

Allen Tate

(1899-1979)

The Swimmers (1961)

SCENE: Montgomery County,
Kentucky, July 1911

Kentucky water, clear springs: a boy fleeing
To water under the dry Kentucky sun,
His four little friends in tandem with him, seeing

Long shadows of grapevine wriggle and run
Over the green swirl; mullein under the ear
Soft as Nausicaa's palm; sullen fun

Savage as childhood's thin
O fountain, bosom source undying-dead
Replenish me the spring of love and fear

And give me back the eye that looked and fled
When a thrush idling in the tulip tree
Unwound the cold dream of the copperhead.

--Along the creek the road was winding; we
Felt the quicksilver sky. I see again
The shrill companions of that odyssey:

Bill Eaton, Charlie Watson, 'Nigger' Layne
The doctor's son, Harry Duesler who played
The flute; and Tate, with water on the brain.

Dog days: the dusty leaves where rain delayed
Hung low on poison-oak and scuppernong,
And we were following the active shade.

Of water, that bells and bickers all night long.
"No more'n a mile," Layne said. All five stood still.
Listening, I heard what seemed at first a song;

Peering, I heard the hooves come down the hill.
The posse passed, twelve horse; the leader's face
Was worn as limestone on an ancient sill.

Then, as sleepwalkers shift from a hard place
In bed, and rising to keep a formal pledge
Descend a ladder into empty space,

We scuttled down the bank below a ledge
And marched stiff-legged in our common fright
Along a hog-track by the riffle's edge:

Into a world where sound shaded the sight

Dropped the dull hooves again; the horsemen came
Again, all but the leader. It was night

Momently and I feared: eleven same
Jesus-Christers unmembered and unmade,
Whose Corpse had died again in dirty shame.

The bank then leveling in a speckled glade,
We stopped to breathe above the swimming-hole;
I gazed at its reticulated shade

Recoiling in blue fear, and felt it roll
Over my ears and eyes and lift my hair
Like seaweed tossing on a sunk atoll.

I rose again. Borne on the copper air
A distant voice green as a funeral wreath
Against a grave: "That dead nigger there."

The melancholy sheriff slouched beneath
A giant sycamore; shaking his head
He plucked a sassafras twig and picked his teeth:

"We come too late." He spoke to the tired dead
Whose ragged shirt soaked up the viscous flow
Of blood in which It lay discomfited.

A butting horse-fly gave one ear a blow
And glanced off, as the sheriff kicked the rope
Loose from the neck and hooked it with his toe

Away from the blood--I looked back down the slope:
The friends were gone that I had hoped to greet--
A single horseman came at a slow lope

And pulled up at the hanged man's horny feet;
The sheriff noosed the feet, the other end
The stranger tied to his pommel in a neat

Slip-knot. I saw the Negro's body bend
And straighten, as a fish-line cast transverse
Yields to the current that it must subtend.

The sheriff's Goddamn was a murmured curse
Not for the dead but for the blinding dust
That boxed the cortege in a cloudy hearse

And dragged it towards our town. I knew I must
Not stay till twilight in that silent road;
Sliding my bare feet into the warm crust,

I hopped the stonecrop like a panting toad
Mouth open, following the heaving cloud
That floated to the court-house square its load

Of limber corpse that took the sun for shroud.

These were three figures in the dying sun
Whose light were company where three was crowd.

My breath crackled the dead air like a shotgun
As, sheriff and the stranger disappearing,
The faceless head lay still. I could not run

Or walk, but stood. Alone in the public clearing
This private thing was owned by all the town.
Though never claimed by us within my hearing.

ANALYSIS

"One notices in 'The Swimmers' that the five youths encounter a posse searching for a lynched Negro, and that twelve men are in the posse, but only eleven men ride back... And as the youths watch the sheriff, the leader of the posse, with the corpse. 'A single horseman came at a fast lope'... Then one remembers the story of the Crucifixion, in *John*, and of the burial of Christ's body by Joseph and Nicodemus, and it suddenly becomes clear that Tate is not just telling about five Southern boys who see a lynched Negro; the Passion is being reenacted. One recalls the lines in the first section, 'The Maimed Man,' which serve to preface the poem:

Teach me to fast
And pray, that I may know the motes that tease
Skittering sunbeams are dead shells at last.
Then, timeless muse, reverse my time; unfreeze
All that I was in your congenial heat...

It would seem, then, that Tate is prepared in his new poems to look at his childhood again, and perhaps all his life, through the eye of his adult religious faith, and that what we shall get is a poem in which each day the Passion is reenacted for the modern man, in everything he does, all around him. One realizes, too, that the rhyme scheme of Tate's poem is that of the *Divine Comedy*. The poet seems to be reliving his past--the South, his boyhood there--against the perspective of the eternal, and equating his childhood reactions to evil, in all the innocence of boyhood, with his mature attitudes...

The serpent again--the passage of time, evil, the lynching--is awakened from its sleep by an act of beauty, the child sees and flees, recognizing evil without pretense, rationalization, or callousness to it. The poet asks that now, with the strength and purposiveness given him by his belief in God, he be permitted to see things whole again, not with the untried innocence of childhood but in the experience of the adult who has been living in time."

Louis D. Rubin, Jr.
"The Serpent in the Mulberry Bush"
Southern Renaissance: The Literature of the Modern South
ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr.
(Johns Hopkins 1953) 352-57

"'The Swimmers' is at least a partial fulfillment of the promise in 'The Maimed Man' to return to the 'pastoral terrors of youth.' The poem's scene is given: Montgomery County, Kentucky, July 1911. Furthermore, Tate clearly places himself in the scene, and the poem may be taken in one sense as a personal narrative, if an extremely symbolic one.

The experience in 'The Swimmers' is direct and immediate, and the invocation is postponed while the setting is described. The landscape is almost immediately generalized. There is a sort of spring of the muses, Kentucky fashion--'Kentucky water, clear springs'--which shifts, in the third *terzina*, to 'O fountain, bosom source undying dead.' On a small scale this is analogical to the general movement of not only 'The Swimmers' but also of all three sections: from the sensualism of the timeless day of childhood--evoked also

in 'Seasons of the Soul'--to the 'fountain,' the 'bosom source'--the Holy Spirit who both comforts and discomforts, who provokes the human heart to the knowledge of 'love and fear.'

By all odds the most important quality in this first part of "The Swimmers" is the great sensuality. In spite of the predominantly narrative purpose this poetry is as rich as anything Tate has written. But Tate is never sensuous without reason: this is a return to the 'sleek sense of the simple child' mentioned in 'The Maimed Man.' In the second *terzina* the grapevine is mentioned, and again in the seventh we have the 'scuppernong.' These are details of the landscape, to be sure, but the vine is one of the oldest hedonistic symbols in the world. The reference to Nausicaa, to the 'quicksilver sky,' strengthens the impression that this is a world of almost unalloyed sense.

It is interesting to compare Tate's writing here with that of the most purely sensual of all American poets, Hart Crane. Tate's early friendship with Crane is well known, as is his criticism of Crane's inability to direct his organ of the senses. Consider the sheer luxuriance of Crane's river scene, more than a little like Tate's in its recollection of the past; the lines are from 'Repose of Rivers':

The willows carried a slow sound,
A sarabande the wind mowed on the mead.
I could never remember
That seething, steady leveling of the marshes
Till age had brought me to the sea....
The pond I entered once and quickly fled--
I remember now its singing willow rim.

I hope it is not in poor taste to point out that age has brought Tate to something else than the sea; and that though his language does not approach the voluptuousness of Crane's there is some relationship between the experiences of the two poems. In 'The Swimmers' we see the sensuality of childhood, pure in itself but later to fall into the synaesthetic distortions of the French tradition, Crane, and twentieth century literature in general. I am not suggesting that the poem is a treatise in practical aesthetics, but that aesthetic experience is included in general experience and that when the senses become distorted it is a sign of more fundamental distortion. The air is heavy in these early lines, with that feeling of anticipation and the cloying sensation that prefaces summer storms.

It is the 'dog-days,' and the action centers upon a small childhood 'odyssey' to a swimming hole, an escape from the heat of summer. The journey is interrupted by the sound of hooves; a posse of twelve horsemen approaches. The next lines form a transition which announces that this summer's heat is as symbolic as that in 'Seasons of the Soul'; the day takes on some of the qualities of the strange dream-world so often present in these poems, though less obviously so in 'The Swimmers' than in the other two sections.

Then, as sleepwalkers shift from a hard place
In bed, and rising to keep a formal pledge
Descend a ladder into empty space,

We scuttled down the bank below a ledge
And marched stiff-legged in our common fright
Along a hog-track by the riffle's edge:

Into a world where sound shaded the sight
Dropped the dull hooves again....

The language is much heightened. It is a vital moment in the poem, as the action unfolds along the edge of the river. At the risk of over-reading I will say that the river seems to me not only a river in Tate's native Kentucky, but also several others: Hart Crane's river, the rivers of the uncontaminated Eden, and even the rivers of Dante's Earthly Paradise where the approach of some very different hooves also sounds like a song. This is the moment at which a knowledge of evil, of sin, enters this world.

The action in the rest of the poem may be briefly stated. Twelve horsemen have ridden out in the posse. Eleven return, and the watching boy sees 'eleven same / Jesus-Christers unremembered and unmade, / Whose Corpse had died again in dirty shame.' The boy then sees the sheriff with the corpse of a negro, victim of a lynching. The sheriff is joined by a 'single horseman' as the watching boy realizes that he has been left alone to witness the two men remove the body and drag it back to town. The boy follows, hopping 'the stonecrop like a panting toad' in the descending twilight which has settled over the scene and his innocence. The action is finished with the return to town:

Alone in the public clearing
This private thing was owned by all the town,
Though never claimed by us within my hearing.

Both John Bradbury and Louis D. Rubin, Jr. have commented briefly on this strange scene. They are in essential agreement that Tate is re-creating the passion of Christ in the moment from his childhood. The corpse of the negro becomes the body of Christ, the sheriff and the strange horsemen become Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus, following St. John's narrative. In addition, Mr. Rubin refers to the 'cold dream of a copperhead' of an early line in the poem, pointing out the similarity to the 'serpent in the mulberry bush' symbol which concludes 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' and signifies both time and evil.

The parallel with the crucifixion is well-taken, since the action of Tate's poem forces the analogy. It is in keeping with the pattern I have mentioned where Tate in some measure makes his personal experience the symbol of universal experience. But I would not want to limit the poem's significance to one more crucifixion-in-the-South. On the dramatic level, to mention but one detail, it seems to me that Joseph and Nicodemus have appeared with remarkable quickness and handled the Corpse with something less than reverence. I do not think the reading would bear too much pressure, though I am perhaps straining at details. But aside from these objections, the poem is at least as much concerned with the Fall as the Crucifixion: there is a watcher as well as a scene, and we must keep the subjective condition of the sinner with the objective remedy of the Sacrifice. The poem is focused on the innocence of what Kierkegaard called the 'pre-spirit slumber.' And what is good enough before the Fall--natural sensuality--is converted to something quite different after it.

The poem is deceptively complex. It has a good deal to say about the personal past, of course, as it is filled with the religious and confessional implications of Tate's then-recent conversion. We should remember that 'The Swimmers' is a poem, however, and that it is a good deal more than a confiteor. Subtly but surely there is also the element of judgment on the past, a judgment which is not stated but, as is typical with Tate, is embodied in the language itself. The implications for the literary past are not an insignificant part of this judgment; they are included in the Dark Night which is more fully presented in 'The Buried Lake.'

This poem, the sixth section of the sequence, is by far the most difficult of the three parts. It is literally filled with symbols which can be tagged in many ways: theologically, mythologically, psychologically, or biographically. This is undoubtedly intentional, given Tate's career, and the poem is to some degree a comment upon it. Without the entire structure visible it is of course impossible to be completely certain of the interpretation of some elements, but the poem is sufficiently self-contained to indicate its general nature and to define its main symbols.

Briefly, the structure of the poem follows this order: there is a formal, if abbreviated invocation, which is immediately followed by (1) a statement of the poet's present condition, (2) a further plea to the 'Lady of Light' of the invocation, (3) some indication of the poet's past, and (4) a brief allusion to the landscape, if we can use the word, for this is what might be called a psychological landscape. The poem then proceeds to narrate three dreams which blend into each other so smoothly that the transitions may not be noticed. This is accomplished with that dream-logic of which Tate is a master, and it is no secret that the dreams are, in part, three which Tate himself has experienced. With the close of the final dream the poem, too, is concluded, save for another brief statement of the poet.

The seemingly a logical flow of the poem and the considerably distorted experience which is narrated may very well obscure the nature of this structure. It is a very traditional structure, and, in spite of the fact that Tate considerably modifies it, nearly all the necessary elements of the convention are here, for this is a dream vision. There is a prologue however brief; there is the dream proper, at least part of which takes place in the traditional season--'midmost May'; in the dream the poet comes to a strange chamber--in this case a 'pinched hotel'; he meets numerous shadowy personages who are not labeled quite so clearly as some of their medieval counterparts; and the dream closes with the poet's return to consciousness. The structure is clear enough, then, though as I say the poem has modifying elements. The chief of these is what C. G. Jung would likely have called the archetype of the Night Journey, with its implications of a return to and exploration of the unconscious."

R. K. Meiners

The Last Alternatives: A Study of the Works of Allen Tate
(Alan Swallow 1963) 190-94

"The Swimmers' did exactly what Tate hoped it would. The *terza rima* worked perfectly. The imagery presented thematic epiphanies. Furthermore, the poem is so lucid that any extended 'interpretation' would constitute an insult. 'The Swimmers' retells, with only a few facts altered, the experience Tate had of seeing when he was eleven the body of a lynched Negro dragged into the town of Mount Sterling, Kentucky.

The lynching was not the standard 'rape-case.' The Negro had murdered his landlord after an altercation, but Tate does not specify any background to the lynching, for he wants the drama to remain a universal agony upon which he can affix his personal yet conforming specifics. There are visible specifics--even the names of his playmates are given. He goes so far as to make a joke at his own expense. His memory of his parents' apprehension that he suffered from hydrocephalus appears in his reference to 'Tate, with water on the brain.' A compound joke, philosophical, religious, as well as biographical. The ending of 'The Swimmers' is true to the important fact of the incident--the town every admitted to itself that the lynching had occurred...

Unimportant facts were changed for dramatic purposes. Tate did not, as in the poem, follow the sheriff back into town, but cut through the fields and beat him into town. Nor, in the actual incident, did Tate's companions desert him. But the solitariness of the boy who followed the 'cloudy hearse' was necessary to the full impact of the Jesus-Christers' ritual sacrifice of the Negro. The town itself had to be rendered as nearly deserted as possible so as to tune to a blinding sharpness the focus upon all humanity's desolation in evil. In that desolation we perceive that the evil must be 'owned.'

Robert Lowell wrote to Tate to say that 'The Swimmers' was the best poem Allen had ever done, the finest *terza rima* in English. He found it better even than Shelley's use of the form. Yet Lowell was less sanguine about Tate's next poem, 'The Buried Lake.' He found the sound of it like 'choking.' And he objected to its similarities with 'Seasons of the Soul,' its 'Allenisms' and contorted phrasing. In contrast, W. H. Auden wrote that he thought 'The Buried Lake' might well be Tate's best single poem. Let Lowell and Auden both be right. 'The Swimmers' is Tate's most nearly perfect poem. 'The Buried Lake' is his richest."

Radcliffe Squires

"Allen Tate's Terzinas"

Allen Tate: A Literary Biography
(Bobbs-Merrill 1971) 197-214

"It is not altogether certain that Tate intended 'The Maimed Man' to be followed immediately by 'The Swimmers,' but a transition at the end of the first poem seems to point directly to the second. The references to water, for instance, are amplified in 'The Swimmers.' In this poem, the actions of diving and 'witching for water' are given specificity by a recalled incident from the poet's memory, and the movement of the poem as a whole has the same pattern of discovery, peripety, and recognition that characterize its predecessor. Again a young man is plunged into a terrifying experience.

Once more there is a succession of dawns and twilights. Even the country setting of 'The Swimmers' appears to be anticipated by the 'Pastoral terrors of youth' described in 'The Maimed Man.' But the

difference between the two poems is considerable. Both are about 'maimed' men; but the first poem describes a dream experience, while the second takes its main scenes from an actual event in the life of the poet. Because it has a more readily discernible story to tell, 'The Swimmers' has tended to attract the kind of reader who prefers straightforward, easily accessible narrative.

The poem is an evocation of the free-wheeling pleasures of boyhood. During the 'dog-days' of Kentucky summer, the speaker and his childhood companions go out in search of water. Theirs is an 'odyssey' where, if they cannot expect to meet a real Nausicaa, the natural world of mullein and grapevine is almost as enticing as a girl's hand. But before Odysseus was washed ashore on the coast of a fairyland Phaiakia, he underwent many trials; and the fun these boys experience is not altogether idyllic. The poet describes it as 'sullen' and 'savage as childhood's thin harmonious tear.' Once again Tate seems to be alluding to 'Lycidas' ('He must not float upon his watery bier...without the need of some melodious tear'), reminding one that water is traditionally associated with death and sorrow as well as with birth and joy. The innocence of the 'sleek senses' must yield to the more discriminating power of the mature eye:

O fountain, bosom source undying-dead
Replenish me the spring of love and fear

And give me back the eye that looked and fled
When a thrush idling in the tulip tree
Unwound the cold dream of the copperhead.

In 'The Swimmers' the opposition between laurel and myrtle is altered to a complementarity. The thrush and the copperhead, love and fear, the 'undying-dead' fountain with its systaltic rhythm, the carefree and the didactic are all at the 'bosom source' of the heart, mortal and immortal. The plunge into the water is both an escape from the summer's blast and an acceptance of the drowning sea. Is the fountain to be understood as *memoria*, the 'clear springs,' or the 'harmonious tear' or all of them? The feeling of alienation from community and from the depths of the self is not as important in this poem as it is in 'The Maimed Man.' 'The Swimmers' is about the larger dimensions of guilt and alienation that a whole community discovers in itself. The poet's memory returns him to an incident he witnessed in which the City of Man and the City of God, like the other oppositions disclosed by Tate's poetic dialectic, intersect in a specific time and place.

As the 'shrill companions' appear now in the eye of memory (rather than in the eye of the ego), they take on symbolic overtones. The rich descriptive language that chronicles their walk along a creek road under a clear, hot sky moves from a visual to an auditory emphasis. There is a delight in the music of words that was absent from 'The Maimed Man.' The catalog of heroes, five boys whose real names are given, may have no intended significance, but it is interesting that two besides Tate are identified by more than their names. One is a doctor's son and the other is a flautist. Medicine and music are also complementary arts, one for healing the body and another for soothing the soul. They are also traditionally associated with Apollo, their patron. Tate, the lad who even then was 'maimed' before his time 'with water on the brain,' is obsessed by the need for water (and redemption); he is already the 'dull critter of enormous head' from 'Sonnets at Christmas' who looks at the sky in search of transcendence. It is amusing that he has these Apollonian figures in his entourage.

The increasing predominance of sounds over sights points to some impending revelation. As the boys follow the 'bells and bickers' of the noisy waters, they hear another sound, which seems 'at first a song' but turns out to be horses' hooves. Like the thrush who revealed the snake, these sounds are soon followed by a posse and sheriff, whose face is worn as a tombstone. The mood shifts abruptly. Day suddenly seems night; the reality, a nightmare. The boys walk into a world on the edge of fear, 'where sound shaded the sight.' Seeing yields to hearing, but when sight returns, the boys discover the sheriff leaning over the dead boy of a lynched Negro. The boy Tate never gets a chance to swim, but he is plunged immediately into a drowning fear:

We stopped to breathe above the swimming hole;
I gazed at its reticulated shade

Recoiling in blue fear, and felt it roll

Over my ears and eyes and lift my hair
Like seaweed tossing on a sun atoll.

When he regains his bearings, the boy hears only two phrases: 'That dead nigger there,' and 'We come too late.' As he watches the men, the boy notes both the sheriff's casualness in the face of death and his reluctance to touch the body, his regret for what has happened and his scant respect for the dead man. The sheriff removes the rope from the hanged man's neck with his foot and attaches it to the feet. The body is drawn forward, like a Hector pulled around the walls of Troy, yet the ignominious treatment of the body seems to flow from embarrassment or even fear, rather than hatred. The dead man, brought to dust, is made to advertise his earthly destiny prominently as the body is dragged to town 'boxed...in a cloudy hearse' and taking only 'the sun for shroud.' The event occurs in broad daylight, though the sun will soon begin to set. The eleven 'Jesus-Christers' of the posse abandon the scene 'unmembered and unmade' like the fearful apostles who abandoned Jesus; they fail to see the significance of the 'dirty shame' that they have witnessed. Yet the 'three figures in the dying sun' are an emblem that the poet in retrospect sees as a kind of new Calvary.

Tate's daring evocation of crucifixion imagery is made convincing by the incidental details, like the sheriff's unintended irony in uttering 'Goddamn' or the 'butting horse-fly' that pauses on the ear of the corpse. There are no accusations, no moral heroes, and no villains in the scene. Even the argument that led up to the lynching is ignored as irrelevant. The terrible scene has been witnessed by 'all the town.' Lynching is another form of the scapegoat ritual, as Rene Girard has shown, a means of attempting to restore order by going beyond established order in the name of the sacred. Like original sin, the responsibility for what has happened must be shared equally by all in the community:

Alone in the public clearing
This private thing was owned by all the town.
Though never claimed by us within my hearing.

The community has not given its sanction for the execution nor expressed publicly its regret for what has happened. The event lies rather on the borderline between universal guilt and universal responsibility that cannot be articulated without diminishing its impact.

In a remarkable simile, Tate describes the dead body when it is first pulled forward:

I saw the Negro's body bend
And straighten, as a fish-line cast transverse
Yields to the current that it must subtend.

Though the Negro has been lynched, not drowned, the comparison is rich in implications, for it connects his death with the feeling of helplessness that overcomes the boy when he first sees the awesome sight. The behavior of the fishline, like the dead body, manifests both a yielding and a resistance that are like the desperate plight of the lynched man. The tug of the rope is a crucifixion of sorts, but it also seems to merge the body with some larger force beyond it. The body is now part of the greater current of an anonymous natural power that sweeps all things before it. The 'faceless head' of the body makes the death appear both terribly impersonal and yet symbolically particularized. The boy who has never managed to go swimming and the dead man whose body swims only in simile have merged.

The faceless death's head that the boy encounters upon emerging from his plunge is a grim counterpart of the dead mother's face that was the object of his dive in 'The Maimed Man.' The maimed man that the poet discovered within himself in the first poem has no merged with the hanged god of Frazer. Memory has disclosed the identity of fear with love, guilt with transcendence. In recognizing that he is guilty, man acknowledges that he is imperfect and incomplete. That acknowledgment is the confessional act that opens the mind to an awareness of its need for some transcending power beyond it, a dimension that can restore wholeness to the self and deliver it from alienation and dissociation.

The concluding poem of the sequence as we now have it, 'The Buried Lake,' brings these themes to their climax. Indeed, it is the climactic poem of Tate's career, resolving the conflicts of his earlier poetry and summing up the implications of the Augustinian imagination for modern man. It cannot be a coincidence that the epigraph Tate has selected for this poem, from Ecclesiastes, begins with the words 'Ego' and 'mater.' For the poem is about the coming together of self and transcendence in an act of understanding deeper than either laurel or myrtle can offer. This biblical mother of beauty, fear, knowledge, and hope seems to embody all the qualities of Tate's vision of reality."

Robert S. Dupree

Allen Tate and the Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry
(Louisiana State 1983) 219-223

"Tate startled many critics by writing in 1950, an introduction to the poetry of Melvin Tolson that Tolson called the 'literary Emancipation Proclamation' for black American writers. Readers who had a view of Tate as an unreconstructed Southerner were equally surprised when they read his terza rima poem 'The Swimmers.' Written after he experienced a flashback, in 1951, to the sight of a lynched man he had come upon in Kentucky some forty years earlier. Tate recalled seeing the 'limber corpse' and pondered the actions of his townsmen. 'Alone in the public clearing,' he wrote in the poem's final stanza, 'This private thing was owned by all the town, / Though never claimed by us within my hearing.'... Of this final line, Coley observes, 'Tate closed the poem with a home truth most southern writers couldn't manage.' Such authors, Coley adds, 'presented racial terrorism as the work of cranks and rednecks, people marginal to the community' (Memories and Opinions of Allen Tate; 955)....

Before the 1950s were over, Tate participated in a two-day civil rights forum titled 'The Sectional Crisis of Our Time.' Martin Luther King delivered the keynote address and Tate's lecture, given on the same day--the centennial of the raid on Harper's Ferry---consisted of an attack against the radical abolitionist John Brown. Tate told the audience he would rather adopt 'a more recent strategy--the example of Dr. Martin Luther King, whose leadership in the non-violent resistance of his people in the now famous boycott of the bus system in Montgomery is to my mind a model of the kind of action that should be undertaken all over this country.'... Whatever support Tate had shown for the civil rights movement as a whole diminished during urban rioting and the Black Power and student protest movements of the 1960s.... In late 1967, Tate wrote his daughter Nancy...'I am interested in order and civilization, which in a crisis take precedence over all other aims, for without civilized order the Negro's justice will be mere vengeance'..."

Thomas A. Underwood

Allen Tate: Orphan of the South
(Princeton/Oxford 2000) 293-94, 404n.184

Michael Hollister (2021)