## INTRODUCTION

Allen Tate
(1899-1979)

"Allen Tate is assured of a place among the most significant writers of his generation. The author of twelve books of poetry, two biographies, eight books of essays, a novel, and a book of memoirs, and editor of more than a dozen other books, he excelled in each of these genres. Tate's primary concerns are those of his age: (1) the dissociation of sensibility, (2) the search for a sustaining and continuing tradition, (3) the opposition to materialistic positivism, and (4) the necessity of man's finding a meaningful relationship to a universe from which the gods have disappeared.

## BIOGRAPHY

Born on 19 November 1899 to John Orley and Eleanor Varnell Tate, in Winchester, Kentucky, Allen Tate believed until he was thirty, because his mother told him he was, that he was a Virginian. In his childhood Tate's family moved two or three times a year, 'moving away from something my mother didn't like.' His earliest memories are of residential hotels, watering places, and resorts visited yearly by his mother. In one of these places, Tate recalled years later, his mother told him: 'Son, put that book down and go play with Henry. You are straining your mind and you know your mind isn't very strong.' (Tate's head was abnormally large and he refers to it ironically in several poems as if he were a water head.)

Because his father early withdrew from social and economic activity, the responsibility of head of the family passed to Allen's older brother, Ben. Tate's early education was haphazard and irregular because his mother seldom stayed in one place long enough for him to complete a school year. In the twenty or so different schools he attended, for periods varying from a few weeks to a rate academic year, he was, he recalled later, always the 'new boy....I had to win my masculine standing at every new school by fist fighting the bully. I don't think I ever won, for if my mind was weak, my physique was weaker.'

One of the few schools he attended for an entire year was the Tarbox School in Nashville, where he lived with his mother while his two older brothers attended Vanderbilt University. Years later when Tate enrolled in Vanderbilt he found that although the passage from Latin he was given to translate as part of the admissions requirement was taken from a longer passage he had memorized, he needed a tutor to pass required mathematics. Having no idea that he had any literary ambitions, he enrolled in Greek and Latin, as well as in the classes of some of them most respected faculty members: in English, Walter Clyde Curry and John Crowe Ransom; in philosophy, Herbert Charles Sanborn; in Greek, Herbert Cushing Tolman. For Curry and Ransom he wrote his first poetry. Later, as a member of the Fugitive group, he continued to write poetry and published his first criticism.

Tate's first books to be published were biographies and poetry, which appeared after he moved to New York in the mid-1920s: *Stonewall Jackson: The Good Soldier* (1928) and *Mr. Pope and Other Poems* (1928). These were followed the next year by *Jefferson Davis: His Rise and Fall*. By this time he was earning his living by contributing reviews and essays to such journals as the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, and

*Hound and Horn*. His first full-length critical essay, 'Poetry and the Absolute,' appeared in the *Sewanee Review* in 1927. In 1928 he received the first of two Guggenheim Fellowships, and before sailing to France, he contributed to *Fugitives: An Anthology of Verse* (1929), which included the first version of 'Ode to the Confederate Dead.' In 1930 he returned to Tennessee and moved into an antebellum farmhouse, where he could help plan *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), to which he contributed an essay, 'Remarks on the Southern Religion.'

Although he taught briefly at Southwestern at Memphis, North Carolina Women's College, Princeton, St. Johns, Vanderbilt, and other institutions, his chief academic appointment was in the University of Minnesota, where he served for more than twenty years. In spite of his academic appointments, he always considered himself primarily a man of letters. For his creative and critical work he received many awards, including the Bollingen Prize, the *Medaglia d'Oro di Societa Italana di Dante Alighieri*, the Fellowship Award of the Academy of American Poets, and membership in the American Academy of Poets and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He was married to the novelist Caroline Gordon (1924-59), the poet Isabella Gardner (1959-66), and Helen Heinz (1966-79). With Caroline Gordon he had a daughter, Nancy, and with Helen Heinz three sons: John Allen, Michael Paul (who died in childhood), and Benjamin Lewis Bogan. Tate died in Nashville on 9 February 1979.

## MAJOR THEMES

In November 1921 Tate was invited to join the Fugitive group, a small coterie of faculty, students, and townspeople meeting at the home of James M. Frank, a local businessman, to discuss the writing of poetry and to criticize each other's verse. Tate's contributions to these meetings can hardly be overestimated. Although at this time he was not an accomplished poet and his verse was obviously that of an apprentice, he changed the nature and direction of the group's discussions.

Rather than concentrating on Swinburne, Hardy, and the Imagists, who the most forward-thinking members of the group thought best represented modern techniques and attitudes in poetry, Tate introduced these young poets and would-be poets to the French Symbolists: Baudelaire, Valery, Verlaine, Mallarme, Remy de Gourmont, and Gerard de Nerval. Then he published a translation of Baudelaire's 'Correspondences' in the December 1924 *Fugitive*, after explaining in the number for the previous April how Baudelaire assisted the modern poet's attempts to delineate his complex experience by dressing up an idea out of one class of experience in the vocabulary of another. In this way the influence of the French on modern poetic theory and practice differed from that of both the English traditionalists and the Imagists. In his essay Tate had also, without mentioning the concept, prepared the group to receive Eliot's explanation of the same problem in the phrase 'the objective correlative.'

Although the poetry Tate wrote at Vanderbilt differs remarkably from his later verse, his associations with Ransom, Warren, and Davidson aided him in finding his subject--that is, contrasting a vital past with a purposeless present. Also, the intense criticism of his earliest poetic efforts by some of the most talented critics of the time profoundly influenced the search for his true poetic voice. Although he and Ransom disagreed on the nature and function of poetry--once their vastly differing opinions almost resulted in a permanent breach when Ransom reviewed unfavorably Eliot's *The Waste Land*--these sometimes violent discussions assisted both men in establishing their permanent positions on basic critical matters. Ransom argued that Tate's poetry was 'obscure' because it lacked essential 'structure' and placed too much emphasis on 'seemingly irrelevant texture.' The reasons for Tate's intentional obscurity, Ransom speculated, was to avoid falling into the 'moral-beautiful compound.' Tate chose a 'subject nearest to his own humanity, a subject perhaps of terrifying import; but in treating it' he stopped 'short of all moral or theoretical conclusions, and confuse[d] his detail to the point where it [left] no positive implications.'

Soon after Tate moved to New York in 1924, he began writing poetry markedly more finished than his earlier verse. On 2 September 1925 he published in the *Nation* 'Mr. Pope,' the title poem of his first collection three years later, *Mr. Pope and Other Poems* (1928). Along with allied subjects, the poem deals with the relations of the poet to society, not only Pope to the eighteenth century but any poet to any society. The sophisticated ladies in their sedans stare at the hideous shape of the poet:

When Alexander Pope strolled in the city
Strict was the glint of pearl and gold sedans.
Ladies leaned out, more out of fear than pity;
For Pope's tight back was rather a goat's than man's.

Tate points out, however, that the poet's misshapen body is merely temporal, but the poet 'who dribbled couplets like a snake' belongs to the permanent world of art. Pope's use of traditional form and meter gives the form and order to his verse that his body, like the work of the modern poets, is denied. A carefully controlled poem is permanent and important, different from the helplessly deformed creature who created it.

Shortly after the publication of this poem, Tate began working on 'The Ode to the Confederate Dead,' which carried a more emphatic statement of his concerns than any other poem he wrote before the 1940s: dissociation of sensibility, search for traditions, and opposition to positivism. The poem, as Tate points out in 'Narcissus as Narcissus' (1938), is about narcissism, the belief that man creates the world in the act of perceiving it. A man stops at the gate of a Confederate cemetery. The season is autumn and the falling leaves, blown by the wind, 'sough the rumor of mortality.' Despite the desolation around him, he can only surmise that the 'inexhaustible bodies' that lie in the graves beyond the stone wall are not 'harbingers of spring,' the promise of new life, because they are not part of the endless cycle of nature. They exist, if at all, because their decaying bodies have fed 'the grass...row after rich row.'

His thoughts turn to 'ambitious November...with a zeal for every slab.' November's only ambition, it would seem, is to destroy what April has produced. The decaying slabs stain 'the uncomfortable angels that rot / On the slabs.' As the man gazes transfixed, he is as impotent as those stone angels. Whatever ability to symbolize metaphysical reality they once possessed they have lost. The strophe ends with the man at the gate realizing that the stone wall really does separate him from the dead and what they represent. He is modern man who knows the grandeur of the past but cannot participate in them. Like the blind crab, he has motion but no direction, energy but no purposeful world in which to use it.

As the poet moves into the antistrophe, the mood naturally changes. He turns to a consideration of the heroism that once characterized, his mind tells him, an entire society. Although he knows of Stonewall Jackson, the hero who gave his life for a cause, and the many battles in which others have done the same--Antietam, Malvern Hill, and Bull Run--his sensibility is unchanged. All he can perceive is that 'the leaves / Flying, plunge and expire.' He is left locked within his narcissistic self, 'Cursing only the leaves crying / Like an old man lost in a storm.' He has lost his creative imagination. He is bound to immanence. Unlike the Romantic poets, he cannot experience a 'spot of time' or transcend his natural surroundings through the song of a nightingale. He is 'The hound bitch / Toothless and dying, in a musty cellar.'

Although the themes of 'active faith' and 'fragmentary chaos,' as Hart Crane once characterized them, have struggled for ascendancy throughout the poem, the winner is no longer in doubt:

We shall say only the leaves whispering
In the improbable mist of nightfall
That flies on multiple wing;
Night is the beginning and the end
And in between the ends of distraction
Waits mute speculation, the patient curse
That stones the eyes, or like the jaguar leaps
For his own image in the jungle pool, his victim.

Modern man, even he who has 'knowledge / Carried in the heart,' can only wait for death, or if he is too impatient to await his natural turn, he can *court* it.

Tate's essays of social and cultural criticism were of great significance to him as he struggled to find his own identity and place, as well as his function, in the modern world. Many of these essays were motivated by the same concerns that were the prime movers of the poetry appearing after 1928 and of his only novel,

*The Fathers* (1938). In 'Message from Abroad' (1929) he begins with an epigram from *Traveler to America* (1799): 'Their faces are bony and sharp but very red...' If these red-faced men are a part of his tradition, Tate can find no evidence of them in the expatriate society of the Left Bank; he is, therefore, very much aware of being an alien. Their feeling leads him to speculate on how a culture passes its traditions from one generation to another. He concludes that those cultures that have 'poetry' and 'statues' transmit naturally and easily their rites, rituals, ceremonies, myths, and manners. All cultural vestiges are lost, however, from those societies that do not have art.

A few weeks after he finished this poem, he began writing another, which at this time he was calling 'Picnic at Cassis.' He sent the poem to John Peale Bishop, who suggested major changes--some of which Tate adopted--and assured Tate that it 'is not one of your best poems. It is your *best*.' He also encouraged Tate to change the title to 'The Mediterranean'...for never 'has the feeling of the Mediterranean from one of Northern blood...been so well expressed.' That Tate wanted to retain this particular effect is indicated by his inclusion of some literal details of a picnic which he, Caroline Gordon, and perhaps fifteen others had attended with Ford Madox Ford: they had entered a small cove under perfect blue skies, where they ate 'cocks boiled in wine and in great cauldrons a sumptuous bouillabaisse, a towering salad, a pile of cheese and fruit,' all washed down with '61 bottles of wine.' Ford remarked to Tate, according to Radcliffe Squires, 'that it must have been in such a cove that Aeneas and his band had stopped to eat,' a remark that sent Tate back to reread *The Aeneid*. That he wanted to expand on the remarks Ford had made is suggested by the fact that Tate supplied an epigraph from Book One of the epic. Venus is speaking to Jupiter, asking what has happened to Aeneas and his group. In translation her question is 'What limit do you set to their pains, great king?' Or, as Tate has translate it: 'What is the end of all this sorrow, great king?'

In the first stanza Tate suggests the three levels at which he wants the poem read. The first two lines are almost a direct statement of literal details: 'Where we went in the boat was a long bay / A slingshot wide, walled in by towering stone--' The reference to the bay as being a 'slingshot wide' foreshadows later metaphorical meanings that will be imposed upon the poem. The third line, 'Peaked margin of antiquity's delay,' reminds the reader that he will be asked to recall the flight of Aeneas from the fallen Troy, a landless wanderer seeking a new home. The fourth line, 'And we went there out of time's monotone,' reminds us of the comparison between Aeneas and his companions with the modern revelers that will thread its way throughout the poem. In 'The New Provincialism' (1945) Tate reminds us in the phrase 'time's monotone' that modern man is limited in time if not in space. He is a prisoner of time because he believes the present moment is unique. 'He cuts himself off from the past and without the friend of traditional wisdom approaches the simplest problems...as if nobody had ever heard of them before.' The modern picnickers do not realize that they are as homeless as Aeneas and his companions were. They too are seeking spiritual roots that will provide a center and purpose to their lives. In the third stanza need / Devoured the very plates Aeneas bore.' Our secret need, of course, is an awareness of our traditions, not only of our Grecian heritage encompassed by the Aeneas myth but of our spiritual background suggested by them myth of the slingshot with which David slew the enemy of Jehovah.

But the westward movement of the modern world has carried us to a new direction, as out philosophy of acquisitive materialism has given us a new sense of values:

> What country shall we conquer, what fair land
> Unman 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 land where tasseling corn,
> Fat beans, grapes, sweeter than muscadine
> Rot on the vine; in that land were we born.

In our search for material splendor, we have squandered our opportunities and fouled our nest; we must change our direction; we must make our journey eastward and find the traditional values that gave force and direction to the lives of such heroes as Aeneas and David. Nothing in the poem is as clear as the

reminder of the lack of purpose and direction in the lives of modern man, but Tate's skillful use of image and metaphor to blend structure and texture makes it, in Radcliffe Squires's words, 'the best of Tate's poems written before he was forty.'

The basic attitudes of this poem are altered slightly in some of the later poems and the essays of cultural criticism written in the late 1930s and 1940s. In 'The New Provincialism' he defines regionalism as 'that consciousness or that habit of men in a given locality which influences them to certain patterns of thought and conduct handed to them by their ancestors.' In 'What is a Traditional Society?' (1936), a revision of an essay given as the Phi Beta Kappa address at the University of Virginia, he remarks that 'here within the walls of Mr. Jefferson's university there is a special tradition of realism in thinking about the nature of tradition.' A little later in the same essay he asks what does this tradition of realism mean and how does it differ from the general American society of the present: 'It means that in ages which suffer the decay of manners, religion, morals, codes, our indestructible vitality demands expression in violence and chaos; it means that men who have lost both the higher myth of religion and the lower myth of historical dramatization have lost the forms of human action: it means that they are no longer capable of defining human objectives.... [Such a man] is surrounded by the grandeurs of the past, but he does not participate in them; they do not sustain him.... Man in his plight lives in an untraditional society. For an untraditional society does not permit its members to pass to the next generation what it received from its immediate past.'

Tate employs this distinction between the traditional and the untraditional society in his only novel *The Fathers* (1938), except in this work he speaks of the 'classical' or 'traditional' and the 'romantic' or 'untraditional hero. The Posey family has given up their land and moved into town where all semblance of family ties has disappeared. Like the other Poseys, George is oblivious to tradition. He believes that every human act is intended for his own personal consumption. Buchan, the classical hero, can objectify his personal experiences--even the loss of his wife and the participation of his sons in a disastrous war--because he 'can participate in the grandeurs of the past.' He is able 'to form a definite concept of [his] human role,' and he can 'function in every level of life.'

R. K. Meiners believes 'The Seasons of the Soul' is one of the most important poems of the twentieth century. In this poem, Tate is trying to present what one poet has called the 'metaphysical present.' The form of the poem is that of the dramatic monologue in which the speaker addresses each of the seasons. Because the seasons are personified, and even contain a part of the poet's (modern man's) personality (his wanton needs and fears), the mood of the poem is reverential.

Each of the four sections--Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring--has six stanzas of 60 lines, and each section bears some resemblance to one of the four elements of ancient philosophy: summer--air; autumn--earth; winter--water; spring--fire. Its attention never wandering far from sin and salvation, the poem can best be experienced if one recalls the scene when Dante and Virgil reach the seventh circle where the violent reside and the speaker is blind and imprisoned. (one is reminded of Tate's often-repeated observation that modern man has a 'locked-in sensibility.') The reader should remember, too, that Beatrice had brought Dante to salvation; in that way he can get the full impact of Tate's protagonist's pursuit of Santa Monica. With his imprisoned sensibility and his faith destroyed by positivism, the protagonist wants her to convince him that he is not dying into nothingness.

The opening section (Summer), which traces the disintegration of the soul, opens with an epitaph from the *Inferno*: 'Then I stretched forth my hand and pulled a twig from a large thorn and the trunk cried: 'Why do you tear me?' This epigram sets the mood for the section, which is primarily concerned with man who is crippled by the imbalance between head and heart, and the poet's insistence that he must attain metaphysical (metaphorical) vision if he is to climb the stair toward salvation. To accomplish this feat he must regain the innocence of childhood and nature:

Speak, that we may hear;
Listen, while we confess
That we conceal our fear;
Regard us, while the eye
Discerns by sight or guess

Whether, as sheep foregather
Upon their crooked knees,
We have begun to die;
Whether your kindness, mother,
Is mother of silences.

She does not respond, and the speaker's doubts remain. His ordeal is that of modern man, a fear of the spiritual disintegration of the world. Few other modern poets have expressed as well as Tate the essential tone of their age.

## SURVEY OF CRITICISM

The authorized biography is being prepared by Robert Buffington. Until it is available the most reliable sources of information about Tate's personal life are Radcliffe Squires's *Allen Tate: A Literary Biography*, Ferman Bishop's *Allen Tate* in the Twayne United States Authors Series, Louise Cowan's *The Fugitive Group* (for the Fugitive period), and Rob Roy Purdy's *Fugitives' Reunion*. The best available bibliography is Marshall Fallwell's *Allen Tate: A Bibliography.* The most helpful book-length critical studies are Louis D. Rubin, Jr.'s *The Wary Fugitives*; R. K. Meiner's *The Last Alternative: A Study of the Works of Allen Tate*; and the previously mentioned books by Squires and Bishop.

An illuminating insight into the regard Tate's contemporaries felt for him appears in *Allen Tate and His Work*, ed. Radcliffe Squires. Two monographs that give a perceptive insight into Tate's literary career are George Hemphill's *Allen Tate* in the University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers and Melvin E. Bradford's *Rumor of Mortality*. Both Arthur Mizener in '*The Fathers* and Realistic Fiction' and Thomas Daniel Young in *The Past in the Present* emphasize the relationship between Tate's social and cultural criticism and *The Fathers*. The only two books of Tate's voluminous literary correspondence that have been published are *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*, edited by John Tyree Fain and Thomas Daniel Young, and *The Republic of Letters in America: The Correspondence of John Peale Bishop and Allen Tate*, edited by Thomas Daniel Young and John Hindle. Tate's contributions to the Agrarian movement are presented in William C. Harvard and Walter Sullivan, eds., *A Band of Prophets* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981) and Thomas Daniel Young, *Waking Their Neighbors Up: The Nashville Agrarians Reconsidered* (1982).

In the future it seems unlikely that Tate's career will attract as much attention as it has in the past. Fallwell lists more than 200 essays and dissertations. Only the most significant of these are listed in the selected checklist that follows this essay. Although there might be some attempt to balance the almost unrestrained adulation he has received in the past, it is certain that Tate has earned a secure and permanent place in Southern letters."

Thomas Daniel Young
*Fifty Southern Writers after 1900: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*
eds. Joseph M. Flora and Robert Bain
(Greenwood 1987) 457-66

Most recommended:
*Allen Tate and His Work: Critical Evaluations,*
ed. Radcliffe Squires (U Minnesota 1972)

## EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

"In Europe the usual tendency in thinking of an American writer is to regard him as a genial barbarian, talented but without critical conscience or intellectual maturity. To be very highly thought of an American writer should at least have worked in a restaurant or factory, gone to sea as a cabin boy, devoted some time to the profession of selling neckties, perhaps have hunted whales in the Pacific or killed lions in Kenya. It does not matter in the least if he has read Shakespeare or educated himself in the Greek classics.

In reality the idea that the American writers lack university education and know little or nothing of European thought, history, and literature is simply a myth. To cite only a few examples among the more

notable and recent, it will suffice to point out that Dos Passos was educated at Harvard and was one of a group of exquisites and esthetes, that Thornton Wilder was educated in the Greek and Latin classics, that Hemingway himself, despite all his posing as a primitive, is a profound connoisseur of Elizabethan literature and a student of Flaubert.

If this is true of the fiction writers, it is all the more true of the poets. Most American poets today are also critics, often university professors. Far from being immediate and spontaneous, theirs is among the most difficult forms of poetry ever produced, the most dense with erudition and with thought, the most disciplined technically. Our own hermetic poets, by comparison, represent a prodigy of simplicity. It is enough to open at random a page of Eliot or Pound, to find before one texts loaded with infinite allusions, historic, philosophical and literary, which range from obscure quotations from the Chinese and Indian to close-packed references to works of the whole western tradition. Among the others, the case of Allen Tate is one of the more significant. Here we have a poet who, besides writing verse that displays a consummate technical perfection of rhythm and meter, confronts in his critical prose the most difficult esthetic problems, ranges from the political and historical sphere to the social and religious, and treats the most complex questions of philosophy and of culture.

Born in Winchester, Kentucky, in 1899, Tate belongs to that group of American intellectuals and artists deriving from the agrarian aristocracy of the South, such as John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks, who under the name of *Fugitives* reacted against the culture of the industrialized and pragmatic North, reaffirming the value of tradition, of form, and of artistic discipline. Shaping itself afresh through recourse to the classics, this movement affirmed the importance of literature as an autonomous expression of a need of the spirit. In the poetry of Tate one feels the influence of the Latin poets, especially in his spirited and stinging satire, basically political, in the mode of Persius and Martial, no less than the influence of Dante and Donne, in his ability to sustain his verse upon a rich basis of thought. The return to the closed forms of sonnet and *terza rima* does not prevent him from experimenting in even more complex rhythms, in which the verses are linked stanza to stanza by recurrent rimes and the images are sustained by a coherent logical structure. But upon this passionately intellectual ground there developed in Tate another source of inspiration: the hallucinated world of the South, people with memories of his boyhood and with the phantasms of the Civil War.

The warm and luxurious landscape alternates, in his poems, with evocations of ambiguous states of soul in which one seems to half listening to catch the faint voices that swarm in a dusk filled with shades and specters. In this sense, Tate moves in the same sphere as other symbolist writers of the South, such as Faulkner and Poe. In 'Mother and Son,' for example, is represented with great dramatic force a troubled spirit's struggle for salvation on the brink of damnation and death. In 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' a poem on the dead of the Civil War ('The people--people of my kind, my own / People but strange with a white light / In the face'), the prodigious formal virtuosity and the perfect accord of the images serve to focus a vision broken by infernal flashes and celestial lightnings, in which the paean of glory for the dead soldiers is linked with the sense of bodily decay and the realistic notation is made one with the metaphysical breath.

No less interesting than his poetry is Tate's vast body of critical work, which gathers into various volumes (among which the most important are *Reactionary Essays* and *On the Limits of Poetry*) essays on esthetics, critical studies, and historical depictions of culture and manners. Tate's theoretical position derives directly from that movement of thought, that in America has had its most authoritative representative in Henry James, for which literature has an autonomous validity as complete knowledge of the experience of man. This trend is clearly opposed to the other, that calls to mind Walt Whitman, which tends to see in literature above all a means of ideological propaganda: linked in part to Marxist tendencies it has today its most brilliant exponents in the critic Edmund Wilson and the poet Archibald MacLeish.

But it should be noted that the autonomy of art is not defended by Tate upon the basis of a sterile estheticism, like that of a Wilde or a Mallarme, and not even on the grounds of an abstract idealism, like that of Croce. Tate adheres on the contrary to that total conception of man of the classico-Christian tradition, which is traceable to Aristotle and St. Thomas, and which has been taken up again by the French philosopher Jacques Maritain, for whom the work of art is engrafted like an integral part in a vaster whole. Tate's polemic, extending beyond the strictly esthetic plane to that of philosophy in general, is in fact

directed above all against that scientific positivism dominant now especially in the United States, which in placing man upon the purely biological plane of the instincts and stimuli, denies the spiritual world any independence of the physical. As in sociology we get then passive adaptation to environment, and in psychology reduction of individual actions to sheer physiological mechanism, so in art and history man becomes prisoner of a coarse utilitarianism, in terms of which he exists as mere Homo economicus, without any respite moral or religious. Scientific methods when applied to literature reveal, in fact, according to Tate, the insufficiency of a vision of life that looks upon everything from the practical angle of experimentation and of results.

Lacking a true faith in art and thought as values superior to pure utility, even the historical and literary critic occupies himself often in a mechanical and arbitrary research into origins and influences or in a cataloguing of facts without significance. Thus Tate criticizes esthetic theories, like that of Richards, which see in poetry only a resource of emotive experience serving to order and organize the impulses for action, or of Morris, who distinguishing on the schematic level between the word as designation, that is as mere pragmatical means of determining behavior, and the word as denotation, that is as addition of extrinsic particulars to a thing already noted, destroys the unity of language as form of complete knowledge.

These false theories were born, according to Tate, of the historic breach that in the romantic period opened between science and poetry. It is then that one encounters the phenomenon of the poet who deprived of a true cognitive function, puts himself into competition with science and pretends to compensate, with intensity of sentiment and willed affirmation of the individual self, for the loss of the total vision of reality. Out of this situation there arose, in criticism also, upon the one hand the cold determination of science and upon the other the emotional and verbal impressionism which reflect the divided and distorted conceptions of art characteristic of the modern era.

What then is the criterion for making use of poetry, if not for producing it, something which is a secret of genius and of history, at least for judging it and distinguishing it? Good poetry, Tate answers, is that in which the texture of the imagery is coherent, the meanings, however multiple and ambiguous, can always be related to the central motive, and every phrase can bear the strictest logical examination, without, however, any possibility of the whole being resolved into pure thought. Experience emotional and cognitive at the same time, great poetry--says Tate--whether ancient or modern, requires for its understanding the cooperation, on the part of the reader, of all his intellectual energies.

These esthetic ideas, in many ways close to those of Blackmur, Empson, and Eliot, are amply illustrated in Tate's critical essays. Particularly important is that on Hart Crane, in which he sees the typical example of the modern romantic poet, whose sensibility without center and without object, not succeeding in localizing itself in the external world, encloses him in pure sensation, or, if he desires to escape from it, falls into sentimentalism and into chaos. In this essay, as in the others on Donne, Keats, Emily Dickinson, and Thomas Hardy, Tate sees the author, with exemplary historical insight, as an inseparable part of the spiritual experience of the civilization in which he lives. Considering this approach, it is easy to understand how the esthetic problem became for him therefore also a political, social, and religious problem.

Modern art is in crisis, because commercialism has destroyed the spiritual unity of man, reducing his life, depleted of all moral and religious purpose, to a mere system of economic relations. Hence the artist suffers today only more intensely from the same sickness that afflicts other men too. Like the people of Eliot's Waste Land, he is still surrounded with the grandeur of the past, but it is only a dead tradition, in which he does not share and which does not sustain him. Having lost faith in anything greater than himself he is in danger of being only 'a cruel animal without a soul...a congeries of possibilities without order and aim'."

Francesco Mei
"Culture and Technique in Tate"
translated by Brewster Ghiselin
*II Quotidiano* (July 1954)

Michael Hollister (2021)

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