Allen Tate

(1899-1979)

## Death of Little Boys (1925)

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 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 cover in an ultimate dream
Will mount to the teeth, ascend the eyes, press back
The locks--while round his sturdy belly gleam
The 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 in his 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.

## ANALYSIS

Perhaps the gauge of Tate's youthful romanticism may be best explored in his much-admired "Death of Little Boys" published in the *Nation* in 1925 when he was twenty-six years old.... The only "classical" element in this adventuresome poem is the plural in the title and the first line. The generalizing character of "boys" extends or is intended to extend an individual experience of death to a universal statement of it. But apart from this gesture (a successful one) there is no concession anywhere in the poem (unless it be in the rather diversified quatrains) to any poem I am familiar with in the "tradition" of English literature up to 1925.

The poem is a consideration of the problem of identity or, more philosophically, the problem of permanence and change. The "you" of the second paragraph is not merely rhetorical address which seeks to involve the reader with the death of little boys, but it achieves exactly that. The bedside is "torn in two" by the "event" of death, which, let us note, does not destroy the little boys but rather the room which crumbles with light. (The room, of course, may be everything which is contained in it.) The "gold curls" are "now deftly intricate with gray" because of the blinding vision of death in which "you" (the onlooker, father, or little boy grown up) must participate because you too feel the fear extended by the windowpane (night or death to which the little boys have in Stanza One surrendered their eyes). The emotional effects throughout are persistently ascribed to the landscape.

In Stanza Three the death is individualized in the singular pronouns (abandoning the universal), in the magnificently concrete, yet symbolic detail of the "sturdy belly" round which "gleam the suspended breaths" of the dead boy, or rather boy-in-man, and "you" (like another Hamlet, a questioning, dubious

intellect) pondering on your cliff feel delirium (death, shifting identity) assailing it (just as, in a similar transfer of affects, it was the room and not the body which crumbled in Stanza One), and your little town (something built, *made*, the ego, perhaps) "reels like a sailor in his rotten skiff." Here the image of the dead boy as a wreck and the little town (the ego) about-to-be-wrecked converge in the sea symbolism. It is at this point (the crisis of the poem) that the fusion of meanings is consummated and the question of permanence (identity) arises like a lonely phoenix from the wreck of little boys (your wreck, of course). The last stanza is an anticlimax, and is so intended. The "bleak sunshine," the discordant shriek of its "chipped music," reaches out to the level of external quotidian existence (milkweed, etc.) where there are no more "events terrific as the sea" but only an ironic calm whose inevitable "precision of moving feet" implies an ultimately similar dissolution of the almost-wrecked ego.

Perhaps this explication will have seemed forced. In that event, I suggest returning to the sea metaphor introduced in Stanza One, picked up and developed in Three and consummated in the harsh despair of "reels," "drunk," and "rotten," to say nothing of the flimsy, useless phonetic fluff of "skiff." By that route, it seems to me, almost the same reading may be developed as the one I have got by the long way. Little boys die in men before men die. Man is torn in two by his past (his little boyhood) and his present. The agency of childhood is mysterious and terrifying in the personality of the man (the aster is man "peeled"--revealed --by his youth).

The certainty of identity (integration of personality) is seriously threatened in Stanza Four. In Five there is a sick rebound: the world and its dull, mechanic inevitability must be met again. The let-down in diction, the clarity of the last stanza as opposed to the complexity of the others, is Tate's cold and disdainful bow to the outer world, to the nowness he *will* not recognize. This, then, is the kind of poetry Tate was writing when he was raging with youthful hauteur against the *nouveaux-arrives* "experimentalists." To recapitulate: "Death of Little Boys" is a very good poem; it is revelatory of Tate's "original" temperamental bent (if learning had not already disguised the interior man); it is certainly as "experimental" as any poem I know of written at that time, including the "romantic" experimentation of Tate's friend, Hart Crane.

Vivienne Koch
"The Poetry of Allen Tate"
*The Kenyon Critics*
ed. John Crowe Ransom
(Kennikat Press 1951) 169-81

"Vivienne Koch has read the poem as an exploration of the problem of identity: man is 'torn in two' by his past--by the death of the boy-in-man--and by his present, here represented in the 'fear' extended from the windowpane in stanza two, the 'delirium' of stanza four. Miss Koch reads the poem correctly, and finds it a 'very good poem' if somewhat experimental and very romantic. I disagree. In spite of the poem's virtues, which I slight by not mentioning, I believe this is one of the clearest examples in all Tate's poetry of the presentation of bogus experience. Yvor Winters has called it 'pseudo-reference.'

It is a dangerous conception, and I am by no means in complete agreement with Winters, though I have somewhat shifted his conclusions to fit my argument. Notice that Tate presents a general theme in a very dramatic form. He asks us to visualize a dying boy lying in bed. We discover that the 'boy' must be generalized to include the youth of all men. Then comes a series of dramatic shifts: to the windowpane with its view of an uncommonly strange aster; to the 'cliffs of Norway'; to a 'little town'; and finally to a small parade of humanity shuffling along in 'chill precision.'

To some extent, a poet has a perfect right to ask us to imagine any scene he wishes. We, in turn, have the right to demand that we be allowed to see precisely what the scene is. This is where it becomes dangerous to say that an experience is 'bogus,' for it is too easy to make this a principle with which to club anything we do not understand. Still, it seems justified here. The famous 'peeled aster,' in spite of attempts to justify it by some readers, remains opaque. The 'sturdy belly' is a very particular characteristic of a boy located nowhere in particular. The shift from the deathbed to the scene of the Norwegian cliffs and rotten skiffs takes place nowhere at all except in Tate's mind: there is no way to tell, from the language, why there should be any cliffs, Norwegian or otherwise. All these are something like objective correlatives which are

not objective at all. Thus the poem fails, not because it is obscure but because it is formally incomplete. The incompleteness is mirrored in the language, which only invokes a precise scene, and does not give precision.

I have perhaps been more harsh with the poem than it deserves, but only in order to establish one way in which the symbolic mode has occasionally betrayed Tate. The same type of thing may be seen, on a lesser scale, in the startling metaphors which conclude 'The Meaning of Life' and 'The Meaning of Death,' metaphors which have been praised by Mr. Brooks and Mr. Nemerov, but which are unjustified. They, too, typify this violation of the major premise of the symbolic mode, that the symbol must be grounded in perception. Tate does not err in this fashion very often. Usually such difficulties as those encountered in 'Death of Little Boys' disappear with scrutiny. This, for instance, is the case in most of those poems, the best of which is 'Seasons of the Soul,' where Tate deliberately creates an hallucination. With careful reading, we discover that the experience, though seemingly chaotic, is quite understandable, that the language carried its own meaning."

R. K. Meiners
*The Last Alternatives: A Study of the Works of Allen Tate*
(Alan Swallow 1963) 105-06

"In 'Death of Little Boys' Tate approaches the reader from a slightly different stance. But his topic and objective are unchanged. Here the poet stands just outside the mind of a representative contemporary. Yet, playing the epistemological poet once more, that mind is what he presents. And the impression we get is of consciousness rendered to motion and found wanting in the process.... Once more, death is the occasion--death, the chief of checks on mortal pride and traditionalist educator *par excellence*. More than other 'rumors of mortality' (the phrase itself well describes the body of Tate's verse), the passing of children scandalizes the positivist's expectation of a secular beatitude, challenges his sense of total power over his condition.

Hence, 'the event will rage terrific as the sea' while bodies fill a crumbling room with light.' For as contemplation of youthful remains indicts the delusion all men at times entertain--that we, in our 'new wisdom,' are becoming gods and masters of our own respective fates--the beholder of those remains is bound to see in the 'peeled aster' beyond the 'windowpane' a memorial of his own corpse in 'gray' upon the selfsame catafalque. Then for all the deathbed guests, the assembled townsfolk, there is only the maelstrom of 'delirium,' a steady drifting into the great suck of despair. In time-honored rituals alone, in the collective formalities of bereavement which contain (by implication) some affirmation of death itself, is there surcease from the pain of disillusion, from the 'immeasurable surrender.' And even that, once the substance is gone out of the forms, is cold relief."

M. E. Bradford
"Origins and Beginnings"
*Rumors of Mortality: An Introduction to Allen Tate*
(Argus Academic Press 1969) 3-17

"The attempt to escape death through a absorption into mechanical order (the streetcars of 'Horation Epode') or an annihilation of thought (the ironic conclusion of 'Homily') is the subject of another poem of this early period, the much-anthologized and discussed 'Death of Little Boys.' Among numerous readings of the poem, Donald Davidson's interpretation, contained in a letter to Tate, stands out for its clarity and accuracy. He compares the poem to a scene in Tate's later novel: 'Abstraction threatens, is indeed imminent, but does not quite prevail at the funeral of Lacy's mother, in *The Fathers*. In 'Death of Little Boys,' it has prevailed; the result is raw fear rather than grief; the 'guests' turn down their palms to repress indecorous (unmodern0 manifestations of grief; people, place, objects lack identification and connection; in the end there is 'calm' but not consolation.'

The poem is an intricate study of spatial relationships manifested by psychological reactions to the natural world. It is about a communal response to the death of a young person known and loved, but the impact of the death on the person addressed in the poem is overwhelming. His feelings are projected by images of things, such as the drenched aster, that seem to threaten from without. The battered flower peers in, as it were, on the scene inside. It possesses a nightmarish quality of natural fury against life--a

psychological echo of the tousled head of the dying boy whose hair has been 'torn in two' by death. The event has a cosmic terror about it that 'will rage terrific as the sea.' The 'little town' that should offer communal solace 'reels like a sailor drunk in his rotten skiff.' The impact of death on the community is described as a kind of vertigo, triggered by the cold, crashing sea of the north, inhospitable and sterile, that threatens below the imaginary 'cliff / Of Norway where you ponder'--another psychological image of remoteness and separation. The waving flower outside the window, the dizzying perspective from the cliff, and the shipwreck all give a sense of helplessness in the face of death. The awesome energy of nature that is deployed in the death-event, even in this quiet room, is met by fear and near-paralysis. The onlookers can find relief only in motion through space without any definable goal--the 'chill precision of moving feet' that takes them away from the fearful scene. Whatever may be true of Tate's other writings, this poem works through a logic of suggestion rather than through definite literary allusions.

A more unusual aspect of 'Death of Little Boys' is its treatment of light. Throughout Tate's poetry, light is ambivalent; it has negative as well as positive connotations--or rather, to speak more precisely, it may reveal death as readily as symbolize life. The results are often interestingly complex, for light is usually associated with space, while time is associated with death. Thus the sudden explosion of light that fills the 'crumbling room' is a disruption of spatial calm. Death transforms the meaning of light. Space is turned into time. It is in this 'chipped music' at the end of the poem that the abstraction is given curiously concrete qualities; a temporal art is treated sculpturally. Furthermore, the scene outside the window has taken on a sense of discontinuity, of gold 'deftly intricate with gray' among the fields of wheat, as an echo of the event within. Space has been destroyed by time and no longer offers a refuge from the fate of all humanity. The dead boy's hair is 'torn in two,' but the phrase is ambiguous enough to refer also to the person who touches the boy's head. Everything has been divided by mortality--youth and age, nature within and without, the psyche and the body. The impact of this harsh reality, where the form is no longer supported by the myth, is felt on every level."

Robert S. Dupree
*Allen Tate and the Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry*
(Louisiana State 1983) 20-21

"[His mother] had a way of making him feel like a child even after he was a grown man. It was not long after he broke with her that he wrote one of his most powerful poems, 'Death of Little Boys,' a poem whose effect on readers the critics have since debated--but which, for Tate himself, might have been another effort toward personal liberation."

Thomas A. Underwood
*Allen Tate: Orphan of the South*
(Princeton/Oxford 2000) 106

Michael Hollister (2021)