

Allen Tate

(1899-1979)

The Subway (1928)

Dark accurate plunger down the successive knell
Of arch on arch, where o gives burst a red
Reverberance of hail upon the dead
Thunder like an exploding crucible!
Harshly articulate, musical steel shell
Of angry worship, hurled religiously
Upon your business of humility
Into the iron forestries of hell:

Till broken in the shift of quieter
Dense altitudes tangential of your steel,
I am become geometries, and glut
Expansions like a blind astronomer
Dazed, while the wordless heavens bulge and reel
In the cold reverie of an idiot.

ANALYSIS

"Another violent confrontation with the spirit of the times occurs in 'The Subway.' This much admired sonnet is the 'cold reverie' of a character half persona and half person observed--something in between the presence in the two poems examined above. Its matter is infernal, and the hell it explores nothing but manmade and contemporary--the fruitage of wars in the cortex, the self-destructive impetus of rationalism. The subway's rushing underground descent metaphorically and perhaps even mythically informs and hardens the entire poem.

Once more, as in 'Death of Little Boys,' madness is the consequence of an experience that is seen well into but not quite comprehended, a madness that has, after harsh disabusement, its only alternatives--that is, for a man who has had his faith in science--in the offhanded fashionable casualness of the voice in 'Horatian Epode' or the self-destruction mockingly recommended in 'Homily.' This speaker, however, is aware of the satanism in the rush of his fellows in their 'business of humility' down 'into the iron forestries of hell.' No street cars can call him back nor any 'chill precision' remove his memory of 'angry worship.' Therefore he comes again under the sky to find himself an 'idiot,' no longer capable of contemplating the universe under any aspect save those of geometry and associated subway-creating abstractions. He is like the Alice of Tate's later poem--or, rather, as she would have been had she been able to get back through the looking glass: 'broken,' but not reformed--dazed, while the 'wordless (i.e. pointless) heavens bulge and reel' above him.

'The Subway' is a good place for the turning of this discussion toward Tate's maturity. With such poems he found what was to be his characteristic manner in *Poems: 1928-1931* (1932); *The Mediterranean and Other Poems* (1936); and *Selected Poems* (1937). There is no wry irony here, no play. His fashion has become neo-metaphysical, even before 1930. And that is the tenor of much verse from his middle years. The comic and parodic, inflative and deflative mock-heroics which Tate admired in the English Augustans (and emulated) keeps its place in the work of the Thirties and later Twenties. But these ingredients are absorbed into something more serious and sober and, furthermore, are dignified in the process, transformed into what they were not, as a line of meditation introduced by them takes its final startling shape. Moreover, with this shift the spirit in his work appears to be more and more public, less and less restrictively lyric, indirect, and narrowly dramatic. Though the searching of the fragmented sensibility continues, it is not ended in *vacuo*. A network of specific times, events, and circumstances is included. And the result is

assuredly an additional poise and authority. Said another way, Allen Tate emerges with these changes as one of the characteristic poetic voices of his time--and as a Southern poet. The narrowly epistemological and ontological emphases of his earlier work are supplemented and defined by the addition of a frame of history perceived as a reflection of meaning: *his* teleology."

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

"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.... [*Mr. Pope and Other Poems*, 1928] 'Idiot' and 'The Subway' were both written at about the time Tate began to read Spengler, and their imagery may owe something to him, though they certainly continue the coherent development of themes characterizing his earliest work. In any case, the latter poem has a moral vehemence that goes beyond *Decline of the West*. It is most appropriately described as a visit to hell. Tate once defined the epic as 'a judgment of human action, an implied evaluation of a civilization, a way of life.' He considered Hart Crane's attempt at epic in *The Bridge* to be a failure because 'to the vision of the abyss in 'The Tunnel,' a vision that Dante passed through midway of this mortal life, Crane had no alternative.'

Though 'The Subway' is a parody of the epic hero's descent into the abyss--perhaps even an intentional allusion to Dante--it is in the form of a sonnet. The usual associations of the sonnet with the theme of love work ironically in this context to suggest a perverse relationship between man and his own creations. Crane's apostrophe to the airplane, in 'Cape Hatteras,' is perhaps parodied by Tate's sardonic address to underground transportation. The poem consists of one long, complex clause....

Dante's wanderings came to an impasse in a 'dark forest.' Here the darkness of the forest is an unnatural one; the trees are iron standards where higher and lower have come together to form a total picture of hell that is directionless. The subway takes its passengers along a path that cannot be described as going either up or down. The linear accuracy of the train is expressive of no freedom; its tracks are organized and rigid, conducting the pilgrim through echoing arches in a mock-religious ceremony of initiation into fire and thunder. The transformation of the subway traveler is the mechanical equivalent to the humiliating experiences of the damned in Dante's underworld. The modern passenger is metamorphosed into a mathematical abstraction by the alchemical crucible of the train, which explodes in sparks and unholy music.

In this parody of religious conversion, the passenger emerges not to see the sublime stars that mark the end of each of Dante's stages of emergence but to stand 'Dazed, while the worldless heavens bulge and reel.' The subway, intended to save time, affects the human relationship with space by abstracting men from the earthly scale. In such an event, the subway causes the traveler to lose the world as a concrete experience of temporal travel through space. Time is compressed and altered in the subway because speed of movement is no longer related to the feet and body. Moreover, the subway does not even allow one to see where he is going, except as a point on an abstract map.

If Spengler's impact is present at all in the poem, it may be in the poet's ironic echo of St. Paul and Tennyson. 'I am become geometries' recalls both St. Paul's 'I am become as sounding brass' and Tennyson's 'I am become a name' ('Ulysses'). It suggests that the speaker has succumbed to the lust for abstraction that Spengler called 'Faustian geometry,' a new conception of space introduced by Descartes and his contemporaries: "In place of the sensuous element of concrete lines and planes--the specific character of the Classical feeling of bounds--there emerged the abstract, spatial, un-Classical element of the *point* which from then on was regarded as a group of co-ordered pure numbers. The idea of magnitude and of perceivable dimension...was destroyed and replaced by that of variable relation--values between positions in space.' The 'geometries' of the modern world, based on algebraic relations rather than on optically perceptible figures, are an apt analogy for the disorientation of the subway traveler.

Spengler's Faustian geometry is an interesting parallel to Tate's poetic presentation of modern existence. In the subway a journey that should be a fresh contact with the reality of the world is altered, by incessant daily repetition, into a glut of changing places without the spiritual experience of the spaces that lie between them. By removing him from a world in which he has a sense-oriented scale of judgment, the subway destroys the basis of man's moral sense. He is not simply disoriented--he is made insane, incapable of further judgment and therefore of salvation.

'The Subway' is a metropolitan companion piece to the rural 'Idiot.' Both are densely effective statements of the relationship between spatiality and temporality, science and religion in the modern world. But the poem that shows most profoundly the impact of Tate's meditation on these problems is his famous 'Ode to the Confederate Dead.' It is filled with imagery that recalls Spenglerian ideas.... Like 'The Subway,' [the Ode] is a grim parody of traditional religious ideas of salvation tinged with overtones of predestinarian determinism."

Robert S. Dupree
Allen Tate and the Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry
(Louisiana State 1983) 34, 42-44, 46

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