Allen Tate

(1899-1979)

The Mediterranean (1936)

Quem das finem, rex magne, dolorum?

Where we went in the boat was a long bay
A sling-shot 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 drive 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 prophesy of eaten plates could landless
Wanderers fulfill by the ancient sea?

We for that time might taste
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 deep
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
Unmans 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 world where tasseling corn,
Fat beans, grapes sweeter than muscadine
Rot on the vine: in that land were we born.

ANALYSIS

"In both 'The Mediterranean' and 'Aeneas in Washington' Tate deals with the problem of modern man's loss of a tradition, and in both poems the Vergilian world provides an ideal against which Tate measures the present. The ancient world is not simply a means of showing up the shortcomings of the present, however; it is also an image of the potential if unrealized nobility inherent in modern man, who denies his own heritage and thus his own power.

The epigraph to 'The Mediterranean,' *Quem das finem, rex magne, dolorum?* in which Tate substitutes the word *dolor* for Vergil's word *labor* (*Aeneid* I, 241), suggests both Tate's ironic method and the theme of the poem. When Aeneas prays for an end to his *laborum*, he is asking for respite from the suffering involved in completing the heroic task of founding the Roman nation, which exacts a price of pain but offers the reward of self-fulfillment. Modern man, however, deprived of a heroic goal, a *virtutis opus*, can only cry for an end to his *dolorum*, his grief or mental anguish. The difference, of course, lies not only in the quality of ancient and modern men, but in the societies in which they live.

Tate uses the classical past in his poetry to represent a unified society in which man's behavior is directed by a heroic code of conduct. Aeneas in 'The Mediterranean' and 'Aeneas in Washington' is Tate's conception of the traditional man, inspired by his attachment to his nation and his people; he can live by a heroic code of conduct and perform a heroic task because he is able to forego personal satisfaction for the larger pursuit of a national goal.

In 'The Mediterranean' we, modern men, sail on a pilgrimage through the very seas on which Aeneas struggled to achieve his heroic mission. Tate's language here echoes Vergil's: 'long bay' is a literal translation of *secessu longo* and 'towering stone' calls to mind *vastae rupes* (I, 159-62). The phrases help to recall Aeneas' journey, but more important, they imply that modern man attempts to relive Aeneas' experience.

The first three stanzas begin with the words, 'Where we went,' and the next two with the word 'Where.' In this way Tate suggests the compulsive repetition of our quest. Like Aeneas and his men, we wander and search. As the travelers reach shore, the real meaning of the quest becomes clear. The desperation of their need is contained in the most important image of the poem, the image of feasting. Tate evokes the ancient ritual to suggest modern despair and frustration. For Aeneas the eating of the 'mensas,' the cakes that serve as 'tables,' was a casual act symbolic of the great deeds to be performed; for us it is a desperate, secret need.

We, 'hastening to drink all night / Eat dish and bowl to take that sweet land in!' We try through imitation of an ancient ritual to re-create the world in which it was possible to live heroically. The dramatic urgency of these lines conveys the need of modern man for a noble goal, but at the same time the futility of his quest is implied by Tate's adaptation of the myth to image. Aeneas did not attain the destined land because he ate the tables; this act was merely a sign of his accomplishment. We seek the magic of the sign, of the ceremony, of the legends the past has left us, for we have no goal of our own beyond that of personal gratification. Therefore, we devour dish and bowl only to ask: 'What prophecy of eaten plates could landless / Wanderers fulfill by the ancient sea?' We merely 'taste the famous age,' but we cannot participate in its spirit, and so we cannot fulfill ourselves."

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

"'The Mediterranean'...has stood first in every collection of Tate's verse since 1932. In many ways the poem is admirably suited to be the logical introduction to Tate's poetry, for in an extremely compressed manner it displays many of his habitual techniques and some of his most important themes and attitudes. Furthermore, though 'The Mediterranean' is not Tate's best poem it is very fine; certainly it belongs among the first half-dozen of his shorter poems.

The poem has a complexity which is typical of Tate's work. Overtly, it is a dramatic poem, but the scene of the poem is both reinforced by allusion and symbolic of larger matters. In a sense, there are 'tiers' to the

poem and it must be simultaneously read at three levels. First, there is the literal description of the dramatic setting, which is one day in the present. Next we encounter an extended reference to events mainly described in the *Aeneid*. These events, played against the description of the present, yield the final and most important level: a comment on the human condition in the modern world, conceived primarily in historical terms....

The motto of the poem comes from the *Aeneid,* I, 241. Venus is speaking to Jupiter, inquiring the fate of Aeneas and his companions. She asks, 'Quem das finem, rex magne, *laborum*'--'what limit do you set to their labors, great king?' The change from *laborum* to *dolorum* is significant, and Lillian Feder has described it precisely: it signifies a shrinking of the human stature from the possibility of fulfilling heroic tasks to the endurance of pointless mental anguish and despair.' However, Miss Feder's interest in the classics has caused her to see Tate's use of the past too literally, as a sort of nostalgia for an elusive 'unity of being' allegedly present in the classical past. Tate's use of the past is actually more profound. Though there is some real implication of greater unity in the 'famous age,' the poem does not depend upon the literal existence of an historical moment of ideal heroism. For the past was likely as disorganized as the present, though perhaps in a different fashion; in Vergil and other classical art a unity has been realized which is at least in some ways symbolic of an ideal by which we may measure our confusion.

At any rate, the motto should warn us that a knowledge of the *Aeneid* and its significance is necessary to understand how Tate uses it and where he departs from it. Furthermore, it is a warning that some lines and phrases which may seem opaque are actually allusions. These are not merely illustrative, nor are they precious or strained. More than most poets, Tate pulls his allusions into the texture or the poem, modifying and shifting them to fit his own purposes. The motto is a hint that Tate intends to used the *Aeneid* in some fashion, though it is not yet apparent what this fashion may be.

After a few lines the realization should come that Tate has so fused time present and past as to make them one; the day in the present blurs at the edges and flows into the events of the *Aeneid*, and Aeneas himself seems to hover about the original locale of his triumphs. Aeneas was a refugee from the ruined Troy, a 'landless wanderer' seeking a new country. The implication is that 'we,' citizens of a different age, are also in search of a place where we may find roots, where we can establish a living tradition as did Aeneas. But Tate immediately forces a perception of the distance between our reality and this ideal. As Miss Feder points out, the repetition of 'Where we went' and 'Where' at the opening of the stanzas suggests a compulsive repetition; coupled with other language in the poem and the emphatic, iterative colons at the close of the first three stanzas there is an implied sense of permanent frustration.

In my previous chapter I mentioned Tate's constant playing with opposites. Not the least important of these polarizations is this blending of the past and the present which we see perfectly demonstrated in 'The Mediterranean.' Tate accomplishes the fusion here mainly through subtle echoes of Vergil; in the first stanza, which locates the poem, there are several. The 'long day' is a literal rendering of Vergil's *secessu longo* and the 'towering stone' recalls the *vastae rupes* of the *Aeneid*; in later stanzas the 'black hull' and the 'small ship' recall the voyage of Aeneas and insist upon a parallel which seems almost too grand for the occasion but is justified as the poem builds. In the first stanza one must visualize a secluded bay, much like the bay Aeneas found when he first landed on the Italian shore, where a group of people have gone for a holiday from monotonous city life. To reinforce the blending of present and past into a sort of timeless isolation, Tate prolongs the description of the stone cliff which surrounds the bay. He jams space and time together; 'peaked margin of antiquity's delay'; the cliff is not merely the border between the beach and the higher inland, but a temporal border.

This extreme, elliptical compression is typical. The poem begins with the sense of some significance brooding behind seemingly insignificant events. Rapidly, with several slight, flickering allusions, Tate hints at the supra-temporal nature of the occasion, and makes the hint stronger with the emphatic 'time's monotone' which closes the first stanza. At this point there should be a strong realization that in some sense time *itself* is, if not the subject of the poem, at least a powerful element. As the poem develops, it moves toward an important judgment in the implicit comparison of an ideal unity, symbolized in the mythical past, with the monotone of the present. The poem was published first in 1933; behind this conception there are undoubtedly the shadows of the traditional and the untraditional society. Time has become monotonous and

frustrating and the travelers have retreated not only from the city but also into classical antiquity or, rather, to the idea which it symbolizes.

The party has arrived in a black hull much like the one which carried Aeneas. 'No light moved': there is no mark for the eyes, no guide; they are carried by a breeze 'fierce but unseen'.... [In "The Meaning of Life'] 'lust' has much in common with the 'breeze' of 'The Mediterranean.' Both function as symbols of Tate's continual insistence on what he might call the 'analogical ladder.' Human nature and human experience must not be divorced from the natural environment; the individual's sense of his time depends on his sense of physical history. In the fullest sense of that usually trite phrase, there must be a *vital* relationship between man and nature. It does not seem to me tenuous to see the 'breeze' of this second stanza, blowing through a timeless world, as a great deal more than a wind blowing a boat: though unconscious it, too, is a 'passion for time,' a feeling for the longer perspectives.

This is emphasized by the repetition of 'Where we went' and 'Where.' As I have already mentioned, this helps to create a sense of urgency, but it does even more, and the procedure is so typical of Tate it should be carefully marked. This usage of language is elevated, even portentous: there is more going on in the first two stanzas than is stated, more seriousness than seems warranted. The language of the first stanza is almost conventional, and the language, once raised to such a level, demands a subject of importance. This is good rhetorical technique if the importance which seems to be promised is produced. And it is. The social outing is an unusual one; in the third stanza the party has the impression that they have 'devoured the very plates Aeneas bore.' I refer to Miss Feder once more: 'Aeneas did not attain the destined land because he ate the plates; this act was merely a sign of his accomplishment. We seek the magic of the sign...for we have no goal of our own beyond that of personal gratification.'

I can give only partial assent to Miss Feder's reading of what she rightly discerns to be a crucial passage. The reference is to Book III of the *Aeneid*; the harpies, angered by Aeneas driving them away, have placed a curse upon him: he will not reach the land he is seeking until his party has been reduced to eating the plates which they carry. In the *Aeneid* the curse is casually fulfilled when the men eat the wheaten cakes on which they had placed food, a sign that the destination has been reached. There is also eating on this later social occasion, but the distance between the two occasions is enormous. In spite of the self-conscious feeling of participation, there is no ritual here, no public dimension. There is, instead, a furtiveness and desperation, akin to and yet different from the mock-communicants in Eliot's 'Gerontion.'

This is a vital point in the poem, and it has at least a double meaning: the most obvious import is that of ego-centricity, the 'secret need' of the moment. This isolation is modified, however, by a sense of history, a feeling for the past in the present, which is only half ironic; the protagonists have the sense of eating the utensils of Aeneas, fulfilling the terms of the prophecy and finding for a time the roots of the past. Still, Miss Feder is certainly correct when she insists on the almost parody-like quality of the passage; the most important impression it leaves is that of precariousness and inadequacy. The recapitulation of the past is only temporary. If 'The Mediterranean' is representative of Tate's sense of the past, and I believe it is, that sense is certainly something far different from nostalgia.

The fourth stanza introduces another image which grows from the earlier stanzas. Again, it must be read on three levels. 'Derelict' of line thirteen refers, in its widest significance, to the estrangement of the historically minded man from a meaningful tradition. It also has the connotations of a boat drifting aimlessly, either in the historical past as a literal reference to America, or as a symbolic comment on the present and the boat which has brought the characters to their destination. The image is extended and amplified through the rest of stanzas four and five. The group, having arrived at their destination, 'feasted and caroused' and 'affected our day of piracy.' The feeling of haste and urgency grows naturally from the 'secret need' of line eleven. We have here a rendering of that lust which feeds on past time of the passage from 'The Meaning of Life': which lust alone can assimilate, for us, past cultures and past knowledge. That is, in our present condition, estranged from the past, an act of will--or piracy--is required to seize the past. The phrase 'eat dish and bowl' recapitulates line twelve and refers to the act of removing a curse, whether the curse was that on Aeneas of, more urgently, the one on the present moment.

The momentary shift to the second person seems to accent the ceremonial qualities and no matter how private or futile this ceremony may seem to be, any seizing of the past, any knowledge of its tangible presence must be, in terms of Tate's thought, at least a limited good. I disagree somewhat with Miss Feder at this point. Though, as she notes, the modern scene is here preposterously removed from its classical model, it still carries the sense of removing a curse. Modern culture is, in a very real way for Tate, cursed. It is only by losing what he called the 'remarkable self-consciousness of our age,' by seizing the past with a lustful violence which may well be 'piracy,' that we have any chance of establishing ourselves.

The final four stanzas of the poem have a slightly different emphasis. No new concepts are introduced; the imagery is consistent with the earlier imagery. However, the curse, merely implied in earlier stanzas, becomes explicit in the remainder of the poem. The concluding stanzas are denunciatory; they trace the fatal lack of the historical imagination in the modern mind. In the last four stanzas the rhetoric gains intensity with every line until the final period, encompassing the last five lines, takes the whole conception and seals it. This is fine writing; on the whole the last stanzas are more successful than the earlier ones. The theme is introduced by the question in lines nineteen and twenty: 'What prophecy of eaten plates could landless / Wanderers fulfill by the ancient sea?'

The tone of the question is wistful. Tate's imagination was almost entirely occupied with history; if the poem becomes more and more despairing from this point on, it seems to me only a symbol of what finally happens to the theme of history in Tate's writing. The position in 'The Mediterranean,' a relatively early poem, is that we can know the 'famous age' only partially; we can know it only for the brief instant we have retreated from the industrialized cacophony of contemporary civilization and have established, by an act of historical imagination, a union with the past. Though Tate has been charged with escapism on this score, this is hardly so. Even his early attitude, which is fairly well represented here, is not escapism but the conviction that the present can have no significance unless understood in light of the past.

In this secluded cove, classical antiquity seems to be eternal though there are no visible remains of the age. Lines twenty-three and twenty-four may prove puzzling. The reference is clear enough though it is to the *Odyssey*, not the *Aeneid* (10:54; Vergil alludes to the same passage). The 'lust for power' and 'stuffless rage' demand clarification. They mean: we have lost the possibility of heroism. In 'The Mediterranean' the heroic tasks and battles of classical antiquity have shrunk to the level of neurosis: our battles are fought at our nerve-ends. And heroism can exist only if man is dignified; he can be dignified only if he is measured by an external standard. The 'lust for power' destroyed that. The crew of Odysseus undid themselves by loosing the winds. Modern man, seeking to make the powers of the universe subservient to himself, to raise himself--in Tate's words--to the level of angels, has equally undone himself. The storm is more frightening than any created by winds from a wineskin; in seeking to transcend nature, man has forgotten his limitations; he has cut himself off from the tradition which has formed and given direction to Western culture.

The next stanza describes this 'lust for power' by opposition. In the temporary rapport with the past we can 'lie down once more by the breathing side of Ocean.' In the past nature was spiritualized; ocean was personality: this is more than animism, almost a sacramental view of nature. We see nature as simply physical, but on this quiet day in the Mediterranean the feeling that the forefathers are alive, that they have some vital connection with our activity, temporarily exists. It is as if we had retreated through the centuries and taken up residence in the geographically limited ancient world. Ocean once more circumscribes the earth and demons dwell at the edge of the unknown. Though such superstition is too much for our modern wisdom, it may yet function as a limiting conception. But we are yet in the modern world, where 'Atlantis howls but is no longer steep.' There no longer exists a mythical or religious restriction to our ambitions. We may argue as to the effects, but I take it there is not too much room for dispute that the religious dimension *has* shrunk. The last two stanzas trace Tate's vision of the consequences. We see a world in which, if we may believe the Christian doctrine that the sins of man have polluted nature, even the physical environment seems to be rotting.

The sentiments in the poem may be unpleasant or even repugnant to many readers. Yet there is more in this poem than well-written cultural primitivism. We may question--as I have--whether such an age as this ideal heroic one ever really existed. But we know, or should know, that a myth is not necessarily a

substitute for history: it may be an image of some aspect of our nature. And that is the way in which I prefer to view Tate's myth: as a warning to modern culture that it has forsaken too many of the qualities which have made it a culture; it has forsaken too much of a truly human vision of man.

But the poem is not an essay in morals and I do not mean to make it sound that way. It is a fine poem, which, because it is so typical, gives an excellent insight into Tate's methods. There are some flaws, but they are not serious; some of the lines, especially in the middle stanzas, are strained. A few of the images seem private, but this is illusory and a little serious reading of Tate's work and acquaintance with his techniques will remove the difficulty.

I have, however, slighted some important features of the poem, particularly the skillful rhetoric in the concluding stanzas which builds to its climax in the final five lines, a passage which seems capable of standing with almost anything Tate has written. Beginning with line thirty-two, the language runs in a single period to the end of the poem. The passage moves in a rush toward the tired understatement 'in that land were we born.' It qualifies all that has come before, and the effect is one of an almost resigned bitterness at the richness which has been wasted.

The texture of the final five lines is extremely sensual, reinforcing the impression of richness ripening down into rottenness, decay, and frustration. The effect begins with the repetition of 'westward' at the beginning of the stanza and the sense of inexorability the repetition gives. This is immediately strengthened by the alliterated 'barbarous brine.' From this moment to the close of the poem Tate increasingly richens the texture of his poem: consonance, assonance--particularly the repetition of the 'i' sound--internal rhyme, successive long vowel sounds. The whole effect would be cloying, satiating, if that were not the precise result Tate were seeking, and if he did not relieve it with the flatness of that final summary. It is difficult to imagine how he could have made the passage more effective or conveyed the sense of the past rotting into the present more conclusively. Those critics who have spoken of the 'stiffness' or 'dryness' or Tate's poetry should read the passage and dozens like it again: he an be among the most sensual of poets when it serves his purposes."

R. K. Meiners
The Last Alternatives: A Study of the Works of Allen Tate
(Alan Swallow 1963) 132-40

"In 'The Mediterranean,' rhythm and meaning are in complete harmony, and Tate's concern with modernity, vis-a-vis the legendary past, is given lyrical expression. Within a rich texture of rhyme, using assonance and dissonance, the poem moves forward, as a narrow boat with its long, black hull glides on the waters. Beginning in the present, a day of Mediterranean sea and sun, passing across the borders of time, the lines summon another expedition.

Where we went in the boat was a
long bay
A slingshot wide, walled in by
towering stone--

At once the high cliffs of the *calanque* have become 'the peaked margin of antiquity's delay.' Tate's casual summer outing takes on a new quality--'we went there out of time's monotone.' The ocean 'where our live forefathers sleep'; the thunder-tossed green coast of Africa; all the surroundings bring memories of Aeneas and his companions returning after Troy, bearing the prophecy of the eaten plates and the possibility that they may never reach the land they sought. A sense of the famous age, 'eternal here yet hidden from our eyes,' overwhelms the voyagers. Where shall they go? 'We've cracked the hemispheres with careless hand!' They ask the question Venus asked of Jupiter in *The Aeneid*: 'What limit do you set to their labors. Great King?' the epigraph of Tate's poem (in Latin). The voyagers must go 'westward till the barbarous brine / whelms us to the tired land where tasseling corn . . . fat beans rot on the vine.' And here a voice of the frustrated modern being within the poet speaks: 'In that land were we born.' A land of power, of opportunity --but never a land of heroic greatness'."

Katherine Garrison Chapin
The New Republic 153:4-5, 22-24

(24 July 1965)

"If Rome had often been characterized by the appetites proper to the City of Man, Virgil has shown that there were higher impulses at work in its founding. The other side of Virgil's achievement in the light of Augustine's transformation is carried on by Dante. However, as Christopher Dawson has pointed out, 'Dante's view of the Empire is entirely opposed to that of St. Augustine.' For the medieval poet, Virgil is the co-founder of the unified world that has become Christendom.

Dante's is the ideal of an earthly city that has been transformed by faith, and Virgil himself is honored in *The Divine Comedy* as the bearer of a magnificent tradition, a pagan Moses who could enjoy a Pisgah-sight of the new era he had foretold in his Fourth Eclogue but who had to remain behind in Limbo without entering the Promised Land. Virgil becomes for Dante the founder of a great city and the prophet of the emergence of the City of God. Tate also speaks of Virgil's decisive importance in his later writings: Dante's guide was not just 'another poet' who had lived in the past, thus providing a merely literary tradition; Virgil represented the utmost reach of the secular imagination as reason; and this rational, secular imagination had, for Dante, found its limit in the idea of Rome, or the City, which was to be transcended but not abolished by the super-addition of the City of God.

Among Tate's highest tributes to Virgil is 'The Mediterranean,' after 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' one of his most frequently discussed poems. The large meaning of the poem, in its exploration of the sense of history, has seldom been in doubt, and its allusions to the *Aeneid* and the original event which inspired the verses, a picnic on the shores of southern France, are well known. Yet the poem continues to fascinate because of the tantalizingly suggestive resonances of its language. One dimension of the poem that has been overlooked is a possible second level of allusion beyond Virgil to a modern counterpart of Aeneas' voyage--the colonizing of Virginia. Tate uses Michael Drayton's 'To the Virginian Voyage' in his satiric 'Ode To Our Young Pro-consuls of the Air' and has stressed the relevance of Drayton's poem to another satirical piece, 'False Nightmare.' There may also be echoes of it in 'The Mediterranean.'

The relationship between the two poems is made plausible by certain close parallels in imagery, concept, or even sound: 'Atlantis howls but is no longer steep' ('The Mediterranean') recalls

When Eolus scowles,
You need not feare,
So absolute the deepe,

from 'To the Virginian Voyage.' Two rhyming pairs, 'howl' / 'scowl' and 'steep' / 'deep' suggest a verbal inspiration as well as a conceptual one. Furthermore, the last line of Drayton's stanza also resembles 'How absolute the sea!' from 'Message from Abroad.' Yet another verse--'They, in a wineskin, bore earth's paradise'--reminds one of 'Virginia, / Earth's only paradise' in Drayton's poem. Virginia is the destination of the voyagers in both cases, but the New World has changed from 'earth's paradise' to a 'tired land' in Tate's verse. Finally, in still another passage, neglect and rot replace an effortless harvest in this 'paradise,'

where tasseling corn,
Fat beans, grapes sweeter than muscadine
Rot on the vine.

Tate's unstewarded landscape reflects ironically on Drayton's cornucopia of natural goods in a land

Where nature hath in store,
Fowle, venison, and fish,
  And the fruitfull'st soyle,
  Without your toyle,
Three harvests more,
All greater than you wish.

The optimism of Drayton's ode, an exhortation to the voyagers as 'brave heroique minds, / Worthy your countries name,' is a remarkable expression of the spirit of adventure and national destiny that led the Renaissance voyagers to the New World. Tate has called it 'the ignorant Edenic *enthusiasm* of Michael Drayton.'

At least three of Tate's poems (and possibly a fourth, 'Message from Abroad') are related to Drayton's, then, and they help define one of his principal themes, the 'ignorant Edenic' vision that is fixed on the 'ignis fatuus' of modern utopia, the secularized version of the City of God. 'The Mediterranean' opposes two poets and two voyages--Virgil's narrative of the carrying of Troy to Rome and Drayton's celebration of the new colonization of America by Europe. But the difference between them is considerable, despite the heroic cast and national fervor that Drayton tries to lend to the Virginian voyage. Both poets see their heroes as driven by the divine will, but the modern attributes an economic rather than a spiritual destiny to the venture:

> And cheerfully at sea,
> Successe you still intice
> To get the pearle and gold,
> And ours to hold,
> Virginia,
> Earth's onely paradise.

Aeneas' quest for a new home was hard and fraught with difficult decisions. Drayton's Englishmen 'Let cannons roare, / Frighting the wide heaven' as though they were traveling without barriers. It is this too easy and irresponsible conquest that has led modern man to crack 'the hemispheres with careless hand.'

The main theme of 'The Mediterranean' is the reality of place and the respect for limits. The epigraph, slightly altered from the *Aeneid*, speaks of a limit (*finem*) to sorrow, but the word is ambivalent and also allows the interpretation 'What goal is made possible by our suffering?' The sufferings and labors of the voyagers are meaningful because they will come to a conclusion in some permanent community. Man is limited by his sufferings, but he is also defined by them. They serve to counter his appetite, which left unchecked would devour everything. The balance between appetite and limits, between what nature offers and man truly needs, creates a proper sense of place. It is a mutual relationship between the land that man inhabits and his own spirit that leads to a respect for the character of place.

'Mediterranean 'means 'middle of the earth.' In Tate's poem it also stands for the center of Western experience. The action that is embodied in the poem is the return to the center, the recovery of origins that gives a fresh perspective and new life to an old world. The 'landless wanderers' who picnic on the coast are no longer men whose city was destroyed--they are not tied to any land at all. Their picnic is an 'affectation' of a 'day of piracy,' not the fulfillment of a prophesy. Yet they can achieve something like Aeneas' mythical voyage in their imaginations. The opening lines of the poem echo Virgilian phrases. It is through the historical imagination that the wanderers rediscover the meaning of 'antiquity's delay' and 'time's monotone.' Their picnic is a communion with, not simply a vision of, the past. The imagery of feasting in the poem suggests that taking 'that sweet land in' is a sort of communion, even in affectation, with eucharistic meaning. The past is tasted, not simply visualized in the imagination:

> 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.

The return to the center is a ritual undertaken through the concrete participation in a meal. Eden is held in a wineskin and consumed only 'in our secret need.' Such is Tate's and Virgil's understanding of the way the City of God resides in the hearts of men. The 'green coast' can be reached only by drinking and eating, for that is man's only genuine access to any paradise on earth--through his body's limits. The 'stuffless rage' of the modern mind is unleashed by 'lust of power' (an Augustinian phrase, from Book XV of *The City of God*, that has become part of contemporary language.) The paradise that the Virginian voyagers first encountered in the New World was a place where nature sufficed to fill the body's desire. The abundance of

fat beans and sweet grapes that 'rot on the vine' in the land where Americans were born and live has been neglected for an appetite that lusts after power. Man learns to locate his blood, found his traditions, and become part of a place where he can establish a new center of tradition only after he has settled into a life that is a 'modest conquest of nature,' as Tate says elsewhere.

In contrast to the Virgilian fable of the refounding of Troy is the modern exploration of the universe for its own sake. The Gates of Hercules were the natural limits beyond which the Greek world felt it should not venture. But now that 'We've cracked the hemispheres with careless hand,' there is no longer a sense of time and place in our experience. Reality is no longer accessible to man unaided by his mediating technology. Places are no longer a 'slingshot' or 'a month' wide. They are mere abstract points on a map, neither fearful nor impressive. Only in the imagination can we return to the state of things that characterized Virgil's world, but that return to the remembered center is of primary importance:

> 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!

The unknown no longer frightens modern man, but he has lost the power of keeping his known world alive. Only through the remembered images of all cities, mythical or real, can he know how to settle down and foster his own.

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 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."

Robert S. Dupree
Allen Tate and the Augustan Imagination: A Study of the Poetry
(Louisiana State 1983) 138-43

"R. K. Meiners observed, 'The implication is that "we," though citizens of a different age, are also in search of a place where we may find roots, a land that will be friendly to our endeavors, where we can establish a living tradition as did Aeneas.' Although modern man, the critic continued, has difficulty imagining his past, he searches for bridges between the culture of his dead ancestors and present events. In another poem written in that period, 'Aeneas at Washington,' Tate conflated the ancient world with that of his childhood in Kentucky and Washington, D.C."

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

Michael Hollister (2021)