Alan Tate

(1899-1979)

Mr. Pope (1928)

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.

Often one thinks the urn should have more bones
Than skeletons provide for speedy dust,
The urn get hollow, cobwebs brittle as stones
Weave to the funeral shell a frivolous rust.

And he who dribbled couplets like a snake
Coiled to a lithe precision in the sun
Is missing. The jar is empty; you may break
It only to find that Mr. Pope is gone.

What acquisitions of a verity
Prompted the wit and rage between his teeth
One cannot say. Around a crooked tree
A moral climbs whose name should be a wreath.

ANALYSIS

"[In "Last Days of Alice"] the adjectives are still adjectives, but they are totally unexpected, similarly with the verb in the line from 'Mr. Pope': 'he who dribble couplets like a snake.' The effect of this type of writing is one form of the 'harshness' I have mentioned: it hammers upon our expectation, and forces us to hitch up our attention. Usually, however, the qualities which I have called 'harsh' or 'turbulent' come from Tate's habitual refusal to cast his poetry into mellifluous or euphonious language, the language usually assumed to be 'lyrical'....

John Bradbury...quotes the [first] stanza from Tate's 'Mr. Pope'... A good test of a preconception is how it fits an actual passage. Bradbury writes of Tate's passage: 'This is pure [John Crowe] Ransom in almost every particular. One suspects, however, that Ransom would not have allowed the inaccurately hard 'glint' for pearl.' Here Bradbury is reduced to carping at an adjective not used in accordance with 'ransomic' practice in order to reinforce his notion that Tate's poetry is entirely derivative. But his preconception has played him false: it has caused him to forget elementary grammar. The 'glint' in the passage is not, and indeed cannot be, associated with 'pearl.' Were the line to be read in that way, 'glow' or something suitably soft might be preferable. But 'glint' must be associated with 'pearl and gold *sedans*,' and a carriage decorated with gold and pearl glints in the sun; or shines; or sparkles'."

R. K. Meiners
The Last Alternatives: A Study of the Works of Allen Tate
(Alan Swallow 1963) 109, 114

"'Mr. Pope' may be set alongside Eliot's *Homage to John Dryden* and certain items by the Sitwells (Edith and Sacheverell), Roy Campbell, and T. E. Hulme as an early and curiously metaphysical acknowledgement from modern poetry of its debt to neo-classicism. In his poem Tate honors those qualities in Pope that he would have in himself.

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.

To begin, Pope addressed himself to and commanded the respect of the world where he was born--both the 'human condition' in general and 'the total complex of sensibility and thought, belief and experience' which was Eighteenth Century England (see the essay, 'To Whom Is the Poet Responsible?').

But there is another issue raised in the first quatrain, that of the private Alexander Pope--the deformed hunchback of less than five feet--and his connections with Pope the poet. Stanzas two and three deal with this question and turn it around to prepare for the peroration / eulogism of the last two lines:

Often one thinks the urn should have more bones
Than skeletons provide for speedy dust,
The urn gets hollow, cobwebs brittle as stones
Weave to the funeral shell a frivolous rust.

And he who dribbled couplets like a snake
Coiled to a lithe precision in the sun
Is missing. The jar is empty; you may break
It only to find that Mr. Pope is gone.

What requisitions of a verity
Prompted the wit and rage between the teeth
One cannot say. Around a crooked tree
A moral climbs whose name would be a wreath.

All is quiet, restrained, conversational though forceful and well calculated. The person who is *Mr*. Alexander Pope (the formal address is no mere Southernism) is unavailable--'missing.' The urn can contain far more than the flesh provides. No answer to the question of why the poet flailed the Dunces and 'bit' (Pope liked the word and hence Tate's snake imagery) whatever enraged him can be extracted from 'speedy dust.' Put otherwise (as for instance in Tate's essay 'Narcissus as Narcissus'; also in his 'Miss Emily and the Bibliographer' and in the aforementioned 'The Unilateral Imagination'), earlier Romantic and more recent psychological criticism of the work of traditional poets is beside the point....

Such, Tate has argued in essay after essay, is the duty of the poet: to create communion, not communication; self-contained wholes or 'incarnations' for contemplation, not marching orders or testimonials ('Poetry as Knowledge,' 'Tension in Poetry,' and 'To Whom Is the Poet Responsible?' He does not deny that the motives behind a man's creations are rooted in 'personality' (hence the organic figure, the tree; and its peculiarity, crookedness). But he insists that, if the artist is to be loyal to his craft, it is the handiwork that should interest us, the thing made and not the subliminal causes of its fashioning. Therefore, upon a crooked tree (the Pope *with us*: the work, not the urn) gathers a moral (i.e., aesthetic) that deserves a poem."

M. E. Bradford
"Origins and Beginnings"
Rumors of Mortality: An Introduction to Allen Tate
(Argus Academic Press 1969) 3-17

"*Mr. Pope and Other Poems* (1928)...is divided into three sections: 'Space,' 'Time,' and 'History,' reflecting his early concern with the categories of science and the imaginative modes of myth and history. In poems like 'The Subway' he gives a concise portrait of the mechanical secular world that destroys human freedom. But the opening title poem, 'Mr. Pope,' acts as a balancing assertion of the role of the poet. Pope, strolling through London, seeing, evaluating, interpreting, is in sharp contrast to the 'idiot' in his 'cold revery' after the subway ride. Tate's placement of these two poems in prominent positions, at the beginning and end of the first part of his book ('Space'), shows that he is concerned in 'Mr. Pope' with more than a

world of art, removed from both space and time in its ideal existence. He is concerned about the health of the human community. The poem is about the quest of the artist to overcome the paralysis of the imagination in a world given over to radically dissociated notions of space, time, and history.

As a paradigm for the entire volume, Pope represents the alienated but respected poet who could still pull together enough of his cultural experience to make a coherent statement about the whole of things. Other poets are alluded to in the remaining poems of this first collection--Sappho, Catullus, Propertius, Dante, Webster, Donne, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud. The epigraph from Blake's 'London,' on the title page of the volume, reminds the reader that Pope was quite different from all of them, for his London is not yet the unreal city of Blake and Baudelaire. His poetry is poised between two epochs. In Pope's eighteenth-century city, a traditional society is still part of the imagination. It is not in need of being reinvented, as it was already by the time of Blake. Yet like the modern southerner, Pope was a man aware of what it meant to be a foreigner in his own country. A recusant Catholic, he was barred from politics and other means of direct participation in society. A hunchback, he was physically repulsive even in Hogarth's London. A satirist and a great poet, he was both admired and feared by his contemporaries; for he showed them how great the power of poetry can be, overcoming through it all the limitations of his handicaps.

In Tate's poem, Pope is both part of the city in which he strolls and apart from it. He walks in it, while the ladies who lean out 'more out of fear than pity' are riding in carriages. His 'goat's' back contrasts with the 'glint of pearl and gold sedans.' He is not integrated into the normal life of the city; he is an outsider inspiring the fear that all invaders provoke, a strange animal wandering the streets. He strikes the ladies as a strange person, but his peculiar intensity cannot be dismissed; indeed, it causes them to strain from their habitual places of comfort. What they see in him is more than a pitifully deformed hunchback. They see a dangerous masculine force, like the one feared by Belinda in 'The Rape of the Lock.' The 'strict' glint of their sedans is matched by his 'tight' back.

The two middle stanzas of the poem continue this opposition of the feminine and masculine, the contained and the uncontainable. The urn, we are told, 'should have more bones,' according to the conventional way of thinking about both art and funerals (the urn stands for both). It should contain more evidence of the man. But the 'jar is empty; you may break / It only to find that Mr. Pope is gone.' The urn has become more than the 'funeral shell' of the preceding stanza. It is now a vase, like the jar that Wallace Stevens set in Tennessee or the Chinese jar of Eliot's *Four Quartets*. In the oriental world, the jar stands for the oneness and the still movement of art and intelligence which triumphs over birth and death. But the jar itself will be destroyed if we try to discover more of Mr. Pope inside it than nature will allow to remain.

The reason that the urn seems to be so fragile is that it has about it an air of feminine receptivity incapable of containing the masculine energy of Mr. Pope's strange person. Opposed to the feminine image of the jar--comparable to Keats's 'unravished bride of quietness'--is the masculine image of the serpent. They are opposed in other ways as well--one represents space and death, the other time and fertility. Pope is said to have 'dribbled couplets like a snake / Coiled to a lithe precision in the sun.' Apollonian wit and satire, combined with the extreme fecundity of his art, constitute a fertile marriage of the linear with the cyclical, life with death, good with evil, space with time. Perhaps the formal urn could never have contained all the freely emanating dribble, but the couplet manages to keep form and energy together, whatever has become of the poet; for Pope as craftsman was more than a maker of vases. His serpentine creations are a different kind of symbol of the triumph of art over birth and rebirth. In its eternal stillness, the urn remains a spatial art form. Poetry is a time art. The serpent, an old symbol of immortality, renews itself through time.

The brilliant linking of images in the last stanza of the poem draws all these oppositions together into a final statement. What was Pope's rage? It was not sexual (though the ladies fear him) nor moralistic (we still enjoy the poetry, though we no longer care for the moral). The snakelike bite of the satiric tongue, the 'wit' and rage between his teeth,' can still interest us, whatever originally prompted it. Mr. Pope the historical personage is no more, and all his personal quarrels with other men are forgotten. As W. H. Auden said of Yeats, he has become his poems. But what has triumphed in them is the masculine energy of the snake, not the feminine receptivity of the jar. In the last two lines of the poem--'around a crooked tree / A moral climbs whose name should be a wreath'--the snake is unified with another large symbol, the 'crooked

tree' that stands both for Pope's physical body and for something greater that supports his poetry. Together, snake and tree represent the triumph of the imagination over the limitations of time, space, and history in the wreath that crowns Pope's efforts. The snake is not merely coiled around the tree--it climbs. The symbolic entanglement of the snakelike moral with the earth-bound tree of life is a reminder of the caduceus, the healing wand of the ancient world. Yet it is also a reminder of moral dualism and ambivalence.

The tree is the ancient symbol of the life of the cosmos, and Pope's poetry--if not the man--remains to move up this axis of immortality. Nevertheless, the spiraling serpent figure, symbol of triumph, also recalls the temptation of the knowledge of good and evil that led man to his fall from innocence. Pope is vital to modern man because he not only speaks of what we should do but, more necessary in our times, reminds us of our human limitations, our own physical and moral imperfections, our own crookedness. Pope overcame his imperfections through his imagination of a realm of order; he deserves his laurel wreath because, like the classical hero, he helped to restore a city.

Pope stands in Tate's volume for something irrecoverable; his bones can never be retrieved from the urn. He was a poet in a time of crisis who was still very much a part of his society, however difficult his position in it. He was the last poet, Tate suggests, who could draw on a whole tradition for his vision. A generation later, poets resided in a changing world that affected all too directly their ability to enjoy this communion. In 1926, speaking of Eliot, Tate wrote, 'It is evident that he for some reason--like Gray who also lived in a critical transition period--cannot 'speak out.' A few years later, Tate wrote of 'the intensive literary cultivation of a few men who by the very act of taking up the profession of letters exile themselves from society.' The poet in the early eighteenth century was still capable of speaking out because he existed in a genuine, if decaying, community. Echoing historian Carl Becker, Tate later claims in 'The Man of Letters in the Modern World' that the 'Heavenly City was still visible, to Americans, in the political economy of Thomas Jefferson. Thus America was able to hold on to the notion of a traditional society a bit longer than could Europe. Pope and Jefferson stand for the last major figures to whom the unity of Western culture was still available....

In a series of epigrams entitled 'Historical Epitaphs' (1930), Tate provides a brief resume of nineteenth-century American history, from Thomas Jefferson to John Brown, in which he traces the movement from an appreciation of tradition to an embracing of abstract moralism. Among poets, the movement is from Pope to Blake, whose 'poetry of the Prophetic Books fleshes out the homemade system,' and to Keats, who 'lacks an ordered symbolism through which he may *know* the common and the ideal reality in a single imaginative act.' As sympathetic with and admiring of these poets as he was, Tate recognized that there was something spiritually unhealthy about the world into which they were thrust and with which they were forced to contend as poets....

On the whole *Mr. Pope and Other Poems* has a powerful negative character, for Tate had not yet developed his concept of regionalism as an alternative to provincialism in time.... He had not yet come around to Davidson's positive assessment of southern culture.... Tate still sees the southerner as limited by the same provincialism as others in the modern world."

Robert S. Dupree
Allen Tate and the Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry
(Louisiana State 1983) 34-38

"Tate underwent a...conversion during his exhausting efforts to publish his first book of poetry, titled *Mr. Pope and Other Poems*, which finally came out in the summer of 1918. Publication of the poems had not come easily. After almost five years of failed efforts to interest American publishers in a volume they found too obscure, he had turned to European firms. But when Ford Madox Ford sent the poems to a British publisher, they fared no better. Shortly afterward, T. S. Eliot asked Faber and Gwyer to publish the volume--even though he believed his American protege was 'a little tied up' in his 'own tail. Though the firm agreed to bring out the poems, they wanted help with the cost of publication, and Tate refused.... Reviews of *Mr. Pope and Other Poems* confirmed that Tate's reputation as a Southerner was of greater interest to critics than his Modernism. Although the book was not widely reviewed and seven years later

had sold only 330 copies, those critics who did review it recognized a brilliant, if troubled, poet still under the hold of Modernist ideas but captivated by Southern themes....

What [Louis D.] Rubin would have argued had he written [a biography of Tate], he once wrote to me, was that in Tate's poem 'Mr. Pope,' he was writing about himself, or an ideal of himself! The hunchback, the little guy who kept the world at bay through his wit and ferocity.' I also share Professor Rubin's insight that Tate was 'really a very vulnerable person'.... Rubin...is one of the critics who understands Tate's struggles with religious faith, with the world of Nellie Tate, and with Tate's view of himself and his work before and after her death. Yet I seem to make a friendly departure from Rubin and several others who argue that Tate's Southernism was more of an accessory to than it was a cause of his Modernism. I believe Tate's much-discussed 'persona' was not his Southernism but his Modernism.... Tate used Modernism to keep his emotions as a Southerner at bay.)....

[See] James Edward Tobin, 'Tate's Mr. Pope' *Explicator* 15 (March 1957).... For an alternate reading, see Margaret Morton Blum, 'Allen Tate's "Mr. Pope": A reading,' *Modern Language Notes* 74 (Dec. 1959): 706-8."

Thomas A. Underwood
Allen Tate: Orphan of the South
(Princeton/Oxford 2000) 138, 415, 334n.82

Michael Hollister (2021)