

Allen Tate

(1899-1979)

The Cross (1928)

There is a place that some men know,
I cannot see the whole of it,
Nor how men come there. Long ago
Flame burst out of a secret pit
Crushing the world with such a light
The day sky fell to moonless black,
The kingly sun to hateful night
For those, once seeing, turning back:
For love so hates mortality,
Which is the providence of life,
She will not let it blessed be
But curses it with mortal strife.
Until beside the blinding rood
Within that world-destroying pit
--Like young wolves that have tasted blood
Of death, men taste no more of it:
So blind in so severe a place
(All life before in the black grave)
The last alternatives they face
Of life, without the life to save,
Being from all salvation weaned--
A stag charged both at heel and head:
Who would come back is turned a fiend
Instructed by the fiery dead.

ANALYSIS

"As I look back upon my own verse, written over more than twenty-five years, I see plainly that its main theme is man's suffering from unbelief; and I cannot for a moment suppose that this man is some other than myself."

Allen Tate
"Religion and the Intellectuals"
Partisan Review XVII, 242

"I will conclude this chapter by turning to what is in my judgment Tate's finest short poem and consider these techniques and themes as they operate at the very highest level in his writing: the poem of which I speak is 'The Cross'.... Nothing he has written since that time [1928-1931]...has surpassed 'The Cross' within its scope; it is his best short poem and one of the best anywhere. Since 1930, Tate's range has become broader and his style has changed and matured; but by that time he has established a full claim to critical attention...."

It is a very early poem if one excepts the early things published in *The Fugitive* and *The Double Dealer*. It is a very tight and difficult poem. Not many commentators have tackled it, either because they have not discerned its worth or else its extreme condensation has not lent itself very well to the type of hit-or-miss quotation to which Tate's poetry has often been subjected. Perhaps many critics have felt like Hart Crane when he wrote to Tate: "'The Cross' keeps me guessing a little too strenuously. I can't help thinking it perhaps too condensed, and...a not entirely fused melange of ecclesiastical and highly personalized imagery. In which case you sin no more than Eliot in the recent 'Ash-Wednesday.'"

Crane was dead wrong, even in his example. The poem is not 'too highly condensed'; it exists at approximately the level of condensation which language must attain if a short poem is to be called great. The meanings of that 'ecclesiastical imagery' are available. As for the 'highly-personalized' imagery, there is no doubt that Tate's imagery is unique, but this is true of all important poets, and the problem can be met with some education and a careful reading of Tate's other work. My analysis of other poems more than adequately prepares us for considering this difficult poem. A careful reading of 'The Cross' will in turn prepare us for an extensive examination of 'Seasons of the Soul,' one of Tate's really major poems, which forms the substance of the following chapter.

'The Cross' was written in 1928, long before Tate's prose demonstrates much concern with Christianity and well before an overtly religious viewpoint informs his writing. Yet "The Cross' is a religious poem. It is really a religious poem about history and it almost perfectly manifests what I have claimed is the fundamental quality of Tate's career: his concern with history was primarily religious from the beginning, and he must be understood as a basically religious writer....

Though the poem is short, its controlling idea is as large and vital as any in our experience; the handling of it is very fine. It is apparent, I believe, that although the poem is explicitly religious its meaning expands until it includes the large historical and cultural concerns which we have seen informing all Tate's work. That the poem should do so much in such a short length and still remain under control, with no unspecified or dissembling images, is startling.... That the poem accomplishes so much in the short length is one measure of its greatness.

The poem is concerned with man's religious predicament and the historical consequences of it: once a man or a culture has obtained a knowledge of Christianity, that knowledge cannot be ignored except at great peril. And since this is the subject of the poem, it is not surprising that Tate should use religious, even theological, terms in it. The meanings of these terms are not esoteric; it is not as if Tate were demanding knowledge of a minor Buddhist sect of the ninth century. Hart Crane found it too ecclesiastical and difficult; if the same comment holds true for other readers, that fact might be a vindication of the poem's theme: the culture has placed itself in danger by forgetting, even destroying, the forces which have made it.

It is typical of Tate's concern for 'unity' and 'full experience' that he phrases a problem of religious faith and epistemology in visual terms. It is similar to, but much refined from, the imagery of the other poems on which I have commented. In his early essay on Emily Dickinson Tate remarked that she never reasons; she sees. The same observation might be made, perhaps more accurately, of 'The Cross.' There is no theological reasoning in it; it is all *seeing*. The first line sets the pattern: the unspecified 'place' that 'I' cannot see gradually becomes visible. In the first line, the word 'place' has absolutely no context; yet it becomes perfectly apparent in the next few lines that it must be read in Christian terms. This impression is reinforced immediately by the juxtaposition of 'know' and 'see.' Both words, despite their surface simplicity, have tremendous implications. 'Know' is used in the New Testament sense: knowledge unto salvation; 'see' also has theological overtones, for since the 'place'--the cross--is not seen completely, the efficacy which it once had cannot be obtained. If the protagonist of the poem is blind, it is a spiritual blindness.

And yet, it is also a physical blindness. The religious concern merges with a more purely aesthetic concern. We may assume that men once *saw* the cross. I am not speaking figuratively; there was a time when the sign of the cross would call into mind a fairly organized body of concepts. But this is no longer so. We can no longer see the cross; we can no longer 'see' traditional Christianity. Our vision is generally faulty and nothing is seen whole and flawless, unmixed with our constant introspection and meditations in scruple. The implications of the word 'see,' as I have remarked before, are always important for Tate; it is one of the most loaded words in his vocabulary.

The speaker of the poem is placed in such a position that his awareness is challenged by the central fact of Christianity. Yet, he does not know how he came to be in such a position; it has just happened. Christianity is, we assume, a part of his culture which had not much interest for him before its awful significance burst upon him. For that is how we must read the passage beginning with the last words of line three.

The third through the eighth lines carry the significance beyond the individual to the entire Western tradition. The bursting flame is a fairly stereotyped expression for the revelation of Christ's glory. On the other hand, 'secret pit' causes trouble if we read in this fashion: it carries inevitable overtones of the Christian hell. There has not been, to my knowledge, any religion which has developed an identical notion of eternal punishment. Furthermore, the gospel tradition directly links Christ and hell; he descended into hell before he assumed his position of majesty. So the ambiguity: the revelation of Christ's glory is at the same time the revelation of terrible potentialities. Those who are accustomed to thinking of Christ exclusively in the pastoral imagery of the lamb of god, or as the bearer of peace and glad tidings, may have some difficulty with this reading. For those who like to think in this fashion, it is necessary to remember that Christ is in some sense a destroyer. Theologically and psychologically, he destroyed that world of nature in which men could feel that the state of nature was beneficent. In the Christian scheme of salvation, the state of nature after the Fall is a state of sin. I have some recollection that Christ once said 'I bring not peace, but a sword.' The protagonist of the poem seems to be struggling with the significance of that remark.

This revelation, in one sense, *crushed* the world (line five). The emotional force of the word is plain. To understand the conceptual niceties of attaching this image to a quality of light, one has to have grasped the typical patterns of Tate's imagery which I have described; it also helps to have studied Baudelaire and his followers. For when 'The Cross' was written, it had not been long before that Tate had translated the famous sonnet 'Correspondences.' In this passage is a successful example of correspondence, the transposition of an image from one order of experience to another. 'The Cross,' we may notice, is considerably more conservative in this respect than 'The Meaning of Life' or even 'The Mediterranean,' and it is probably the better for it. Though 'The Cross' has less of that remarkable wit which distinguishes many of Tate's other poems, it also avoids the failures of this mode of imagery, the *preciosite* which is so often Tate's major vice.

The assertions of lines six through eight cause no particular difficulty if we have grasped what goes before. The sun, which once ruled, either as a personified deity or as the chief phenomenon of nature, can no longer have its old significance for those who have encountered the awful force of the new religion. The specifically Christian imagery of the earlier lines is here replaced by Pagan images, which are in turn dismissed. Perhaps this, after all, was the meaning of the darkness after the crucifixion: 'the day-sky fell to moonless black.'

The next lines revolve primarily around a subtle juxtaposition of love and hate. It takes a nice bit of theological dexterity to get around the seeming negations of lines nine through thirteen. The love is the love of God revealed in Christ; mortality is just that--the condition of being mortal, with all its implications of finiteness and naturalness. But Christ's role, as we have seen, is not unambiguous; neither is his love unambiguous. Consider this: 'A new commandment I give you, that you love one another.' But love is not within the area of command. And so here: according to traditional Christianity, Christ is the manifestation of God's love, yet he may destroy. The relationships of this mortality-providence-blessed-mortal strife sequence furnish almost limitless ambivalences. The terms act as prisms in which the significance of each succeeding term is refracted, modified, and transformed in a *progression d'effet* modulation. Mortality is the providence of life in the sense that all men are mortal; death is part of the human experience, that which is provided or foreseen. But providence implies the doctrine of Christian providence--the care of God for his creatures. The providence of God is a blessing, but it may reverse upon the recipient and become a curse. The love of God, in this poem, has a strange way of turning, for those who apprehend but do not hold, into something which has an effect very unlike love.

I mention ambiguity and ambivalence and I do not wish to be misunderstood. It is not the structure of the poem which is ambiguous, nor the imagery. The ambiguity lies in the condition the poem examines, the meaning of the Christian tradition in the present time. The images grow logically out of this concern and are organic with the conception; they never deteriorate to mere decoration or illustration. Compare this with the imagery of 'The Meaning of Life,' for instance, and it will become obvious how far they differ. Since the images here are so organic to the conception, the assertions that the cross is blinding and that one can stand, at the same time, *beside* the cross and *in* a world-destroying pit (lines thirteen and fourteen) are

explained by the fundamental irony that knowledge may indeed damn. It damns not only an individual but also, in a sense, a culture.

The image of the 'young wolves that have tasted blood' which begins in line fifteen and qualifies the succeeding lines is among the very finest in Tate's verse and it absolutely must be grasped. The preceding lines have made the cross both a preserver and a destroyer. It destroys the old life of the 'world'; i.e., it has changed the situation of nature: it makes a purely natural form of salvation impossible. On the other hand, it offers a supernatural salvation but does not guarantee it. The word 'blood' looks in two directions. Imagistically, it functions as a symbol of the historical and metaphysical tensions in which modern man finds himself. He cannot return to the world of natural religion once he has glimpsed the significance of the supernatural any more than wolves that have tasted blood can return to and be satisfied with common food. 'Blood' also has obvious connotations of the blood of Christ. The problem here is: in what form can we find salvation? The answer is, if we may call it an answer, that the difficulties surrounding this task are nearly insuperable. Modern man--the 'dull critter of enormous head' of the 'Sonnets at Christmas'--is caught between two salvations, the natural and the supernatural. His intellect rebels at the thought of supernaturalism, but once he has become aware of its significance he can no longer return to the pleasant naturalisms of the past.

The last eight lines are among the finest that Tate has written, though the remark seems irrelevant when applied to a uniformly fine poem. There is the very great beauty of perfect phrasing in line seventeen, a line which at first seems one of the least pretentious of the poem: 'So blind, in so severe a place.' There is little to say except 'exactly'; the force of the conception gives it its strength. We, as the heirs of the Christian tradition, have become 'blind' to the 'world'--it no longer nourishes us. The line and the one immediately following ('All life before in the black grave') carry an ironic twist on the Christian symbolism of baptism. We have in a sense been 'buried with Christ,' in the words of the formula, but we have been buried to a form of living death, not to the 'new life' which baptism is meant to symbolize.

Whether we agree or disagree with the doctrine which generated the notion, we give assent to an ordered world of imagination. The situation is such that sight--in the sense of the first lines--is desperately needed yet men are desperately blind. And thus blindly, without real life, a race of men who have forsaken both the older love the world and the supernatural love they cannot believe in, seek to discover issues as mysterious as the meaning of life. It is as if a skeleton went in search of flesh for its bones. In the words of Tate's later 'Winter Mask,' we cannot tell:

Why is it man hates
His own salvation,
Prefers the way to hell,
And finds his last safety
In the self-made curse that bore
Him toward damnation:
The drowned undrowned by the sea,
The sea worth living for.

In such a condition the last alternatives of life are faced (lines nineteen and twenty). The alternatives are, of course, the questions of life and death in a supernatural sense. But still, 'without the life to save': the meaning of 'life' has shifted from the previous line. The usage of a single word with double meanings is typical of Tate; here, the life which cannot be saved is life in *this* world. This is one more insistence on the impossibility of returning to a pre-supernatural life. Such a return might be comforting, but it is historically and psychologically impossible.

The last lines do not resolve the tension; they aggravate it. If we prefer useful maxims, this will irritate us, but it is likely that the problem is insoluble. In the line 'Being from all salvation weaned' the word 'being' is most naturally read as a participle which continues the meaning of the preceding line. The dilemma remains: there is a paradoxical doubt of supernatural salvation, though we have been weaned from the world. We cannot return to simple naturalism any more than a child can return to the breast of its mother. Though it runs the danger of quibbling, I am also tempted to see a further extension in 'being' and read it as a noun: being itself, the *quidditas* of life, has gone bad.

The stag image works beautifully. It develops conceptually and imagistically out of the earlier material. These lines work; they function as images should. Their most striking quality is the perfectly planned supra-conceptual implication in the progression of images. The stag image is prepared for by the image of the wolves tasting blood. We consent immediately on a purely imagistic level to the legitimacy of the stag charged at heel and head before we have debated the intellectual properties. And then the conceptual level becomes plain: modern man is caught in the middle, between two salvations, with no hope of retreating to the level of natural piety and little hope of attaining the supernatural vision.

If we try to repudiate the supernaturalism which we have once known, our will is perverted and we are dominated by evil. The consequences are, then, grave. It is not possible to escape that world-destroying pit nor to think one's way out of it. Once there the inhabitants--those, I imagine, who have earlier faced 'the last alternatives' and have failed to deal with them--make certain of our loyalties by making our forms identical with theirs.

I can think of no way to make the poem more powerful; there is nothing which should be taken out, nothing added. And it is strange that at this early stage in his career Tate should be phrasing the major problem of his writing in primarily religious and not primarily historical terms. The next chapter will be concerned with 'Seasons of the Soul,' a long poem from a later point in Tate's career. In that poem we will again see the problems of history and religion converging..."

R. K. Meiners

The Last Alternatives: A Study of the Works of Allen Tate
(Alan Swallow 1963) 103, 145-52

"The Cross' (1928) is an excellent example of his concentrated style. The Poem, placed in our time and dealing with man's vision of his spiritual predicament, is short, but its range is broad and vital. In an essay on Emily Dickinson, Tate remarked that 'she never reasons, she sees.' Here Tate 'sees.' To 'see' is one of his favorite verbs with many levels of meaning.

There is a place that some men
know
I cannot see the whole of it
Nor how I came there. Long ago
Flame burst out a secret pit
Crushing the world with such a light
The day-sky fell to moonless black,
The kingly sun to hateful night
For those, once seeing, turning back.

The poem presents the Christian image, which we can no longer 'see,' the realization that love, death and salvation stand before the world destroying pit, facing the last alternatives of life. We have become blind to the natural world of living, and yet have no access to the other world.

For love so hates mortality,
Which is the providence of life
She will not let it blessed be
But curses it with mortal strife,
Until beside the blinding rood
Within that world-destroying pit
--Like young wolves who have
tasted blood,
Of death, men taste no more of it."

Katherine Garrison Chapin
The New Republic 153:4-5, 22-24
(24 July 1965)

"Some of Tate's best-known poems are concerned with this very problem of a conflict between loves with and without faith. Perhaps the most familiar is 'The Cross.' As a dramatic portrayal of the situation of modern man, it moves swiftly and convincingly. The 'last alternatives' that he faces are a choice between the faith and love demanded by the cross and the nihilism and narcissism inherited by the chance world of the present. This second way, Tate has demonstrated brilliantly, was given full expression by Edgar Allan Poe: 'He is constantly telling us that we are all alone, that beauty is evanescent, that the only immortality may be a vampirish return from the grave, into which we must sink again through eternity.'

The protagonist of 'The Cross' knows that 'turning back' will not spare him the necessity of choosing between the two ways. The last lines of the poem describe perfectly the fate of Poe's vampirish heroes; and the typical Poe-like themes of vortex, pit, and grave are unmistakable. At the beginning of the poem, the abyss that threatens to destroy the self is accompanied with an illuminating fire.... It is the kind of symbol Tate refers to in his essay on Poe that both illuminates and burns. The speaker, confronted with such knowledge, stands on the brink of the only truly heroic decision possible in the modern world: the decision to accept personal annihilation rather than vampiric immortality. The light of the cross that is revealed at the beginning of the poem is also the light of death.

Man has a natural resistance to mortality, whether it be expressed as self-love or love for another; but he cannot expect to save himself though it alone. The cross stands for a kind of death that leads somewhere, and its effectiveness as a symbol in this poem goes beyond traditional Christian associations. The cross is a much older icon; it stood in the pagan world for the belief in a world axis, for the crossroads that organize every human establishment of order and every choice of action. In other associations, the cross was the cosmic tree by means of which the soul reaches God, a point of intersection between earth and heaven. In Tate's poem it functions as the mediating image that brings together a great number of opposing motifs: flame (fire and life) and pit (earth, nothingness, and death); love and hate; immortality and mortality; the sun of rationalistic hope and the moon of irrational fear. The cross is also a symbol of agony and struggle. It is the paradigm for suffering carried out in a state of tension. It is also a symbol of destiny. No more apt commentary upon the action depicted in Tate's poem could be found than J. E. Cirlot's coincidentally appropriate description in his *Dictionary of Symbol*: "The basic idea behind the symbolism of crucifixion is that of experiencing the essence of antagonism, an idea which lies at the root of existence, expressing as it does life's agonizing pain, its cross-roads, possibilities and impossibilities, of construction and destruction. Evola suggests that the cross is a synthesis of the seven aspects of space and time, because its form is such that it both maintains and destroys free movement.

The violent oppositions so typical of Tate's poetry are aptly summed up in this central symbol. The poem is a powerful cosmic drama, played out on a stage where time and space are not specific or definite ('long ago,' 'a place that some men know') but remain, nevertheless, effective settings. The complexity of the poem lies in its oppositions as they occur on all levels, including the more intimate frame of reference of the human body (eye opposed to foot, head to heart) and the battleground of the psyche (wolflike aggression meeting staglike defenselessness). The success of the poem is doubtless a result of Tate's mixture of the very concrete and the very abstract. The symbol of the wolves is handled with particular brilliance. The young pups, weaned from their mother's milk to the taste of fresh blood, will no longer be satisfied with the blander nourishment.

Man possesses a lust for life that drives him to seek something beyond death, but he has been 'from all salvation weaned' and cannot go back. Without religious faith, man will seek his salvation where he can; he will attempt to find it in the love that 'so hates mortality / Which is the providence of life,' but he will find no peace there. The rending of the body, suggested in the image of the charged stag, is a destruction of the physical for the sake of the spiritual. It is the only alternative to the living death of a vampire immortality. It is a modern man's cross that he cannot decide: he is crucified on the intersecting agonies of his dissociated condition and torn in two directions at once. Having encountered the dilemma directly, he knows that there is no turning back. Yet no secular form of salvation can save him from the wolf of death. He faces the fact of his own mortality without hope or faith and therefore without the benefit of love.

Though the poet obviously believes in the power of love, he cannot turn to it as a total solution, for desire to survive is greater than an understanding of the whole: 'For love so hates mortality / Which is the

providence of life / She will not let it blessed be / But curses it with mortal strife, / Until beside the blinding rood / Within that world-destroying pit / --Like young wolves that have tasted blood-- / Of death, men taste no more of it.' Occasionally, a poet's interpretation of the work of his colleagues may shed light on his own poems. Tate's reading of W. H. Auden's 'Our Hunting Fathers Told the Story,' which also deals with love and mortality in terms of hunting imagery, may be taken as a gloss on the lines about love from 'The Cross':

'In this poem there is an immense complication of metaphor, but I do not propose to unravel it. I would say just this: that all the complications can be returned without confusion or contradiction to a definite, literal, and coherent field of imagery; that when the poet wishes to extend his meaning, he does it by means of this field of metaphor, not by changing the figure, which is: the hunter debases his human nature (Love) in his arrogant, predatory conquest of the world, and Love itself becomes not merely morally bad but evil. The field of imagery, to which all the implications refer, is that of the hunting squire, who by a deft ambiguity quickly becomes predatory man.'

This figure in Auden's poem may have caught Tate's attention because of his own use of similar images. In 'The Cross' the love that hates mortality is human nature itself, and the fear of death makes man into a kind of predator seeking to destroy death. Once man has glimpsed salvation, he is like the young wolves who cannot return to their mother's milk. He can no longer accept death as the end. But the love that hates mortality must yield to a higher love that sees something beyond death. Tate's own field of imagery in this poem is the flight of the stag from the wolves, and, like Auden, he also depicts love the hunter turning into a predator first and then a victim. This transformation of the predator of death into the prey of death is paralleled in two other poems of Tate's. In 'The Traveller' [and] 'Inside and Outside'.... Man by nature bears the cross of his situation, and he can choose to accept what he is and come to understand his own nature or attempt to escape it without hope of success. Any solution that fails to recognize man's need to transcend his own nature will, Tate implies, lead to his ultimate destruction."

Robert S. Dupree
Allen Tate and the Augustan Imagination: A Study of the Poetry
(Louisiana State U 1983) 83-87

"Then his mother died, and though his intellectual interests had always interfered with his ability to share her religious feelings, now especially he felt the absence of religion in his life. His poem 'The Pit' now explored the battle between the intellect and faith--and bore a new title, 'The Cross.' It was unclear whether the cross represented a symbol of salvation or an intellectual burden to twentieth-century man. Depressed and out of sorts, Tate was looking for a philosophy to live by, an entire system of thought, with ordered and hierarchically arranged values.... 'The Cross' [is] about the intellectual burdens of a twentieth-century Christian."

Thomas A. Underwood
Allen Tate: Orphan of the South
(Princeton/Oxford 2000) 154, 178

Michael Hollister (2021)