heart? Shall we take the act

To the grave? Shall we, more hopeful, set up the  
grave  
In the House? The ravenous grave?

Leave now

The shut gate and the decomposing wall:  
The gentle serpent, green in the mulberry bush,  
Riots with his tongue through the hush--  
Sentinel of the grave who counts us all!

### THE SWIMMERS<sup>1</sup>

Kentucky water, clear springs: a boy fleeing  
To waters under the dry Kentucky sun;  
His little friends of Nomen with him, seeing

Long shadows of grapevine wriggle and run  
Over the green swirl; mullein under the ear  
Soft as Nausicaä's palm; sullen fun

Brutal as childhood's thin harmonious tear:  
O fountain, bosom source undying-dead  
Replenish me the spring of love and fear

And give me back the eye that looked and fled  
When a thrush idling in the tulip tree  
Unwound the cold dream of the copperhead.

--Along the creek the road was winding; we  
Felt the quicksilver sky. I see again  
The five companions of that odyssey:



Bill Eaton, Charlie Watson, "Nigger" Layne  
The doctor's son, Harry Dueslér who played  
The flute; Tate, with the water on his brain.

Dog-days: the dusty leaves where rain delayed  
Hung low on poison-oak and scuppernong,  
For we were following the active shade

Of water, that bells and bickers all night long.  
"No more'n a mile," Layne said. All five stood still.  
Listening, I heard what seemed at first a song;

Peering, I heard the hooves come down the hill.  
The posse passed, twelve horse; the leader's face  
Was worn as limestone on an ancient sill.

Then, as sleepwalkers shift from a hard place  
In bed, and rising to keep a formal pledge  
Descend a ladder into empty space,

We scuttled down the bank below a ledge  
And marched stiff-legged in our common fright  
Along a hog-track by the riffle's edge:

Into a world where sound shaded the sight  
Dropped the dull hooves again; the horsemen came  
Again, all but the leader. It was night

---

<sup>1</sup>Part III of a poem of some length, now in progress.

Momently and I feared: eleven same  
Jesus-Christers unmembered and unmade,  
Whose Corpse had died again in dirty shame.

The bank then levelling in a speckled glade  
We stopped to breathe above the swimming-hole;  
I gazed at its reticulated shade

Recoiling in blue fear, and felt it roll  
Over my eyes and ears and lift my hair  
Like seaweed tossing on a sunk atoll.

I rose again. Borne on the copper air  
A distant voice green as a funeral wreath  
Against a grave: "That dead nigger there."

The melancholy sheriff slouched beneath  
A giant sycamore; shaking his head  
He plucked a sassafras twig and picked his teeth:

"We come too late." He spoke to the tired dead  
Whose ragged shirt soaked up the viscous flow  
Of blood in which It lay discomfited.

A butting horse-fly gave one ear a blow  
And glanced off, as the sheriff kicked the rope  
Loose from the neck and hooked it with his toe

Away from the blood. --I looked back down the slope  
The friends were gone that I had hoped to greet. --  
A single horseman came at a fast lope



And pulled up at the hanged man's horny feet;  
The sheriff noosed the feet, the other end  
The stranger tied to his pommel in a neat

Slip-knot. I saw the Negro's body bend  
And straighten, as a fish-line cast transverse  
Yields to the current that it must subtend.

The sheriff's God-damn was a facile curse  
Not for the dead but for the blinding dust  
That boxed the cortege in a cloudy hearse

And dragged it towards our town. I knew I must  
Not stay till nightfall in that silent road;  
Sliding my bare feet into the warm crust

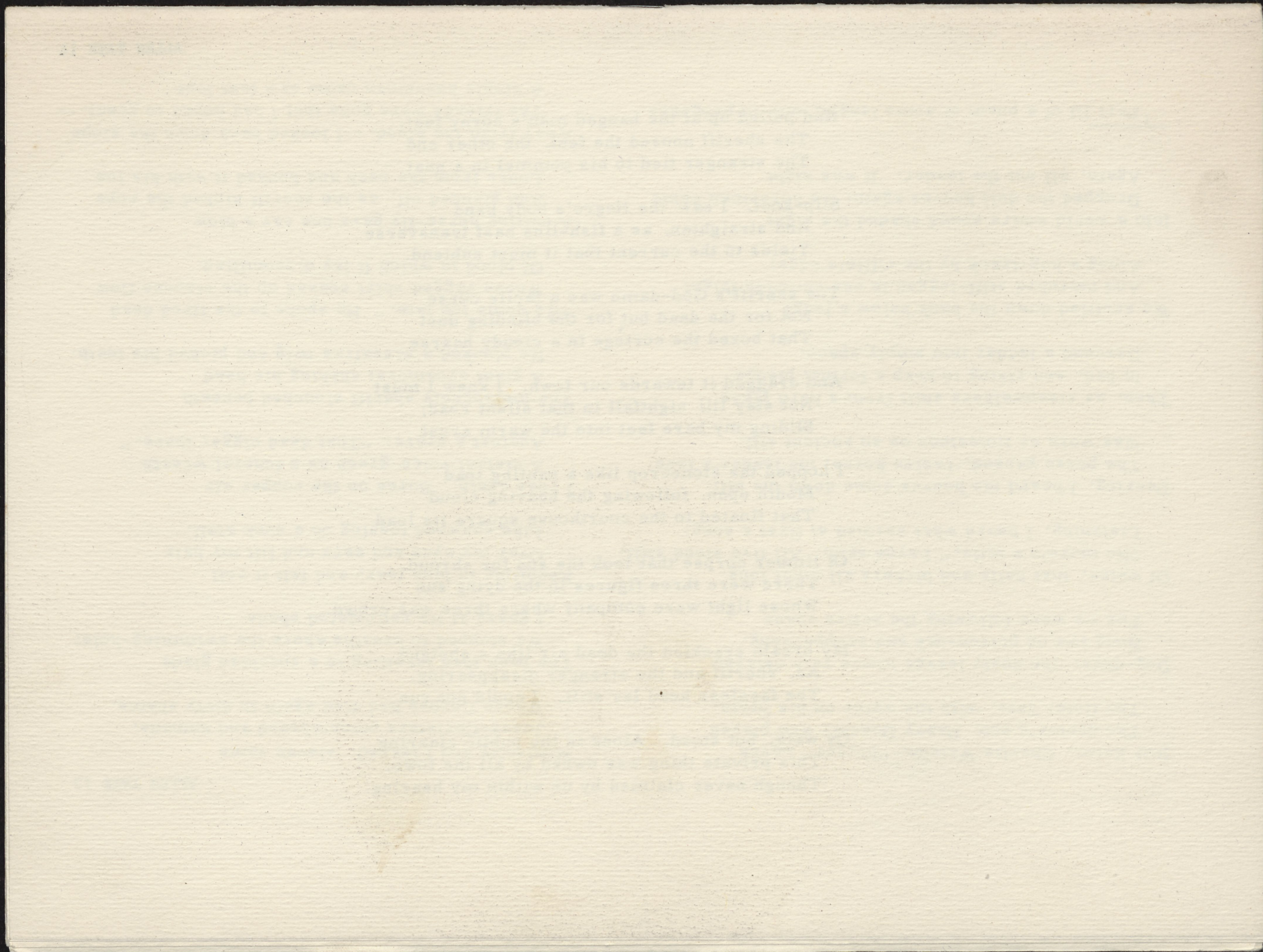
I hopped the stonecrop like a panting toad  
Mouth open, following the heaving cloud  
That floated to the courthouse square its load

Of limber corpse that took the sun for shroud.  
There were three figures in the dying sun  
Whose light were company where three was crowd.

My breath crackled the dead air like a shotgun  
As, sheriff and the stranger disappearing,  
The faceless head lay still. I could not run

Or walk, but stood. Alone in the public clearing  
This private thing was owned by all the town,  
Though never claimed by us within my hearing.







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