

Allen Tate

(1899-1979)

Sonnets at Christmas (1934)

I

This is the day His hour of life draws near,
Let me get ready from head to foot for it
Most handily with eyes to pick the year
For small feed to reward a feathered wit.
Some men would see it an epiphany
At ease, at food and drink, others at chase
Yet I, stung lassitude, with ecstasy
Unspent argue the season's difficult case
So: Man, dull critter of enormous head,
What would he look at in the coiling sky?
But I must kneel again unto the Dead
While Christmas bells of paper white and red,
Figured with boys and girls
Ring out the silence I am nourished by.

II

Ah, Christ, I love you rings to the wild sky
And I must think a little of the past:
When I was ten I told a stinking lie
That got a black boy whipped; but now at last
The going years, caught in an accurate glow,
Reverse like balls englished upon green baize--
Let them return, let the round trumpets blow
The ancient crackle of the Christ's deep gaze.
Deafened and blind, with senses yet unfound,
Am I, untutored to the after-wit
Of knowledge, knowing a nightmare has no sound;
Therefore with idle hands and head I sit
In late December before the fire's daze
Punished by crimes of which I would be quit.

ANALYSIS

"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."

R. K. Meiners

The Last Alternatives: A Study of the Works of Allen Tate
(Alan Swallow 1963) 150

"All of the 'Sonnets at Christmas' (1934 and 1942) are good enough to invite comparison with the devotional sonnets of Donne and Hopkins, and the second in the 1942 group is Tate at his best.... Most of Tate's themes are here--the inescapability of twilight, the *ignis fatuus* of the good old days, the commercial

direction of the American dream, and the undesirability of the accomplishment of the fondest hopes of the social engineer: the Chinese people efficiently exploited and well fed, the Negroes no longer an outcast people and therefore bereft of their great gift for music, and the Germans turned into sexless consumers. The formal qualities of this sonnet, its diction, and its meter are what a poet knows of immortality in his own lifetime."

George Hemphill
Allen Tate
(U Minnesota 1964) 34-35

"Those poems of Tate's that seem the most personal--such as 'Sonnets at Christmas,' 'Sonnets of the Blood,' or 'The Swimmers'--are autobiographical in a radically different fashion. Though many of Tate's writings are correctly described as confessional, they are not simply transcriptions of the author's interior lie without some larger formal purpose. Indeed, all contemporary poets are to some degree participants in the tradition of Rousseau, though such poets as Eliot and Yeats, by refusing to take themselves as their sole subject matter, have drawn the line between themselves and their more self-absorbed successors of the last two decades. But Tate is like these older poets he admired in that the end of his confession is illumination rather than self-justification.

Tate's confessions are written out of a vision larger than himself, a sense of history that makes his work an exploration of an age and a way of life rather than of an ego. Compared to Yeats's, Eliot's, or Pound's, his self-portrait is modest. He claims little for himself, is often self-deprecatory. He offers no schemes relating world history and the psychology of types, as does Yeats; nor comprehensive programs for the salvation of the world, as does Pound. He does not even advocate a return to some historically available 'Christian society,' as does Eliot. Yet he is aware that mere self-presentation will not suffice. Even the characteristic honesty that many have seen as the hallmark of Tate's personality would not, of itself, be sufficient to give his poems permanent interest. Yet what Tate has said of Emily Dickinson surely applies with equal force to his own work: 'She exhibits one of the permanent relations between personality and objective truth, and she deserves the special attention of our time, which lacks that kind of truth.'

Yet there is something about Tate's poetry, in its frightening obliquity, its concrete density yoked with 'fierce Latinity,' and its demonic energy, that makes it stand apart from the work of other twentieth-century poets. For that reason, Tate cannot be grouped with other moderns whom he resembles superficially. Always his own person, faithful to his vision of a world in need of true salvation from itself, Tate had never compromised or shirked the implications of his difficult situation. Therefore, his confessional posture is in some danger of being misunderstood by those who lack the perspective for seeing precisely what it is.

The key to Tate's confessional poetry is to be found in the tradition into which it fits. It does not belong with such writings as Rousseau's but with Augustine's. Tate returns to this source through a sequence of intermediaries that includes Baudelaire, Pascal, and Dante, but his ultimate inspiration lies in the figure of Augustine as it is revealed in *The Confession*. In common with his great prototype, Tate possesses an imaginative fury and power that transcend a mere fascination with the psychological disarray of the contemporary soul. Like Augustine, Tate intends to guide his reader from the confrontation with the self to a confrontation with the world, from the fictionally personal to the historically public. Confession, like any other movement of the soul, serves poetry as an action to be imitated, as a fiction that points beyond itself analogically to something else.

Rousseau's confession points to no one but himself, for he claims to be unique. His autobiography is a matter of historical self-justification, of setting the record straight for future generations. Augustine's way is poetic, analogical, and typological. The story of his life follows the pattern of the scriptures, showing the fall from grace and the return to salvation. Like the Bible that Augustine read and the confessional poem that Dante, his greatest disciple, gave to the world, this revealing of one man's experience results not so much in a personal record as in a text with many levels of meaning.

It is not the poet's life that is opened to public view in such poems but that greater life of the memory that is sustained in culture. By seeing his own actions in relation to the past, the poet turns autobiography into the story of his culture's destiny. The accident of an individual's existence in space and time becomes a

meaningful emblem of man's ultimate needs. In the elevation of his own experiences through poetry, Tate has been able to achieve that same double detachment that allowed Augustine to view both his own life and his era from a dramatic perspective. Tate's confessional poetry is a transformation of personal feelings into deeper meanings; he moves from self-examination to history, from confession to memory.

Tate could not have evolved his kind of confessional poetry without the inspiration of Dante, for Augustine offers no specific model for the poet, even though he was himself a man of letters. It is Dante's depiction of the poet as protagonist that shows the special character of the artist in his quest for understanding. The dual inspiration of Augustine and Dante offers a richer dimension to Tate's meditations than he could have gained from either alone. Echoes of both writers appear in his mature poetry. The Augustinian parallels, however, are more basic to Tate's entire stance. At times he isolates incidents from his own life that, intentionally or not, have counterparts in Augustine's biography. A striking example is the episode of the stolen pears in Book Two of *The Confession*....

Man's perverse preference for his own damnation is a theme Tate takes up in 'Winter Mask,' but a more precise equivalent for the unaccountable sins of youth is in 'Sonnets at Christmas' and 'More Sonnets at Christmas.' In the first of these, Tate recalls an event from his past: 'When I was ten I told a stinking lie / That got a black boy whipped.' In his memoir 'A Lost Traveler's Dream,' Tate is more specific: 'I had let a Negro boy, my playmate, take a beating from his mother, out cook Nanny, for a petty theft that I had committed. (Henry was killed in World War I; I never made it up to him for my cowardice.)' The significance of this episode in the poems, however, has to do with the problem of forgiveness. Can there be any forgiving of sins in a purely immanent universe, where man alone is responsible for everything? For the implications of both the verse and prose versions of the story seem to point to a justice that demands retribution, even after there is no way to offer some redress to the injured person. If there can be no personal means of making up for a wrong against another, who has the authority to grant remission of the sin? In a world without faith, the answer is that no one can. There is only the convention that civilized people follow or the habit that remains from a childhood upbringing. A psychoanalyst could perhaps relieve the pressure of conscience on the sinner, but he could not forgive the sin. The act of forgiveness for an injury done to another requires the kind of enormous love that has authority in its own right. No man can command that kind of love in the modern world because no man is the spokesman for all mankind, and men are rightly chary of allowing any one person to be their supreme spokesman in such matters. At best, our present world allows forgiveness to be dispensed through the abstract processes we call law.

But on a personal level, where the public law is inoperative, who can offer the comfort of remission? The answer is to be found only in religion, but a man who knows these things and yet is incapable of belief must suffer if he is honest. Therefore, Christmas in Tate's poem, as in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, is a time of agony rather than a time of joy. The speaker may prepare his body and appetite for the season, but he cannot dress up his emotions:

This is the day His hour of life draws near,
Let me get ready from head to foot for it
Most handily, with eyes to pick the year
For small feed to reward a feathered wit.

The ironic self-deprecation of this first poem in 'Sonnets at Christmas' depicts a man whose head dominates his body--his eyes act as hands--to no avail. He will be an observer, not a participant in the holiday. While others relax, eat, or hunt, he cannot take part in the festivity or see any 'epiphany' in it. His meditations are unconnected with the half-secular, half-religious activities that stand for a presumably sacred moment of remembrance.

Yet I, stung lassitude, with ecstasy
Unspent argue the season's difficult case
So: Man, dull creature of enormous head,
What would he look at in the coiling sky?

The poet finds it curious that man, whose head has grown so large in his assertion of pride, should seek out anything beyond himself. Like the speaker in Wallace Stevens' 'Sunday Morning,' he is aware of the moral system of the past which, though no longer alive, still demands obeisance for social reasons. 'But I must

kneel again unto the Dead.' The festivity is a decorative one; the paper bells are as silent as the God for whom they are supposed to be ringing, and man's fall has been reduced to a picture of children slipping off a sled.

The speaker's silence contrasts with the gaiety around him, but it is at least part of the 'small feed' he has garnered with his eyes to sustain him. There are benefits in this silence that the boisterous celebration cannot confer. The meditation prompted by the ambiguous cries of 'Ah, Christ, I love you' turns to the memory of past actions: 'The going years, caught in an after-glow, / Reverse like balls englished upon green baize.' The act of remembrance is here conveyed in an unusual simile. To return to the past is to execute a clever shot, like a pool player who causes the ball to spin backwards as it moves forward. Christmas itself is such a memory, a casting back in time while life moves forward, but what emerges is the hope for some vision that will break the silence, a sight that has the impact of sound: 'Let them return, let the round trumpets blow / The ancient crackle of the Christ's deep gaze.' The poet, who can neither hear nor see, asks that Christ return his attempted gaze into the darkness. The search through the memory is not simply a search for past crimes; it is also a search for God. But the secularization of the season, suggested in the activities of the first sonnet, is complete at the end of the second, for Christmas has become simply 'late December.' Gazing into the fire, the speaker knows that he is looking into the hell of a world where time is meaningless and where the fire that warms and lights the room in which he sits has no power to purge or enlighten him. He is permanently guilty of 'crimes of which [he] would be quit'.

In "more Sonnets at Christmas," the sense of failure is shifted from the personal and communal to all of civilization. It has been ten years since the first set of sonnets was published, and the poet's sense of crisis has deepened. The imagery has become more complex to reflect the desperate situation of the war'...."

Robert S. Dupree

Allen Tate and the Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry
(Louisiana State 1983) 165-70

"Flickers of a pained conscience did occasionally appear in poetry Tate wrote during the Agrarian movement. The African American poet and anthropologist Arna Bontemps recognized that, even in the 1930s, when Tate wrote 'Sonnets at Christmas,' he was ashamed of his behavior toward blacks. Ah, Christ, I love you rings to the wild sky' the second sonnet began. 'And I must think a little of the past: / When I was ten I told a stinking lie / That got a black boy whipped....' But such confessional moments in Tate's poetry, or elsewhere, were rare during the 1930s. Indeed, his views on race issues, as well as his belief in segregation, remained relatively unchanged through the 1940s.

He would make no public amendments to his views until the 1950s, by which time his expatriation from the South--and a long series of charges that he was undemocratic--made him more self-conscious about his social pronouncements. Tate startled many critics by writing, in 1950, an introduction to the poetry of Melvin Tolson that Tolson called the 'literary Emancipation Proclamation' for black American writers. Readers who had a view of Tate as an unreconstructed Southerner were equally surprised when they read his terza rima poem 'The Swimmers. Written after he experienced a flashback, in 1951, to the sight of a lynched man he had come upon in Kentucky some forty years earlier.'...

Tate explained to Anthony Hecht: 'I told a lie to escape punishment that got a negro playmate of mine punished, and I didn't have the courage to confess the lie.... [At]t the age of 65 I am still rather haunted by that occasionally. Because this boy Henry was about a year older than I am and he was drafted in the first World War and he was killed in Japan, I never had a chance to apologize to him' (Tate-Hecht, 34)."

Thomas A. Underwood

Allen Tate: Orphan of the South
(Princeton/Oxford 2000) 293, 403n.181

Michael Hollister (2021)