Allen Tate

(1899-1979)

Last Days of Alice (1931)

Alice grows 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--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!

ANALYSIS

"Davie remarked that the adjective 'greens' [in "Idiot"] is used as a verb, and the words normally read as adjectives in the last lines serve as nouns. For Davie, this is 'expressive form' and the attitude behind the poem implies that 'to write poetry or to read it, we have to behave like idiots.' I agree with Davie; this is what I have called a distortion of the symbolic mode. But this is not typical of Tate, though it happens fairly often in his early poems. The pressure Tate customarily exerts on syntax is quite different. The lines from 'Last Days of Alice' are far more typical"

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:

Here the adjectives are still adjectives, but they are totally unexpected; similarly with the verb in the line from 'Mr. Pope': 'he who dibbled couplets like a snake.' The effect of this type of writing is one form of the 'harshness' I have mentioned: it hammers upon our expectation and forces us to hitch up our attention. Usually, however, the qualities which I have called 'harsh' or 'turbulent' come from Tate's habitual refusal to case his poetry into mellifluous or euphonious language, the language usually assumed to be 'lyrical.' This is partly a matter of diction. To call upon Donald Davie again, one continually has the impression that Tate has chosen his vocabulary from certain areas of the language, and has carefully excluded other areas....

Often, Tate's vision of the disparity between the ideal and the actual is modulated into irony similar to that in 'Ditty.' Sometimes this is merely the forcing of a word or phrase into one of his characteristic puns or ambiguities. In 'Last Days of Alice' the cat grins his 'abstract rage' in an abstract world. Alice 'gazes learnedly down her airy nose' like Narcissus into a looking glass world which reflects nothing but herself; the pun on 'airy' refers to both the vapor-thin world we share with Alice and the strange snobbery which makes us proud of it... With no announcement, he will appropriate a conventional form or design and put it to a use which deliberately strains the convention. The 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' is the most famous example, but there are others, such as the forcing of Walt Whitman into *terza rima* in 'False Nightmare'...."

R. K. Meiners
The Last Alternatives: A Study of the Works of Allen Tate
(Alan Swallow 1963) 109, 120

"In most of his collections, Tate prints 'The Eagle' alongside 'Last Days of Alice' to suggest their complementariness, but the relationship between the two poems has evoked little comment. Both poems are given fantastic settings, but the latter one perhaps owes its greater familiarity among readers to the popular books that inspired it. In this poem Alice has been changed from Lewis Carroll's curious little Victorian child into a modern heroine. She has gone through the looking glass, not in search of another world, but to join with her own reflection. Once on the other side of the mirror, she is incapable of returning. She remains in an abstract and frozen nirvana, where she is neither flesh nor spirit. Her body has been reduced to a geometrical outline, and her spirit has rejected intellect and feelings for the assertive will. She has 'grown lazy, mammoth but not fat,' like the modern world she stands for. Like the exploded apple of 'The Eagle,' she has lost all palpability.

On a historical level, one may read both poems as allegories of Spengler's Faustian era in its 'lost and twilight age.' Dominated by the final stages of rationalism, extreme individualism, and fragmentation, men in this period turn to abstract mathematical language as their primary means of expression. Alice is, like the eagle, Western man pushed into the ultimate range of a Faustian drive for power.

On a personal level, the poem is about self-love. Like the eagle, Alice is part of a disintegrated personality. The 'All-Alice of the world's entity' has been 'smashed in the anger of her hopeless love.' She has lost her sense of the exterior world and has turned from a desire to know herself to a form of radical solipsism. In doing so, she becomes like Poe's heroes and heroines, who 'are always burning with a hard, gemlike flame--a bodiless exaltation of spirit,' as Tate describes them. For Alice, too, is

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.

In 'Our Cousin, Mr. Poe,' Tate speaks of the peculiar form of incest in 'The Fall of the House of Usher': 'In none of the...comment...that I have read...is there a feeling of shock, or even of surprise, that Roderick Usher is in love with his sister: the relation not being physical, it is "pure".' This Manichaeism was hidden from Poe's readers because it was given symbolic, not literal, expression in the stories. Yet Tate sees it as unmistakable:

> The symbolic compulsion that drives through, and beyond, physical incest moves towards the extinction of the beloved's will in complete possession, not of her body, but of her being; there is a reciprocal force, returning upon the lover, of self-destruction.... Two persons of the least dissimilarity offer the least physical resistance to mutual participation in the *fire* of a common being... They are living in each other's insides, in the hollows of which burns the fire of will and intellect.

Tate's Alice goes a step further than Poe's heroes, who are, after all, literally two. Hers is an even more intense incest, achieved in

Love for herself who, as an earthly twain,
Pouted to join her two in a sweet one.

Alice's divided self is united not by a return to the 'world's entity' but by a peculiar geometric abstraction. She has become pure thought without content, gazing 'At nothing, nothing thinking all the day.' The stages of contemplation through which Beatrice led Dante have been collapsed into one. Alice is both Beatrice and Dante, beloved and lover. The beatific vision of the totally other has been replaced by Alice's demonic vision of the totally empty self. She has become all eye, concentrating her being in the 'linear sight' of the highest organ of abstraction among the senses. Instead of the world, she dwells in a geometrical universe of pure forms. The Beatrice who expounded difficult theological matters for Dante has become as ignorant as the sinner who lost himself in the dark forest. The analogical mirrors that Tate discusses in 'The Symbolic Imagination' as the eminently successful image of connatural knowledge in Dante's Paradise are reduced to tools of self-destruction.

The concluding lines of the poem show that damnation is worse in a world without faith than in a believer's world, for faith at least allows one to see more than a single level of meaning in the world. In rejecting all intermediaries, Alice has lost the ability to dwell in reality; as a consequence, she is neither damned nor saved--a figure akin to the indifferent shades Dante sees before the gate of Hell. Hers is not a unique dilemma, however, for it is shared by all moderns:

--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!

Although Alice has lost her being in a kind of self-violence, her example can be instructive to others if they can exercise a sense of analogy. The poet can speak imaginatively, even though Alice cannot. He asks at the end of the poem that man be given only a sense of his finitude, not a certainty of salvation. Unlike the condemned Guido da Montefeltro, who told his tale to Dante because he could not believe that anyone would ever return from Hell to repeat his story of damnation, the speaker of the poem recognizes his plight and prays that man may be restored to the living world before it is too late. At the end of the poem Tate employs a device used by Baudelaire in 'Au Lecteur' or by Eliot in his 'Prufrock': the speaker suddenly addresses his reader as a denizen of the same hell as he himself occupies. The only way to beatitude that is meaningful is one in which man encounters difficulty and suffering, in which he must 'falter on the stony path,' for only through such a way can he learn to act out the meaning of his own fallibility and deserve the love of another.

'Last Days of Alice' is about a perverse love that is not of the body. In Augustine's time, the materialistic world of Rome threatened the spiritual dimensions of life; but in the modern era, there is perhaps not enough materialism in the proper sense to make love real. Modern man is more like a Manichaean than a pagan; he rejects more often than embraces the body. In the two parts of 'Inside and Outside,' already discussed briefly in connection with 'The Cross,' Tate gives a dramatic image of this temperament. The young woman who dies in the soundless room reveals nothing of her decease. There are strangely suggestive hints of vampirism in the scene. The 'outside' of her appearance does not betray the reality of her 'body's life,' which

deep as a foul well,
Instinctive as the wind, busy as May,
Burns out a secret passageway to hell.

She is like Poe's heroines in appearance, ready to rise from the coffin at any moment. Yet it is not the girl herself who is responsible for this vampiric appearance. It is those 'who hold her pulses dear.' The poem is not about the girl but about the effect of her death upon others.

The onlookers, 'speechless,' 'bloodless,' and 'white to the eye,' do not fear for her so much as for themselves, and their hope is that daylight will somehow fight off the terrors of death. It is darkness and silence that they resist, knowing that their vigil is powerless to prevent either fear of death or inevitable mortality. They would 'mortify' their fear--the verb suggests 'control of the passions,' 'causing to feel shame,' and 'bringing about death and decay' as possible shades of meaning. Day, like a hunter, rounds up their fears for the attack; but the mourners are powerless. They cannot attack death with speech, and nothing that is said to them will ward off their terror. This play of inside and outside, darkness and light, vigilance and fear can be overcome only by a yielding to the human condition. As long as a man is part of the natural world, he will know death. Only Gabriel's trumpet, the intervention of something above nature into time, can break the terrible silence and justify the existence of death in the world. Without the hope that the supernatural offers, death is an evil that the natural order cannot justify."

Robert S. Dupree
Allen Tate and the Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry
(Louisiana State 1983) 91-95

"It was also during the period that Tate produced the 'Last Days of Alice,' a poem that Yvor Winters heralded as 'possibly the best' he had ever written. In the poem, Tate used the mirror in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* as a metaphor for the division between the spiritual and the material world.'I have jerked the looking-glass world into an analogy with the world of modern abstract science, which has killed the spiritual life of man,' Tate explained. The modern world, Tate elaborated, one of 'sheer quantity, measure, form, and size,' had torn man from religion. Since the prospects were much better for a sinner than for a man incapable of religious faith, the faithless were wiser to ask 'the God of our flesh to bless us again with damnation, i.e., to restore us to a sensuous life' of spirituality. 'O god of our flesh,' the poem's speaker prays,

return to us your wrath,
Let us be evil could we enter in
Your grace, and falter on the stony path!

This theme, Tate told Virginia Lyne Tunstall, 'runs through every poem I've written'."

Thomas A. Underwood
Allen Tate: Orphan of the South
(Princeton/Oxford 2000) 178

Michael Hollister (2021)