

Allen Tate

(1899-1979)

Aeneas at Washington (1936)

I myself saw furious with blood
Neoptolemus, at his side the black Atridae,
Hecuba and the hundred daughter, 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 uncited 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
Contrived 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.

ANALYSIS

"Aeneas at Washington' contains the same theme [as "The Mediterranean"]. Here Aeneas is both the legendary figure of the ancient past and modern man yearning for the heroic destiny which this heritage seemed to promise him. The first four lines of the poem, taken from Aeneas' account of the Trojan disaster, are a literal translation of *Aeneid* II, 499-502. Tate apparently feels that these lines contain the essence of

the tragedy of Troy, Priam's fate representing the destruction of the majesty and power of Troy; Neoptolemus, the savagery of the destroyer. The passage describes the suffering which Aeneas witnessed and endured, and presents Aeneas as Vergil depicted him at a crucial point in his life.

Tate then goes on to give his own view of what followed these events. His interpretation of Aeneas' conduct and his description of Aeneas as part of a modern American scene suggest what happens to the heroic figure alive today, the heroic nature of man in today's world, and the heroic heritage of modern man in modern society. Tate's interpretation of Aeneas's conduct and deeds begins at line 5:

In that extremity I bore me well,
A true gentleman, valorous in arms,
Disinterested and honorable.

Much of what Tate says in these lines sums up the traditional view of Aeneas. The word 'disinterested,' however, offers a new view of his conduct, and I think is significant for what it tells us not only about Aeneas but about Tate's conception of heroism. Aeneas, as Vergil depicts him, is 'disinterested' because he is concerned with the task at hand, not with his personal safety. He can act 'objectively' in that 'extremity'; he sees what must be done, and even in retreat he acts nobly. In other words, Aeneas is not hampered by inability 'to function objectively in nature and society.' He is not the victim of what Tate calls 'solipsism,' a theme he discusses in 'Narcissus as Narcissus' and develops fully in the 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' but which cannot be ignored in this poem.

In 'Narcissus as Narcissus' Tate says that 'solipsism' is 'a philosophical doctrine which says that we create the world in the act of perceiving it.' It 'denotes the failure of the human personality to function objectively in nature and society. Society (and 'nature' as modern society constructs it) appears to offer limited fields for the exercise of the whole man, who wastes his energy piecemeal over separate functions that ought to come under a unity of being.'

Aeneas can be 'valorous' and 'disinterested' and thus a 'true gentleman' because he is a member of a society which lives by a heroic code. Even at the moment when he witnesses the destruction of that society, he is able to function as a 'whole man,' that is, to set forth to found a new land.

The four lines of the second section of the poem create a brilliant transition, for they describe both aspects of Aeneas: the hero of the *Aeneid* and the man he has become, now 'at Washington,' faced with the problems of modern man.

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

Both the founders of Rome and of America brought to the 'reduction' or conquest of the land 'the vigor of prophecy.' Tate's use of the Latinism 'littorals' recalls, of course, the landing of Aeneas on the *litora* or shore of Italy, but it also suggests that to the settlers of America the country was not merely a shore on which to land but one which contained all the promise of the *litora Italiae*. It implies that they came with a sense of dedication which their tradition, their knowledge of and belief in the ancients, had taught them. But for both the Romans and the Americans, 'hunger [,] breeding calculation,' limited their 'triumphs' to materialistic ones. 'Hunger,' the very image which Tate forms out of the Vergilian myth of eating the tables, to symbolize the desire for a prophetic vision, is used here ironically to imply the need for material fulfillment.

Thus Tate prepares us for the third section in which Aeneas, mindful of his own history, is shocked by the contrast between the promise of the past and the actuality of the present. Now, he 'see[s] all things apart' because, no longer a member of a 'traditional society,' a society 'that permitted [men] to develop a human character that functioned in every level of life' ('What Is a Traditional Society?'), his personal desires have little to do with his nation's needs.

The singular passion
Abides its object and consumes desire
In the circling shadow of its appetite.

A modern man, he has been affected by 'solipsism.' He 'wastes his energy piecemeal over separate functions that ought to come under a unity of being.' The advantage of Aeneas as a symbol here is that Aeneas's career represents history as man once saw history; he symbolizes our tradition and the resources of man as a heroic figure. Aeneas, looking back nostalgically to his own glorious past and questioning the meaning of Troy, symbolizes the tragic nostalgia and conflict of modern man. Our tragedy is not that of a day or a period; it is given significance by its place in history, in time, as Tate sees it, for the past is present in our very defeats, and awareness of it gives us perspective.

The remembrance intensifies the shame of our present weakness, but it also indicates our inherent strength. It warns us against self-destruction; its very living presence is proof that our lives need not be so narrow as we choose to make them. The memory of Troy and 'what we had built her for,' words which contain both tragic insight into the quality of the past and at the same time a plaintive question as to its meaning in the present, imply that we built Troy not only literally but figuratively or poetically out of our need for a heroic destiny and a meaningful way of life. After all, Troy even to the Romans was essentially a myth, and it can, Tate seems to say, serve us as it served them. It is the myth of our own past."

Lillian Feder
"Allen Tate's Use of Classical Literature"
The Centennial Review 4:89-114 (Winter 1960)

"Usually...the qualities which I have called 'harsh' or 'turbulent' come from Tate's habitual refusal to cast his poetry into mellifluous or euphonious language, the language usually assumed to be 'lyrical.' This is partly a matter of diction.... One continually has the impression that Tate has chosen his vocabulary from certain areas of the language, and has carefully excluded other areas. At one extreme of Tate's diction is a passage like the one from 'Aeneas at Washington':

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

This is what might be called Tate's formal or Latin style, and the reader of his poetry must be prepared to find passages of this type: ceremonious, relatively unmodified by imagery in the customary sense, and filled with elliptical predications ('hunger breeding calculation') which demand scrutiny. To illustrate the other extreme of Tate's diction the passage which immediately follows in 'Aeneas at Washington' will serve:

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.

This is very sensuous, though Tate still feels at liberty to call out attention to an unexpected adjective: 'green sun.' Both the first and the second passage are very fine writing, but their qualities are very different. The passages are, in fact, nearly opposed, and it is most significant that Tate juxtaposes them in one poem. A survey of the *Poems* will demonstrate that no one of Tate's poems is written entirely in one extreme of his diction or the other.

This should not give the impression that Tate's typical poem alternates between a formal, Latinized tone and a more physical and sensuous one. Though this occasionally happens, it is far more usual for Tate to write in what I shall call, for convenience, the middle range of his diction. This phrase may be misleading, for it seems to imply a vocabulary drawn from some hypothetical middle ground between equally

hypothetical extremes of abstraction and concretion. But Tate does not achieve his 'middle range' in this fashion, and indeed the phrase is much too neutral to describe his typical manner."

R. K. Meiners

The Last Alternatives: A Study of the Works of Allen Tate
(Alan Swallow 1963) 109-110

"This symbolic stratification of cities is the focus of Tate's companion piece, 'Aeneas at Washington,' usually printed after 'The Mediterranean.' It reverses the situation of the first poem. Instead of dramatizing the discovery by a modern American of the scenes where the Trojans might have landed, Tate imagines Aeneas discovering the shores where the Americans have landed and settled, carrying his Rome to other shores. Aeneas speaks and compares his own actions during the fall of Troy with the motives of the men who have made Washington what it is; he looks back on his flight from the burning city without self-recrimination:

In that extremity I bore me well,
A true gentleman, valorous in arms,
Disinterested and honourable.

After he has done all that can be achieved for his stricken city, Aeneas turns to those things that matter to him personally--his wife and the 'old man' his father--and leaves for a new world after taking up 'cold victualing' (for eating also has a great prominence in this poem). But the crisis is not simply a matter of foreign invasion; there has been an internal change as well: 'civilization / Run by the few' has fallen 'to the many.' Aeneas knows that only two things can survive the collapse of a civilization: 'a mind imperishable' and 'a love of past things.' Aeneas hastily gathers up the few definite things about him--the household gods (*his prima sacramenti memoria*)--and hoists his father, symbol of the living past, onto his back. All that remains of the particular Troy he was a part of is his love of it, 'tenuous as the hesitation of receding love' symbolized by the fading ghost of his first wife Creusa.

Although Aeneas is aware of the divine origins of his conquering energies, he recognizes that his chief responsibility lies in exercising them with prudence and restraint.

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

The words that play against each other are all Latin-derived--'reduction' is tempered by 'vigor,' 'calculation' by 'fixed.' The behavior common to ravaging conquerors has been muted and softened. The point of the aside is that any human community is a matter of compromise between good and bad elements, but exaggerated Latinisms like 'littorals' also remind the reader that 'reduction' (*reductio*, a 'leading back') and 'calculation' have neutral senses. Aeneas, like other men, has lust for power, but he has learned to control and contain it because he has the knowledge of his city's destiny that will limit his ambition. In fact, Aeneas alone possesses the controlling detachment that is possible when life is informed by a myth; he can 'see all things apart.' The proper human proportion of desire is, after all, related to reasonable fulfillment. There is no lust for power in Aeneas' meditations:

Now I demand little. The singular passion
Abides its object and consumes desire
In the circling shadow of its appetite.

Unlike the modern explorer or pioneer, Aeneas can be satisfied because his desire does not stray from its object and is eliminated once his appetite is satisfied.

What Aeneas sees, however, has certainly been swollen out of proportion to the needs of refounding a fallen city. Looking at Washington, the first city in the world created specifically for government, Aeneas must admit that his original motives for building a new community have become unrecognizable: 'The city my blood had built I knew no more.' Washington is a city built not with blood but with geometric

abstractions and disembodied ideas. Washington is the symbol of what Spengler calls 'infinite relations, conceivable only in pure Space' by the Faustian imagination. The Greeks, according to Spengler and others, abhorred the 'desensualized idea of infinity of the Unextended, or 'Time actualized as infinite Space.' The great dome of the Capitol is a new symbolic center of the universe, but the light that plays about it suggests the enlightenment of the abstract will for power rather than a return to a traditional cosmos, and this city of Faustian men has been created through the imposition of a geometric pattern on the 'wet mire' of the world. Aeneas finds himself at an enormous distance from 'the ninth buried city' of his homeland, and his alienation is created by a disjunction of both time and space.

The darkest image in the poem, however, is the screech-owl's whistle, a sound that in 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' evokes the fury of battle. In this poem it may represent another allusion to the *Aeneid*. The owl is, of course, Athena's bird and a symbol of wisdom; but in oriental and middle-eastern mythologies, it symbolizes 'death, night, cold and passivity,' according to J. E. Cirlot. Since confronting the dark and coming to a deeper understanding are not opposed in Tate's other writings, it may be that the owl stands for both. Cirlot says that the owl symbol 'pertains to the realm of the dead sun, that is, of the sun which has set below the horizon and which is crossing the lake of sea of darkness.' Associated with twilight, the owl can be seen as the harbinger of Spengler's final phase of civilization. Certainly Tate uses it as an image of falling time and twilight... But even more suggestive is the Virgilian parallel that occurs toward the end of the *Aeneid*, when Megaera in the form of an owl causes Turnus to recognize the inevitability of his fate: 'She beholds the Trojan armies and the troops of Turnus, having suddenly contracted into the form of the little bird, which sometimes sitting by night on graves, or abandoned roofs, untimely sings her late strain among the shades.'

The sight of the dome and all its pretensions to permanence is challenged by the sound of the bird; once again Tate opposes the visual and the aural to suggest transience."

Robert S. Dupree
Allen Tate and the Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry
(Louisiana State 1983) 142-45

"In...'Aeneas at Washington,' Tate conflated the ancient world with that of his childhood in Kentucky and Washington D.C....written during peak years of Tate's commitment to Agrarianism."

Thomas A. Underwood
Allen Tate: Orphan of the South
(Princeton/Oxford 2000) 187, 258

Michael Hollister (2021)