

Allen Tate

(1899-1979)

The Meaning of Life (1933)

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.

ANALYSIS

"With very rare exceptions it seems to me that Tate is seldom so successful in his looser, more meditative and 'philosophical' poems as in his more formal and condensed manner. This is not because meditation, or even didacticism, is automatically debilitating, though many critics would have them so, but because Tate's 'philosophical' poems are often those that are most strained. Still, 'The Meaning of Life' (and its companion, 'The Meaning of Death,' which I will not analyze) is an interesting and important poem. It is one of the most direct of Tate's poems, and in spite of what seem to me faults its language is often brilliant.

Lines one through seven contain perhaps the clearest statement in all Tate's poetry of the polarization of experience of which I have spoken. The antithesis here is palpable; two sides of a question are precariously balanced, entering his poetry here as subject matter and not merely as presupposition. He names the two sides of his formulation 'commentary' and 'essence' and makes them permanent qualities of experience. He develops the point somewhat laconically in these lines and the 'think about it at will' of the first line with its slightly diffident tone lends more than a little irony, for the matter is vital, not frivolous.

Tate's 'commentary' and 'essence' form a version of the dilemma which has dogged him throughout his career, traced in earlier chapters. It is a form of a problem ubiquitous in the history of thought and is not likely to be resolved; it is not materially different, for instance, from the Aristotelian-Scholastic distinction between 'accident' and 'substance.' We may assume that the speaker reflects Tate's views; though this is

usually a dangerous assumption, he could have written some of Tate's critical essays. The voice in the poem maintains that there is a basic, yet unnamable quality of which life partakes: I believe it is that 'subjective' element we have seen entering into Tate's critical dilemmas. Connected with this primal quality are secondary configurations by which the intransigent stuff of life is made known, the objective manifestations (note line twenty: 'one's sense of the proper decoration alters'). Although this essence is always known through the commentary, the essence constantly exists in tension with the commentary and is known through it. There could hardly be a clearer summary of Tate's personal paradox; both sides must exist and both must have meaning.

The problem is developed in almost entirely abstract terms in the first seven lines, and this is not surprising, for the poem promises to be philosophical. In a flat statement, Tate insists that a balance must be preserved; if the balance is not preserved, either we will become so embroiled with the external trapping and specific environment of our problems that we forget the continuity of life, or we will become so involved in considerations of the meaning of life (or speculations equally mysterious) that we grow fatally separated from our contemporaries.

If the speaker is indeed using Tate's voices, then lines eight and nine refer not only to the dramatic situation, but also to the whole of Tate's work: 'I was saying this more briefly,' the speaker says. Indeed, it would be difficult to find a more terse and condensed poetry than Tate has produced. 'But one must be explicit as well as brief,' he continues, and we expect him to go on and expand the first seven lines.

The next ten lines are written in an almost completely narrative manner and the change from the opening of the poem is marked. Indeed, in this short poem there are three distinct parts, each with its own tone: the abstract argument of the first seven lines, the narration of the next ten, and the compressed and indirect imagery of the close. It is questionable whether a poem of this length can stand the strain of these shifts, especially since the ostensibly dramatic occasion is weak. This is one instance where Tate's penchant for visualization seems more of a liability than an asset. In spite of this, however, the lines themselves move well, and they *do* illustrate the earlier conception clearly.

As a boy, the speaker felt himself to be different from the old men of his region who shot at each other 'for luck.' A mysterious kind of luck, but read in the light of the first seven lines it becomes obvious that somehow, even if unwittingly, these old men had maintained a balance between 'essence' and 'commentary.' Translated out of the quasi-philosophical language, their outward action worked from the inward conviction; there was a unity of inner moral code and outward moral action. It is the concern for *ethos* which figures so strongly in all Tate's work. I suppose it is questionable whether the 'old men' *actually* possessed any such grand 'unity of being,' but it is not really important: they function as a symbol of an ideal state; they lived in an awareness of transcendent forces somehow amenable to their activity.

The speaker, recalling his childhood, says that he was unlike the old men. At twelve he was determined to shoot for 'honor': a code of chivalry which feeds on an idea of exalted humanity. At twenty, subdued by the dangerous knowledge that the errors of the past must be ameliorated in the wisdom of the present, he had lost even honor, which was a pale reflection at the level of historical myth of the motives of the old men. By the age of thirty-three he has made an act of the imagination and has realized that it was not the shooting which was meaningful, but its motivation: a continuity with the past felt deeply in the blood. In terms of the earlier language, at twenty he had separated essence and commentary, and both were meaningless; by thirty-three he realizes that if the most trivial actions do not spring from the 'essence' the whole idea of motivation has been jeopardized.

By extension, the tragedy of modern man is his lack of some rationale for his actions. It was not the shooting and killing which was valuable; it was what lay behind it. In the sense that killing 'for luck' implies that there are things worth shooting about, killing is good: 'in killing there is more than commentary.' The laconic statement is likely outrageous to many temperaments, but the attitude is clear: in the blood feuds of the Kentucky mountaineers, though seemingly senseless, there is more meaning than in most modern life. The mountaineer allows his sense of continuity, his blood ties, to dictate his action.

As Cleanth Brooks mentions in his commentary in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, the most striking part of the poem is the image which forms the final six lines. It begins with the statement of line twenty: 'One's sense of the proper decoration alters.' This is the 'commentary.' Outward forms change from century to century; the individual perception changes; it is proper that it should be so. The 'but' of line twenty-one introduces the qualification: in spite of change, there is 'lust' which 'feeds on itself.' This lust is the sense of time, essential to man; it is irrational in itself, but necessary for rationality. Here it is compared to the blood in the human body, and the symbolism of blood, used in this manner, is one of Tate's favorite images. The image of blood and body combine in the figure of a cave and water.

Howard Nemerov, in the essay I have mentioned, insists that this is a permanent duality in Tate's poetry: the changing and fluid outward forms and the permanent and continuous essence necessary for stability. This is very likely so; it is the stylistic embodiment of the polarized manner of thinking typical of Tate. What interests me more in this poem, however, is the way the image suddenly bursts on one, combining spatial and temporal qualities, with no preparation in the earlier language. The image is startling, as Cleanth Brooks says, but it is startling largely because it has no business being here. The imagery of 'The Cross,' which I shall examine later, is just as startling, but it works perfectly; this does not.

The image itself is plain enough, however, as a visualization of the earlier philosophical argument. The fundamental quality, or essence, of humanity is 'unspoken to, unspeaking' but it should qualify and form the motives for conscious action, of which the 'shooting' of the Kentucky mountaineers is only a symbol. The blood of the river is full of fish heavy with spawn but eyeless. The unqualified essence is a prerequisite for knowledge, but is itself without knowledge and must be guided. It must never, however, be submerged, lost in the commentary.

The thrust of 'The Meaning of Life' is in accord with Tate's early position, where he was largely devoted to making a religion out of history. It is not a completely successful poem, but not because of its thought, which is certainly serious enough to motivate any number of fine poems whether or not one agrees with it. What makes the poem unsuccessful in my opinion is its general strain, and the consequent disparity which comes from the combination of a fundamentally dramatic situation with a highly symbolic form. They do not, at least here, go together.

In the two poems just examined I have looked closely at some of Tate's techniques and themes. I will conclude this chapter by turning to what is in my judgment Tate's finest short poem and consider these techniques and themes as they operate at the very highest level in his writing: the poem of which I speak is 'The Cross'.... When 'The Cross' was written, it had not been long before that Tate had translated the famous sonnet 'Correspondences.' In this passage is a successful example of correspondence, the transposition of an image from one order of experience to another. 'The Cross,' we may notice, is considerably more conservative in this respect than 'The Meaning of Life' or even 'The Mediterranean,' and it is probably the better for it. Though 'The Cross' has less of that remarkable wit which distinguishes many of Tate's other poems, it also avoids the failure of this mode of imagery, the *preciosity* which is so often Tate's major vice."

R. K. Meiners
The Last Alternatives: A Study of the Works of Allen Tate
(Alan Swallow 1963) 141-45, 149

"A pair of companion poems--'The Meaning of Life' and 'The Meaning of Death'--illustrates the way these oppositions are embodied in imaginative images. The first poem, subtitled 'A Monologue,' ironically shows a greater sense of community than the second, styled 'An After-Dinner Speech.' The two poems suggest the opposition between spirit and letter, for meaning implies some sort of interpretation. The shared images of both poems--particularly the eye and the cave--are given life or death according to the way they are read by the speaker. Both poems recount childhood memories, and both speak of time and darkness. Nevertheless, the meaning of these things is utterly different in each poem. The speakers' individual backgrounds seem to be divergent. One is rural, the other urban; one was exposed early in life to the ambivalences of the world in its mixture of good and evil, the other brought up in fear of the 'mixed modes.'

'The Meaning of Life' begins with a short meditation on exegesis.... Meaning comes as a result of the interplay between the two interdependent 'methods' or ways of approaching life. One way of viewing life sees it as self-sufficient, self-explanatory. Another sees it as requiring explication, unfolding through commentary, even though 'one's sense of the proper decoration alters' and the commentary must be rewritten again and again....

The attitude of the speaker in the poem comes full circle from a repugnance for shooting to a recognition that there are special moments when life can have meaning only if one is willing to take the ultimate responsibility for it. Shooting is a metaphor for attention and commitment, a means of concentrating in the memory a focused image of the preciousness of life and the necessity of taking risks to preserve its essential values. By shooting 'at one another for luck,' the old men in the mountains kept constantly alive their awareness of what it means to live in a community.

The concluding lines of the poem move into the realm of pure life, the unchanging and eternally earthbound 'lust' that is proper within its own domain because, like Aeneas' 'circling shadow of its appetite,' it 'feeds on itself.' Both self-renewing and self-consuming, like the ouroboros, it is an image of pure flowing that is nevertheless pregnant with the future and 'heavy with spawn.' The darkness of the river and blindness of the fish in this passage stand for that ineffability beyond expression that commentary can point to and only partly reveal. They are an image of that 'passion for time / Longer than the arteries of a cave' held in the memory when the commentary is forgotten. If shooting is an act of exegetical attention that relates human action to the essence of life, then the cave is the great unconscious repository of life-blood that can be elevated to the level of the explicit only through the proper commentary executed in an act of total attention."

Robert S. Dupree
Allen Tate and the Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry
(Louisiana State 1983) 148-50

Michael Hollister (2021)