

Allen Tate's Poetry (1939)

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Allen Tate's poetry illustrates a structure of violent synthesis. He constantly throws his words and images into active contrast. Almost every adjective in his poetry challenges the reader's imagination to follow it off at a tangent. For instance, in the "Ode to the Confederate Dead," November becomes not "drear" November, "sober" November, but "*Ambitious* November with the humors of the year" [Italics mine]. The "curiosity of an angel's stare" is not "idle" or "quiet" or "probing" or any other predictable adjective, but "brute" curiosity. This is the primary difficulty that Tate's poetry presents to the reader who is unacquainted with his dominant themes: the surface of the poem, in its apparently violent disorder, may carry him off at tangents.

There is some justification, therefore, for approaching Tate's poetry through an account of his basic themes--all the more since these themes are closely related to the poetic method itself. We may conveniently begin by examining a very important passage in his essay on "Humanism and Naturalism." In discussing attitudes toward history, he describes two ways of viewing the past, in which events form a logical series; the second is that which gives what Tate himself calls the "temporal past."

"...the logical series is quantitative, the abstraction of space. The temporal series is, on the other hand, space concrete. Concrete, temporal experience implies the existence of a temporal past, and it is the foundation of the religious imagination; that is to say, the only way to think of the past independently of...naturalism is to think religiously; and conversely, the only way to think religiously is to think in time. Naturalistic science is timeless. A doctrine based upon it, whether explicitly or not, can have no past, no idea of tradition, no fixed center of life. The "typically human" is a term that cannot exist apart from some other term: it is not an absolute; it is fluid and unfixd.

"To de-temporize the past is to reduce it to an abstract lump. To take from the present its concrete fullness is to refuse to let standards work from the inside. It follows that "decorum" must be "imposed" from above. Thus there are never specific moral problems (the subject matter of the arts) but only fixed general doctrines without subject matter--that is to say, without 'nature'."

In other words, the artist today finds that his specific subject matter tends to be dissolved in abstractions of various sorts. His proper subjects--specific moral problems--are not to be found in an abstract, logical series, for in such a series there are no standards of any sort--and nothing specific, nothing concrete.

Tate's preoccupation with history and time in his poetry is thus closely related to John Crowe Ransom's characteristic problem: that of man living under the dispensation of science--modern man suffering from a dissociation of sensibility.

Tate goes on to say in the same essay: "The historical method" has always been the anti-historical method. Its aim is to contemporize the past. Its real effect is to detemporize it. The past becomes a causal series, and timeless..." Tate's concern here is with the neohumanists, but the generalization may be applied to the arts without distorting it too violently. Carl Sandburg, for example, will supply an example to our purpose. Consider his "Four Preludes on Playthings of the Wind."

After the first Prelude with its "What of it? Let the dead be dead," and after the second Prelude which describes an ancient city (Babylon?) with its cedar doors and golden dancing girls and its ultimate destruction, Prelude Three begins:

It has happened before.
Strong men put up a city and got
a nation together,
And paid singers to sing and women
to warble: We are the greatest city,

the greatest nation,
nothing like us ever was.

But, as the poem goes on to point out, the ultimate dancers are the rats, and the ultimate singers, the crows. The poet's intention, presumably, is to contemporize the past. The real effect is to detemporize it. Babylon or Nineveh becomes interchangeable with Chicago. Chicago receives a certain access of dignity from the association; Babylon, a certain humanity and reality; and the poet is allowed to imply, with a plausible finality, that human nature fundamentally doesn't change.

Sandburg's primary impulse seems to be a revulsion from the "literary" past--the people of the past, too, hired, singers, ran night-clubs, and joined booster societies. But Sandburg's contemporizing of the past springs also--probably unconsciously--from the fact that he is immersed in a scientific civilization.

Tate not only cannot accept Sandburg's detemporized past; he must strive actively to ascertain what meaning the past can have for modern man who has so many inducements to consider it merely as a logical series. This, I take it, is the primary theme of "The Mediterranean," "Aeneas at Washington," and even--in a varied form--of the "Ode to the Confederate Dead." Aeneas had a concrete past--moved from a particular Troy to found a particular Rome. We, on the other hand, who have "cracked the hemispheres with careless hand," in abolishing space have also abolished time. The poem is not a lament, nor is it a "sighing for vanished glories." It is a recognition and an exploration of our dilemma. Modern man, like the Aeneas of Tate's poem, is obsessed with the naturalistic view of history--history as an abstract series. He sees

. . . all things apart, the towers that men
Contrive I too contrived long, long ago.

But Aeneas has been acquainted with another conception of history.

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

(We may gloss the last quoted lines as follows: In his "Religion and the Old South," Tate argues that the naturalistic view of history is intent on utility; but in the case of concrete history, the "images are only to be contemplated, and perhaps the act of contemplation after long exercise initiates a habit of restraint, and the setting up of absolute standards which are less formulas for action than an interior discipline of the mind.")

Modern man with his tremendous historical consciousness is thus confronted with a dilemma when asked for the meaning of his actions:

. . . Stuck in the wet mire
Four thousand leagues from the ninth buried city
I thought of Troy, what we had built her for.

The problem of history receives a somewhat similar treatment in the fine "Message from Abroad." The form into which the problem is cast is peculiarly that of the American confronted with the lack of "history" of his own land and thrown up against the immense "history" of Europe. Stated in somewhat altered form, it is the problem of man, who requires a history in which he can participate personally, lost in the vast museum galleries of western civilization.

Provence.
The Renaissance, the age of Pericles, each
A broad, rich-carpeted stair to pride
. . . they're easy to follow
For the ways taken are all notorious,
Lettered, sculptured, and rhymed. . . .

But "those others," the ways taken by his ancestors, are

. . . incuriously complete, lost,
Not by poetry and statues timed,
Shattered by sunlight and the impartial sleet.

He can find, to mark those ways,

Now only
The bent eaves and the windows cracked,
The thin grass picked by the wind,
Heaved by the mole. . . .

The tall "red-faced" man cannot survive the voyage back to Europe:

With dawn came the gull to the crest,
Stared at the spray, fell asleep
Over the picked bones, the white face
Of the leaning man drowned deep. . . .

And the poet is finally forced to admit that he cannot see the ancestors, and can merely conjecture

What did you say mornings?
Evenings, what?
The bent eaves
On the cracked house,
That ghost of a hound . . .
The man red-faced and tall
Will cast no shadow
From the province of the drowned.

Obviously Tate's poetry is not occupied exclusively with the meaning of history. But his criticism of merely statistical accounts of reality serves as an introduction to the special problems of his poetry in much the same way that Ransom's comments on the relation of science to the myth served as an approach to his.

Attention to his criticism will illuminate, for example, the positive position from which he comments on our present disintegration:

The essential wreckage of your age is different,
The accident the same; the Annabella
Of proper incest, no longer incestuous:
In an age of abstract experience, fornication
Is self-expression, adjunct to Christian euphoria. . . .

("Causerie")

Or, to make the application to the subject of poetry itself, one may quote from the same poem:

We have learned to require
In the infirm concessions of memory
The privilege never to hear too much.
What is this conversation, now secular,
A speech not mine yet speaking for me in
The heaving jelly of my tribal air?
It rises in the throat, it climbs the tongue,
It perches there for secret tutelage
And gets it, of inscrutable instruction. . . .

The situation described is peculiarly that of the modern poet. His speech is a mass of clichés--of terms which with their past associations seem too grandiloquent and gaudy, or, with their past content emptied, now seem meaningless. "Vocabulary / Becomes confusion," and without vocabulary man is lost

Heredity
Proposes love, love exacts language, and we lack
Language. When shall we speak again? When shall
The sparrow dusting the gutter sing? When shall
This drift with silence meet the sun? When shall
I wake?

We may state the situation in still other terms: Man's religion, his myths, are now merely private fictions. And as Tate has remarked in one of his essays, ". . . a myth should be in conviction immediate, direct, overwhelming, and I take it that the appreciation of this kind of imagery is an art lost to the modern mind." The lover in Tate's "Retroduction to American History," has lost his appreciation of such imagery. He "cannot hear. . . . His very eyeballs fixed in disarticulation . . . his metaphors are dead."

Tate's metaphors are very much alive; it is through the production of energetic metaphor, of live "myths" that the poet attempts to break through the pattern of "abstract experience" and give man a picture of himself as man. Hence his preoccupation with time and mortality and "specific moral problems." But as a matter of integrity, he cannot take the short cut which Tennyson tends to take to these subjects. One cannot find a living relation between the present and the past without being honest in the present--and that involves taking into account the anti-historical character of our present.

In his "Retroduction to American History," the poet asks why "in such serenity of equal fates"--that is, why, if life is merely a causal sequence, merely abstract experience--has Narcissus "urged the brook with questions?" In a naturalistic world, the brook, like Mr. Ransom's cataract, is only so much water, and we have the absurdity which the poet proceeds to point out:

Merged with the elements
Speculation suffuses the meadow with drops to tickle
The cow's gullet; grasshoppers drink the rain.

Self-scrutiny, introspection, in a purely mechanistic universe, is merely a romantic gesture--"Narcissism." In the "Ode to the Confederate Dead," Narcissism figures again, though without a specific symbol.

As Tate has written: "The poem is "about" solipsism or Narcissism, or any other *ism* that denotes the failure of the human personality to function properly 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. . . . Without unity we get the *remarkable self-consciousness* of our age [italics mine]."

In the "Ode," the Narcissism of the present forms one term of the contrast; the "total" world in which the dead soldiers fulfilled themselves, the other. But the poet refuses to take the easy romantic attitude toward the contrast. The world which the dead soldiers possessed is not available to the speaker of the poem, for that kind of world is the function of a society, not something which can be wrought out by the private will. Moreover, the poet is honest: the leaves, for him, *are* merely leaves.

The irony expressed in the poem, then, is not the romantic irony of the passage quoted from Tate's criticism in Chapter III. It is a more complex irony, and almost inevitably, a self-inclusive irony. Such an irony is found also in "Last Days of Alice," "The Sonnets at Christmas," "The Meaning of Life," and "The Meaning of Death."

Before considering these poems, however, it is well to note a further criticism of naturalism in Tate's prose. The naturalistic view of experience (history as an abstract series) suggests an "omnipotent human

rationality." It can only predict success. The poet (who, by virtue of being a poet, is committed to the concrete and particular) is thus continually thrown into the role of Tiresias.

A number of Tate's poems are ironical treatments of rationality, "The Eagle," for example. It is not the heart which fears death, but the mind, "the white eagle." And in the "Epistle to Edmund Wilson," "The mind's a sick eagle taking flight. . . ." The theme is most powerfully stated in the last of the "Sonnets of the Blood." The brother is cautioned to

Be zealous that your numbers are all prime,
Lest false division with sly mathematic
Plunder the inner mansion of the blood. . . .
. . . the prime secret whose simplicity
Your towering engine hammers to reduce,
Though driven, holds that bulwark of the sea
Which breached will turn unspeaking fury loose
To drown out him who swears to rectify
Infinity. . . .

If the blood is a symbol of the nonrational, concrete stuff of man which resists abstract classification, by the same token it symbolizes man's capacity to be more than an abstract integer, and therefore signifies man's capacity for sin. In an age of abstract experience sin is meaningless.

In "Last Days of Alice," the logical, self-consistent but inhuman world of *Through the Looking-Glass* becomes an ironical symbol of the modern world. The poet maintains most precisely the analogy between Alice gazing "learnedly down her airy nose" into the abstract world of the mirror, and modern man who has also turned his world into abstraction. The subsidiary metaphors--"Alice grown . . . mammoth but not fat," symbolizing the megalomania of the modern; Alice "turned absent-minded by infinity" who "cannot move unless her double move," symbolizing the hypostasis of the modern--grow naturally out of the major symbolism. The poem is witty in the seventeenth-century sense; the reference to the Cheshire cat with his abstract grin, a witty comparison. But the wit, the sense of precision and complexity, is functional. It contributes the special quality of irony necessary to allow the poet to end his poem with the positive outcry:

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!

Man's capacity for error, his essential unpredictability, is referred to in a number of Tate's poems. It is the basis of the beautiful "Ode to Fear."

My eldest companion present in solitude,
Watch-dog of Thebes when the blind hero strove:
'Twas your omniscience at the cross-road stood
When Laius, the slain dotard, drenched the grove.

Now to the fading, harried eyes immune
Of prophecy, you stalk us in the street
From the recesses of the August noon,
Alert world over, crouched on the air's feet.

You are the surety to immortal life,
God's hatred of the universal stain. . . .

There is an especially rich development of this theme in the twin poems, "The Meaning of Life," and "The Meaning of Death." The first opens with a dry statement of the point as if in a sort of apologetic monotone:

Think about it at will; there is that

Which is the commentary; there's that other,
Which may be called the immaculate
Conception of its essence in itself.

But the essence must not be turned into mere abstraction by the commentary, even though the commentary is so necessary that the essence is speechless without it. The poet goes on to apologize for the tone of tedious explication:

I was saying this more briefly the other day
But one must be explicit as well as brief.
When I was a small boy I lived at home
For nine years in that part of old Kentucky
Where the mountains fringe the Blue Grass,
The old men shot at one another for luck;
It made me think I was like none of them.
At twelve I was determined to shoot only
For honor; at twenty not to shoot at all;
I know at thirty-three that one must shoot
As often as one gets the rare chance--
In killing there is more than commentary.

Our predicament is that the opportunity for any meaningful action rarely offers itself at all. With the last lines the poet shifts the tone again, modulating from the half-whimsical, personal illustration into a brilliant summarizing figure:

But there's a kind of lust feeds on itself
Unspoken to, unspeaking; subterranean
As a black river full of eyeless fish
Heavy with spawn; with a passion for time
Longer than the arteries of a cave.

The symbol of the concrete, irrational essence of life, the blood, receives an amazing amplification by its association with the cave. The two symbols are united on the basis of their possession of "arteries." The blood is associated with "lust," is "subterranean" (buried within the body), is the source of passion." But the added metaphor of the cave extends the associations from those appropriate to an individual body to something general and eternal. The reference to the fish may be also a fertility symbol. But the fish are "eyeless" though "heavy with spawn." The basic stuff of life lacks eyes--cannot see even itself; and filled with infinite potentialities, runs its dark, involved, subterranean course. The metaphor is powerful and rich, but it gives no sense of having been spatchcocked on to the poem. The blood symbol is worked out only in terms of the cave symbol, the two cannot be broken apart. Moreover, it has been prepared for in the casual personal allusion which precedes it. It too is a part of "old Kentucky / Where the mountains fringe the Blue Grass."

"The Meaning of Death" also begins quietly, as "An After-Dinner Speech." The speech is addressed to us, the moderns, who have committed ourselves to commentary--complete, lucid, and full. We have no passion for time--have abolished time.

Time, fall no more.
Let that be life--time falls no more. The threat
Of time we in our own courage have foresworn.
Let light fall, there shall be eternal light
And all the light shall on our heads be worn.

Although at evening clouds infest the sky
Broken at base from which the lemon sun
Pours acid of winter on a useful view. . . .

The concession announced by "although" is important in developing the tone. Incurable optimists that we are, we say hopefully that there shall be eternal light although one must admit that the evening light does not suggest the warmth of life but freezes the landscape with cold, pours acid upon it, turns it into something which is a vanity and meaningless. (The psychological basis for the symbolism here is interesting. The "lemon sun" indicates primarily the color of the evening sun, but "lemon" carries on over into a suggestion of something acid and astringent.)

But, the poet observes, our uneasiness is really groundless. Tomorrow surely will bring "jocund day" and the colors of spring. If one in boyhood connected fear with the coming on of the dark at evening, that was merely because one was a small boy. We, at least, have given up that past with its irrationalities and superstitions:

Gentlemen! let's
Forget the past, its related errors, coarseness
Of parents, laxities, unrealities of principle.

Think of tomorrow. Make a firm postulate
Of simplicity in desire and act
Founded on the best hypotheses;
Desire to eat secretly, alone, lest
Ritual corrupt our charity . . .

Ritual implies a respect for the thing as thing; it implies more than an abstract series--implies a breach in our strict naturalism. That naturalism must be maintained

Lest darkness fall and time fall
In a long night . . .

and thus spoil out plans for the conquest of time--spoil our plans for the reduction of everything to abstraction, where, we hope,

. . . learned arteries
Mounting the ice and sum of barbarous time
Shall yield, without essence, perfect accident.

The past phrase suggests the final metaphor of "The Meaning of Life," and with the final line of this poem, the speaker drops his ironical pretense of agreement with the "gentlemen" and shifts into another quality of irony, a deeper irony, returning to the cave metaphor: "We are the eyelids of defeated caves." We are the generation that has broken with history, the generation that has closed the mouth of the cave. The word "eyelids" indicates the manner of the closing: the suggestion is that the motion is one of languor and weariness as one might close his eyelids in sleep. The vitality is gone.

A similar theme is to be found in "The Oath" though the setting and the treatment of the theme in this poem are very different. The two friends are sitting by the fire in the gathering twilight.

It was near evening, the room was cold.
Half-dark; Uncle Ben's brass bullet-mould
And powder-horn and Major Bogan's face
Above the fire in the half-light plainly said:
There's naught to kill but the animated dead.
Horn nor mould nor major follows the chase.

Then one of the friends proposes the question, "Who are the dead?"

And nothing more was said. . . .
So I leaving Lytle to that dream
Decided what it is in time that gnaws
The aging fury of a mountain stream

When suddenly, as an ignorant mind will do,
I thought I heard the dark pounding its head
On a rock, crying: *Who are the dead?*
Then Lytle turned with an oath--By God it's true!

The thing that is true is obvious that *we* are the dead. The dead are those who have given in to abstraction, even though they may move about and carry on their business and be--to use the earlier phrase in the poem --the "animated dead." A mountain stream ceases to be a mountain stream when its bed has become worn level. It might even be termed a "defeated" mountain stream when it has lost the activity which gave its career meaning.

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