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THE POETRY AND "STRATEGIES" OF ALLEN TATE

by
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ABSTRACT

THE POETRY AND "STRATEGIES" OF ALLEN TATE

By Lee F^{OR}GERLACH

The purpose of this study is to trace the development of Allen Tate as a poet and to illuminate, interpret, and evaluate his poetry. The propriety of such a study is indicated by generally held notions that Tate's poetry is difficult and obscure and that this greatly compromises its value as poetry. Further, in our time Tate is considered to be an important poet, yet his work has received no extended treatment.

Part One of the study deals with Tate's early poetry: the uncollected pieces published in magazines during his years as a member of the "fugitive group" of poets of Nashville, Tennessee (1921-1925). This poetry is discussed and analyzed in the light of three fairly general problems which the young poet had to face: (1) the problem of verbalization, of "language as poetry," (2) the problem of the use of irony as a means for dodging artistic responsibility, and (3) the problem of the young writer who comes to poetry as a member of a "school" of poets. In consonance with these problems, Tate's work is also examined in the light of the direct influences on it by the poetry of E. A. Robinson, Hart Crane, T. S. Eliot, and John Crowe Ransom.

Part Two of the study deals with Tate's mature poetry: the preserved and collected poems of the years 1925-1947 and the few uncollected poems of the years 1947-1954. This poetry is given close analysis in the light of the "Metaphysical" and the "Symbolist" "strategies" with which Tate is concerned and which he uses for writing poems. The two "strategies" are defined. Tate's important poems are explicated and evaluated. His consideration of a proper contemporary creative "sensibility" is discussed and brought to bear upon his work. "Seasons of the Soul," his most ambitious poem, is extensively analyzed, interpreted, and judged. The poet's latest work is interpreted as moving in the direction of aesthetic techniques which are essentially new for him, Dantesque, allegorical-symbolist.

Two main conclusions are reached in this study.

(1) The poetry of Allen Tate is difficult and has its persistent obscurities as a matter of creative principle. But these, as problems for the reader, can be reduced to a fairly reasonable minimum by an understanding of Tate's specific techniques and general strategies for composition and by relating and taking advantage of the inter-informing qualities of his poems. (2) In an age of minor poetry, Tate stands as one of our most consistent and important minor poets along with Hart Crane, J. V. Cunningham, Robert Frost, John Crowe Ransom, W. C. Williams, and Yvor Winters. He does so mainly by virtue of four lastingly impressive lyrics: "The Mediterranean," "The Cross," "Ignis Fatuus," and "Seasons of the Soul."

DEDICATION

Dedications are a ruse,
Part a gift but part excuse
For the love or brains we steal
Thinking profit, pride, appeal.
Katharine Mintzer, Allen Tate:
This to thee I dedicate.

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INTRODUCTION

The poetry of Allen Tate is most generally considered to be difficult and obscure. It is not my intention in this study to prove that such an opinion is improper or without justification. Tate's poetry is difficult and, in many ways, obscure even to the fully initiated reader of contemporary poetry; and, like a great part of the poetry by the seventeenth century English metaphysical poets and the nineteenth century French symbolistic poets to which it is akin, it will probably remain fairly difficult no matter how frequently it is analyzed, explained, or discussed. Some of this difficulty, obviously and not so obviously, stems from the poet's inability or refusal to form his materials into more than a personal assembly of chance effects. Yet much of what is held to be excessively demanding in Tate's poetry reflects its readers' cultivated expectations and loose habits of mind with regard to poetry in general. The reader who has trouble "getting much of anything" out of Tate's poems will more often than not have the same kind of trouble with any poem, by any poet, worthy of mature consideration. Like all valuable poetry, Tate's requires of a reader an unusual awareness of mind and a kind of attention which an age of prose-readers can be expected to deem unnatural, fruitless. But, given the

kind of attention which even its more obvious qualities merit, Tate's poetry seldom proves a cheat. One gets a return commensurate with the efforts put into a reading.

But then, too, having gotten the return, there is still the great possibility that one will not particularly like what he gets. Tate is seldom what might be called a pleasant or a pretty poet. What he has to say is, in the main, almost always shot through with qualities of anger and violence, even of viciousness. In a final judgment of his work, the effects of such qualities may well prove to be more important than the effects of his other more technical, artistic qualities. Thus one may hold serious reservations about the personality of the poet, his qualities of understanding, thought, emotion, and his overall vision of life, at the same time that one "appreciates" his skill as a poet and his poetic strategies: the ways in which and the means by which the general structure of meaning and the texture of details are related in a given poem. Unfortunately, there is no adequate way in which to deal with such reservations. Even if these personal reservations of a very human sort ought not to occur in a competent reading, they still do, especially when the reader is confronted by "romantic art," which, more than others, insists upon particular personality as effective presence in its products. And Allen Tate is a romantic writer.

Of course, there are romantics and romantics. Like most of them, Tate is his own sort, but a sort not radically

different, in the end, from most of the other poets of our time who are also romantics: Stevens, Crane, Pound, Eliot, Ransom, Williams, Cummings, Lowell, Roethke, and many others. In fact, were one to speak of a comparison between Tate's poetry and the work of some other contemporary poet's which is not romantic, which is deeply classical in kind, one could look to, virtually, only one hopeful but not thoroughly classical poet in our time: J. V. Cunningham. Comparisons aside, however, Tate's romantic qualities are largely responsible for many of the difficulties that one may have with his work.

The metaphysical and symbolist strategies and other "language" strategies which have been practiced in twentieth century poetry, are not calculated to make poetry more simple and easily available, even to readers who are, in advance, sympathetic and initiated, not to speak of those who are not. Tate, in practicing such strategies, has obviously not aimed at winning an audience he could not fully respect: that audience which has become largely addicted to varieties of "mass language." Thus, in a sense, one may say, Tate has aimed at no audience at all, but at the making of poems which are their own end.

Such an objective may seem to be contradicted by the romantic strain in Tate's art which never fully releases its reader from awareness of the artist's personality. But his best poems raise that personality to a condition of ultimate objective human importance. "The Mediterranean," "The Cross,"

"Ignis Fatuus," and "Seasons of the Soul" arrive at a personally non-contingent status and "an end in themselves" because the special personality in them is not eradicated but formed into each poem in such a way that its existence is the poem itself. These poems do not ask us to appreciate a creator who exists apart from them in the way that his "Death of Little Boys" or "The Maimed Man" does. The personality in these, his best poems, is the true center of poetic structure, the focus of meaning. To miss or reject the human figure in each of these poems in its particularity, in its quality, is to miss the poems--one by one--and rightly constitutes not a lack of appreciation but a failure in understanding. In poems such as these four, the operating romantic principles are given their most valuable formulation.

We must, I believe, hold it as axiomatic that great poetry may be written under the direction of many different strategies for organizing language and meaning. In the end, we expect from any poet new insights into the human condition and individual powers of communication, whatever his particular method may happen to be. We get these from Tate, in spite of the frequently compromising similarities that exist between the sensibility that sponsors them and the sensibilities of other poets, Eliot's for example. In his best work he has an individuality and distinction of language which is centrally traditional and which places him

among the best poets of our time. The qualities of mind and the emotional force in the greater part of his poetry make it of lasting, if perhaps, minor importance. Yet, he remains disturbing, complex, difficult, debatable, interesting, and provocative. His work stands as probably the best example of a kind of modern poetry which our time is likely to produce. As Vivienne Koch has said: ". . . if there is a poetry of tension and if there is a living practitioner of this awesome and marvelous feat of poetic balance between the classic and the romantic, the metaphysical and the Symbolist among us, surely it is Tate himself."¹

Now, this may all seem to be rather careful praise. Obviously one cannot pronounce an easy and unqualified judgment of his poetry. And such a problem in judgment has existed with regard to his work from the beginning of his career as a "fugitive" in 1921. Most of Tate's early poetry, for reasons which I shall soon attempt to make clear, is no longer easily available. Although one might call this early work promising, even exciting--as Hart Crane and others did--much of it is simply unimpressive or surprisingly bad. With a few notable exceptions, the poems he presents for hasty publication in his early years are no better and often worse than those of his "fugitive" peers: William Yandell Elliott, Stanley Johnson, and Alec Brock Stevenson, now all but forgotten.

¹Vivienne Koch, "The Poetry of Allen Tate," Modern American Poetry, ed. B. Rajan (New York: Roy Publishers, n.d.), p. 32.

By 1937 he had chosen to leave behind him in the shadow of his more parochial days all but a select few of his magazine publications from the preceding fifteen years. Of the thirty-six pieces collected from his "fugitive" years in Mr. Pope and Other Poems (1928) he chose to retain only thirteen, and most of these he had rewritten to make congenial with his more mature standards of composition. Mr. Pope and Other Poems has become a fairly scarce item. The Fugitives and The Double Dealer and other "little magazines" in which Tate's early work appeared have been defunct now for over twenty years and adequate collections of them are to be found in but a few places. Certainly, the greater part of his early work is available only to an energetic student. As a result, the Tate of the Fugitive School of Nashville, Tennessee, is more often referred to than really known or even recognized.

But, then, such a problem in recognition is perhaps also understandable. As Tate would choose to forget the poems of which he no longer approves so would most readers follow his lead. The early poetry becomes virtually silent. The reader exercises a natural critical tact which avoids embarrassing the prominent living writer with reminders of his juvenilia. The best of poets was once very young.

Such reasons for silencing a poet's beginnings, however, do not greatly alter certain critical needs. To arrive at a sound understanding of what a poet such as Tate does now and tomorrow, one must study what he has done. There is

no more revealing material at our disposal for such understanding, if poet and chance and time are kind, than his education in the art. The critic, at any moment in his concern, is committed to taking advantage of as much of the poet's past as he can reasonably manage. He ought to be interested in all of it, and in all of its interrelations as a body of work. Concern with new poems and mature work ought to be firmly anchored in knowledge of what the poet has learned, and what he has done. One must attend to his history as a poet.

The history which I intend to trace of Allen Tate's career is not, however, exactly developmental as one might assume it would most naturally be. Certainly, it is not biographical. It does make use of an obvious chronology of changes in his work, but it does so with a concerted emphasis upon the individual poem and in the light of a few terms which are of major importance in coming to a full understanding of his poems: irony, metaphysical, symbolist, and sensibility. Most of what I intend to examine in Tate's career as a poet can still be profitably studied in terms other than those I use, but the terms which I have selected have a practical importance. By and large, my terminology and the structure of perceptions which I bring to bear on his changes, his improvements and declines, his important achievements and failures, are drawn from Tate himself or from the writings of others of whom he would

approve such as John Crowe Ransom and T. S. Eliot. In a way, such a critical device tends to become one of the problems of this study. For while it proves to be a useful and, especially in regard to that crucial matter of the poet's intentions, a fair way in which to deal with what he has written, it may be argued that in particular analyses of poems such a critical method places one so close to Tate's own point of view for those poems that one may fail to explain and illuminate them as fully as might be intended. In the face of such a shortcoming I can only, for the moment, argue that Tate is a poet whose extra-poetic notions, while not absolutely essential, are extremely useful in coming most directly to an understanding of his poetry. In the end, my intention is to discuss, worry, and evaluate moments, problems, methods and other matters that seem most relevant to me in the career of this difficult poet.

It may seem at times that I over-do certain matters. Why spend so much time and energy on early, obviously worthless poems? Why devote so much time to what must still be a scanty discussion of the metaphysical and symbolist "strategies" for writing poems? I can only answer that for an understanding of Tate's poetry, one must deal with what may appear to be obvious in order to get at that which is not.

It may seem, on the other hand, that there are times when I give little or no attention to questions which ought to be considered important. What, beyond Tate's obvious

debt to French symbolism in general, are his specific relations with individual French poets: Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Valéry and others? What about certain attitudes, certain habits of mind, that seem to indicate Tate's classical affinities? What about the Horatianism of "To Oenia in Wintertime" (1922) and the "cavalier" classicism of other early poems? What about Tate's way of turning toward Rome and Greece for titles,¹ schemes of allusion,² and pieces for translation³ or criticism?⁴ I can only say that all of these matters are both rather vague and, for even the most erudite of critics, dangerously complex. Further, I plead the limits of my intention. Much less than an erudite familiarity with Latin, Greek, and French literatures is enough for the kind of understanding of Tate's poetry which one should reasonably expect.

In brief, then, the purpose of this dissertation is to trace the development of Allen Tate as a poet and to illuminate, interpret, and evaluate his poetry. In the end my study should serve to reveal how Tate's increasing

¹"The Progress of Oenia," "Horatian Epode to the Duchess of Malfi," "Elegy for Eugenesis," "Non Omnis Moriar," "Calidus Juventa?," "Lycambes Talks to John," "Aeneas at Washington," "To the Lacedemonians," "The Anabasis," etc.

²"The Mediterranean," "Aeneas at Washington," "Ode to the Confederate Dead," "Eclogue to the Liberal and the Poet," etc.

³"Farewell to Anactoria," "Adaptation of a Theme by Catullus," "The Vigil of Venus" ("Pervigilium Veneris"), etc.

⁴"Longinus and the New Criticism."

awareness of poetry's possibilities and devices is instrumental in the making of a good poet, and how artistic self-consciousness has become both the sign and burden of the contemporary poet. But let me begin at the beginning.

PART ONE

THE EARLY POETRY OF ALLEN TATE

CHAPTER I

LANGUAGE AS POETRY

Allen Tate's first published poem appeared in the March 1920 issue of The American Poetry Magazine over the name of Orley Allen Tate.¹ It is not an impressive beginning:

IMPOSSIBLE

Do you remember how last year we walked
Against the purple sun through pearly shade,
And stopped all breathless--lingered there and talked,
And heard swift pyrotechnics nature played?
Then, as the twilight dozed, we crept along
In grassy stillness; color flew away
And rollicked with our breath of leafy song
That skipped off, hiding, till the yellow day.

These thoughts are fancy painted, and you see
Their tone is light because they could not be!
Do not forget; for these green times now laugh
In glee with sport and thought and lily-dance;
And fate in vanity now leaps to chaff
Me smiling at her winking circumstance!²

¹It appears that Tate has chosen to forget this early poem completely. In a footnote in The Oxford Anthology of American Literature, 1938, he refers to "Elegy," in its early form titled "Euthanasia," as his "first published poem." In using this poem I am depending on Willard Thorp's "Allen Tate: A Checklist," in The Princeton University Library Chronicle, Vol. III, No. 3 (April, 1942), 85-98. Professor Thorp indicates that he had the poet's advice in compiling this list, and it does not seem very likely that Tate would have permitted him to include here work for which he was not responsible. In any event, Thorp's checklist is the most authoritative we have, and, though twelve years old, it is still thoroughly adequate for an examination of Tate's career up to 1942 which was characterized by widely scattered publication in periodicals.

²Orley Allen Tate, "Impossible," The American Poetry Magazine, II, No. 11 (March, 1920), 5.

The clearest reason for the failure of this poem is that it is almost completely obvious. Given the emotional experience of young love, a superficial acquaintance with poetic diction of the English romantic love tradition, a nineteenth century literary heritage, and an urge to expression, this poem or some close kin to it is fairly predictable. It is a kind of static formula poem. But it is not completely without value. It is, after all, a beginning.

The poem exists at the mercy of its "poetic antecedents," is a semi-automatic product of poetic diction. It is both trivial and affected in its treatment of a very traditionally romantic subject-matter. The effort to write concrete imagery ("Against the purple sun through pearly shade") is either unrealizable as descriptive fact (purple sun) or is generalized in an overly-emotional way and drifts into easy personification:

for these green times now laugh
In glee with sport and thought and lily-dance;
And fate in vanity now leaps to chaff
Me smiling at her winking circumstance!

Tate is unable to define either the factual or the emotional elements of the experience which he purports to present here. He loses himself in his interest in words.

The manner in which the poem is written, a verbal exercise which adheres to the demands of literal meter, which uses a loose nineteenth century poetic vocabulary and its attendant set of images filled with the ethic of romantic love, indicates that the poet conceives his work in terms of language. Outside of the pleasures of indulging in

a vague emotional state of mind, an impetus to display verbal powers appears to dominate any other motive for creativity which might be relevant to the task before him. In this basic respect, as well as in the more obvious ones already indicated, the poem is "romantic." Its purpose is clearly more one of self-expression than of objective creation.

The art of composition is conceived primarily as an excursion into emotive language. And the conception itself is immature in the sense that it does not indicate an awareness of the demands for consistency made by such an approach to the act of poetry. Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" or Poe's "The Raven," which do indicate such awareness, no matter what other defects they may have, are consistent structures. They are successful in their aim to create a strong though rather undifferentiated affective experience in the reader. Such poems are admittedly the outgrowth of an aroused state of mind and aim at the creation of excitement by means of atmosphere. Tate's poem seems to assume a similar end, but indicates no specific awareness as to how to achieve it.¹

Certainly the meaning which resides in form, what

¹Tate's later criticism of a poem by James Thomson is quite applicable here. He says: "The language here appeals to an existing affective state; it has no coherent meaning either literally or in terms of ambiguity or implication; it may be wholly replaced by any of several paraphrases, which are already latent in our minds . . . The imagery adds nothing to the general idea that it tries to sustain; it even deprives that idea of the dignity it has won at the hands of a long succession of better poets. . ." Allen Tate, On the Limits of Poetry (New York: The Swallow Press, and William Morrow and Co., Publishers, 1948), p. 78. Hereinafter referred to as Limits.

Tate was later to call the "tension"¹ of the poem, is left to the limits of explicit structure: the sonnet with its octave and sestet, the meter, and the rhymes. His language "fills-out" and is compromised by the structure. It is obviously ill at ease in the conditions it tries to meet.

The notion of form as meaning, in the sense that Tate was to conceive of it some fifteen years later, is rather far removed from his central attitude in writing a poem at this early date. He was to say in 1935: ". . . form is meaning and nothing but meaning: scheme of reference, supporting symbolism that ceases to support as soon as it is recognized as merely that."² This conception of a dynamic

¹For relevant discussion cf. Limits, pp. 75-89. Tate adopts for complex reasons the terms, "tension," "intension," and "extension"--probably from T. E. Hulme and Bergson--to discuss the nature of poems. They pretend to be notational terms but are, essentially, evaluative. The closest he comes to a concise definition of what he means by them is to say that ". . . the meaning of poetry is its 'tension,' the full organized body of all the extension and intension that we can find in it." (p. 83) "Intension" appears to be a metaphorical term which means approximately the same thing as what Yvor Winters calls "rational content" or John Crowe Ransom calls "structure." It implies the total, unified--as opposed to additive--denotation of a poem. "Extension" appears to be another metaphorical term, the polar opposite and yet common-law mate of "intension." It means approximately the same thing as what Yvor Winters calls "emotional content" or John Crowe Ransom calls "texture" or "tissue of irrelevancies." It implies the total, unified connotational complication of the poem.

²Allen Tate, Limits, p. 240. One may well question such definition as mere verbalization. The puzzle as to what constitutes form is shifted to consideration of the meaning of meaning. For Tate, meaning appears to be what the instrument, language, communicates when it is given structural significance. Obviously, a distinction between content and form does not exist in these terms. Like most contemporary critics, Tate holds such a distinction to be a serious distortion in thinking about a poem. Though this

relationship between meaning--or form--and poetic structure, in a very real sense is one of the things that marks the close of Tate's apprentice years and the beginnings of his work as an important poet. This is not to say that the idea bursts upon him as a light to produce a transformation in his poetry. But it is not improper to say that, like other critical discoveries he makes, this one becomes poetically informing. The perceptions Tate comes to as a critic, and the language he evolves for dealing with these perceptions, are highly important in his development as a poet.

In Tate, the poet and the critic live acutely interanimating existences. Indeed the two selves must be studied as one in order to arrive at a just understanding of either. I emphasize the poetical self that makes the critic possible. I refer to and use the critical self for my own explanatory purposes, in order to clarify those changes and notions in, and behind, Tate's poetry which are not immediately obvious. In his early work, then, both the poet and the critic in him are indefinite and fairly lost in the problems of language and form. As a result, the poetry is inconsistent, lacking in the vital coherence that comes

may be true, an overly-nice adherence to its semantics leads to a disturbing amorphousness in expression. Thus, critical precision may be "stopped dead in its tracks" by the paradoxes of conscientiousness. As Tate says in The Forlorn Demon (p. 176), we can but consider ". . . the entire poem, an actual linguistic object that is at once all that our discourse can make of it and nothing that at any moment of discourse we are able to make of it."

with an artist's establishment of precise attitudes toward his medium. The criticism, at the same time, is rather noncommittal, the expression of a personality involved with literature rather than the statements of a balanced understanding given definition by a program of central arguments and critical-poetic values.

This last kind of weakness, perhaps even more than that which prevails in the poetry, is pretty much a matter of maturity, of written critical experience. A few excerpts from an early editorial piece in The Fugitive should clarify what I mean:

It is agreed, we assume, that the aesthetic problem confronting the poet is eminently practical--versification, diction, composition, in a word, mechanics being the elusive enemy to capture and subdue. The poet's individuality, his peculiar way of viewing the world, his "genius," informs the poem, although neither he nor anyone else can explain the ens realissimum of that genius.¹

In his first sentence here, Tate indicates certain areas in which the critic can exercise judgment. In his second, he eliminates the possibility of precise critical action by making poetry a matter of "genius" which no critic can deal with very reasonably. The following paragraph falls into a similar kind of contradiction in arguing for and against "organic form":

The problem of representation is of equal concern to the poet, for his solution of it will largely determine his diction and, especially, his prosody. Concede the banality that form and content are one, and it is then clear that the apparently inexplicable framework of T. S. Eliot's "Waste Land" is inevitable and final;

¹Allen Tate, "Whose Ox," The Fugitive, I, No. 4 (December, 1922), 99.

for to imagine that poem in another music would be very much like thinking of The Iliad as written in a sequence, say, of triolets or cinquains. I think for all time--so important is The Waste Land--Mr. Eliot has demonstrated the necessity, in special cases, of an aberrant versification, for personal and increasingly abstract art, though some may not care for it. Mr. Robert Bridges continues the discussion of speech rhythms and minutiae, but somehow the concrete achievement invalidates that sort of thing. To try to eliminate unconventional forms from poetry with dialectic is a worthy parallel of the conclusive proof of the impossibility of the aeroplane so nicely advanced by the Cambridge mathematicians years ago; such abstract criticism has the unvenial weakness of ignoring reality, holding only for logical order. . . . Perhaps T. S. Eliot has already pointed the way for this and the next generation, as Mr. Seldes says. But there are and will be many still faithful to the older, if not more authentic, tradition; for the old modes are not yet sapped. . . . But which tradition can the American honestly accept? A fair, if stale question. We bow ourselves out, observing that to be young is very heaven!¹

This is a sort of permissive criticism, and it is only natural that it should encourage in the young writer a permissive poetry. That is, in critical principle, it advocates the notion that anything goes if it is successful. Perhaps there is no arguing with this; but only if the critic then takes upon himself the responsibility for clarifying why something is successful. For the undecided critic, "organicism" is the ready answer. The more rationally organized critic, what Tate was to become, does not retreat this easily. As a beginning poet-critic, Tate's demands and expectations of others are as tenuously formed as those he places on himself.

Though most of this seems quite evident, it should not be assumed that Tate's early poetry shows an over-all weakness of critical check. There are, to be sure, critical

¹Ibid., 99-100.

lapses, and enough to vitiate most of the poems he attempts in his first years as a poet. He is not in 1922 able to come to grips with his specific problems. By 1935 he could formulate them:

The problems of poetry must necessarily be the same in all ages, but no two ages come to the same solutions. Happiest is the age which, like the age of Sidney and Spenser, felt no need to reduce the problems to ultimate philosophical terms: our critical apparatus is immeasurably more thorough than theirs, our poetic performance appreciably looser. But our problems are inevitably theirs. They are the problem of language and the problem of form. The Elizabethan solution was practical, not speculative. The simple didacticism of the neo-classical Renaissance was as far as the sixteenth century got philosophically. The poets wrote better than they knew. Our knowledge is better than our performance.

In ages weak in form, such as our own age, theory will concentrate upon form, but practice upon the ultimate possibilities of language. Ages that create great varieties of forms, as the Elizabethans did in every branch of poetry, talk about language but actually take it for granted, and score their greatest triumphs with form. The powers of the language were not in the long run determined by theory, but instinctively by poets whose dominating passion was form: the language was determined by the demands of the subject, the broader the symbolism, and the more profoundly relevant the scheme of reference to the whole human experience, the richer the language became. The experiment with language as such is The Shepherd's Calendar, and it is a failure; but even there the poet attempts only to enlarge his vocabulary with archaic words for "poetical" effect. There is no trace of forcing of language beyond its natural limits that we find in modern verse. Propriety of diction was the problem, and it was ably discussed by Puttenham in his long Arte of English Poesie, a work in some respects comparable to The Principles of Literary Criticism by Mr. I. A. Richards, who talks not about the propriety of language but about its ultimate meaning. He thus leaves behind him language as an instrument and, by going into the kinds of meaning, converts the discussion into the peculiarly modern problem of form. For form is meaning and nothing but meaning: . . .¹

¹Tate, Limits, pp. 239-40. When Tate asserts that "form is meaning" he is condensing to a bon mot a more complex argument about form. This, for instance, is J. C. La Driere's handling of the same notion in his article on "Form"

For Tate the problems and principles stated here are vital. Poem by poem, from the beginning of his career to the present, one can see that the extent to which he realizes "meaning" as the true problem of poetic "form" measures his poetic achievements. It is certain, however, that in 1922 when he first set up shop as a poet, when he became a member of the Nashville "Fugitive Group,"¹ his approach to the art of poetry was largely determined by his attitudes toward language, and his attitudes toward language were vague or incomplete. Looking back to his early years Tate has commented that he had ". . . neither sensibility nor language of my own."² His poem, "In Secret Valley," more than supports this self-analysis. As he suggests in his introduction to "The Vigil of Venus," he had gotten himself up as Swinburne, and what came out as an exercise in language:

Far down where the winds from off the uplands blow
Sweeter and cooler, like caresses of your fingers. . .
Sun has gone and furrowing; gold in the corn still
 lingers--
I sicken of this beauty as the mountains of their snow.³

in Shipley's Dictionary (p. 250): ". . . total form will extend ideally throughout the work; the work will be all meaning, all structure. But it will equally be all that which is given meaning, that which has structure. . . . Where there is form there will be matter, informed; where there is matter there will be form, informing. To separate the matter and the form of the work will require a mental abstraction; in the actual thing the two will be a unity, since it is only by their unity that the thing exists."

¹Tate's own account of his "fugitive" years can be found in a brief memoir, "The Fugitive 1922-25; A Personal Recollection Twenty Years After," The Princeton University Library Chronicle, III, No. 3 (April, 1942), 75-84.

²Allen Tate, "The Vigil of Venus," Introductory Note, Poems: 1922-1947 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 176.

³Henry Feathertop (Allen Tate), "In Secret Valley,"
The Fugitive, I, No. 2 (June, 1922), p. 57.

But there was more to the problem than this. For one thing, he was given to capricious and insensitive disjunctions in language. In one poem he could write richly and with an adequate sense of rhythmic development:

If I could wipe the must
From the mildewed jars of devilry, and the rust
Off my lip, the taste of the red preserves
Of love would be as honied as one deserves
Who lusted with wormwood and with sickening myrrh,
Buried with a magic wife.

And, in the same poem, he could give in easily, under the guise of a Browningsque dramaticism, to blatant emoting, to seemingly functional but actually ineffectual rhythm and to makeshift inscrutability:

Now the Roc was mad,
As I was saying; trickery, the one weapon I had,
Led me to a blind valley; I clung to its leg
And that undid me, nearly--yes, I beg
Pardon--I'll go on--unity I don't pretend.
Ah, give that beggar sequins without end! . . .
But the Roc. . . .¹

And thus the poem ends. A "poetry of words" is inadequate to his rational commitment. The heavily mannered language surface only betrays his lack of control. And to write this off as an early semi-symbolist piece, as one might, would not make the problem any less apparent.

Now, control of diction constitutes a serious problem for the young poet, and for the young contemporary poet it has been more than usually serious. One of the major movements in twentieth century poetry has been the attempt to break through what some have deemed to be inhibiting,

¹Henry Feathertop (Allen Tate), "Sinbad," The Fugitive, I, No. 1 (April, 1922), 16.

overly-formalized attitudes toward language or uncertain consciousness of it in itself. Operating under assumptions that are an outgrowth of expressionist aesthetics, of psychologism, and of realistic or naturalistic movements in prose literature, in an effort to break away from what are considered to be idioms of the past only (if not archaic, at least literary), the experimental and avant garde writers have urged the poet who would be "modern" to recreate the language of poetry. They have further implied that because he must, obviously, be modern he has no other alternative. By and large, this has meant the construction of varieties of "realism" in poetic diction.

The epigones, as I will indicate shortly, have espoused everything from metered colloquial language and slang to the adaptation of prose to poetry--or rather, the reduction of poetry to the conditions of prose. In much criticism, such as the early piece by Tate which I quoted a moment ago, it meant that almost anything was acceptable as proper poetry if it could be rationalized on some organically "realistic" ground. The canon of criticism based on dictional discriminations was inverted or simply eliminated. Even the most rankly poetical of dictions could stand as an example of irony. Incoherence and inconsistency could be explained away at any time as organically proper. In practice, poetry exposed its center to faddism. Its flanks have always been open to necessary experimentalism, the constant renovation of conventions.

Such "liberated" attitudes toward language decorum were responsible for much of the literary climate into which Tate came as a young poet. And the young Tate, convinced of the necessity of being a Modern poet, wanting fully to be of his age, indulged himself in those attitudes. As he said twenty years later, ". . . we, the young, were trying all kinds of poetry, from Miss Millay to Eliot, from Robinson to Cummings. . . ."¹

As I will point out much later in discussing his poetry of the fifties, Tate still indulges himself though for different reasons. During his early years what he is attracted to is language effects, the superficial manipulation of vocabulary as instrument and device. Needless to say, there are numberless models to encourage his attraction: the Symbolistes, the imagists, the vorticists, the surrealists, the dadaists, all with their particular notions about the proprieties of language as device.

And there are, without going to the alien grounds of the Symbolistes or surrealists, the experiments of American writers who can show him the vagaries of language as poetry. There is the direct, homely, naturalism of Sandburg a la Whitman:

Thirty-Two Greeks are dipping their feet in a creek.
 Sloshing their bare feet in a cool flow of clear water.
 All one midsummer day ten hours the Greeks
 stand in leather shoes shoveling gravel.
 Now they hold their toes and ankles
 to the drift of running water.
 Then they go to the bunk cars
 and eat mulligan and prune sauce,

Smoke one or two pipefuls, look at the stars,
 tell smutty stories
 About men and women they have known,
 countries they have seen,
 Railroads they have built--
 and then the deep sleep of children.¹

Tate matches this with his own homely details, which--though seeking effects of language essentially similar to those of Sandburg--are presented in orderly tetrameters that indicate his leanings toward a poetical "morality" quite different from Sandburg's:

When noon-time comes the whistle blows.
 Down the straight street in jagged rows
 The multitudinous workmen shamble
 Past Mike's saloon through swarming flies
 To the weedy lot where they may gamble
 With crooked dice and gorge stale pies.
 It is the hour when stink and sweat
 Subside to let the flesh forget
 Affinity for brick and lathe,
 The cold necessity to bathe--
 And certain things one would forget.²

There are the verbal-musical gymnastics of Wallace Stevens:

Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
 Of tan with henna hackles, halt!³

And Tate is able to produce a variety of this kind of word-play, too, though never with the skill of Stevens:

¹Carl Sandburg, "Near Keokuk," Complete Poems (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950), p. 117.

²Allen Tate, "Nuptials," The Fugitive, I, No. 4 (December, 1922), 116.

³Wallace Stevens, "Bantams in Pine-Woods," Harmonium (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923), p. 128.

With sighs more lunar than bronchial,
 Howbeit eluding fallopian diagnosis,
 She simpers into the tribal library and reads
 That Keats died of tuberculosis. . . .¹

There are the verbal ironies, and spirited anti-poeticisms
 of Ezra Pound:

Aye you're a man that! ye old mesmerizer
 Tyin' your meanin' in seventy swaddlin's,
 One must of needs be a hang'd early riser
 To catch you at worm turning. Holy Odd's bodykins!

You wheeze as a head-cold long-tonsilled Calliope,
 But God! what a sight you ha' got o' our in'ards,
 Mad as a hatter but surely no Myope,
 Broad as all ocean and leanin' man-kin'ards.²

And these, too, Tate can follow most easily--though, perhaps
 a bit more adolescently:

Now William pulled the lever down,
 And click-clack went the printing press.
 William was the only printer in town
 Who had peeped while the angels undress.

And William had dudgeon for the sightless beadle
 Who worshipped a God like grandmother on ice-skates,
 For William saw two angels on the point of a needle
 As nobody since except W. B. Yeats.³

To match the innumerable examples of imagism and
 free-verse of writers such as Pound, H. D., and Wm. Carlos
 Williams, Tate turns easily, but not very successfully, to
 concrete imagery and relaxed meter:

¹Allen Tate, "Bored to Choresis," Wave, I (Christmas, 1922), 48-49.

²Ezra Pound, "Mesmerism," Personae; the Collected Poems (New York: New Directions, 1920), p. 13.

³Allen Tate, "William Blake," The Double Dealer, IV, No. 9 (July, 1922), p. 28.

Day

Chariot so strict chariot
Riding the cold stars to death
You are an 18th Century Lady

For, the easy sphincters
Of your eye quiver a while
Then are still

Dusk

Day hot on the terror of her head
Rots on a weak hill,
Span trees web the lank clouds
Slowly spill.

Fretted shadows on stumps
A vanishing husk
Of light . . . grey lumps
Of stone verge the hills with fears.
It is quickly dusk.¹

Somewhere--I have been unable to discover where--
Tate also does some poems in, as Hart Crane says, ". . . an idiom corresponding to cubism etc."² I gather from Crane's letters that these poems were never published, but I think we can still consider them part of Tate's language experiments during these early years. Crane's letter to Tate on February 12th, 1923, leaves little doubt as to what these experiments were like. He writes:

Let me congratulate you on the "Tercets of the Triad", however mockingly intended. It is among your best results, as is, also, "Pins and Needles". O I shall not soon forget "grandfather's knees", etc. etc. The interweaving of the lines is very cunning. I think you display a great amount of cleverness also in the "Pins and Needles"--although I am not sure that I applaud the name for this. There might be others more apropos. To my mind you beat "Gerty" Stein on her own race track. That is you succeed much better than she

¹Allen Tate, "Day," and "Dusk," The Fugitive, III, No. 4 (August, 1924), 126.

²Hart Crane, Letters, 1916-1932, ed. Brom Weber (New York: Hermitage House, 1952), p. 121.

in accomplishing what is her avowed aim--to split up lyrical or picture-word sequences in the same way that Cubists do in painting.¹

Obviously, the manipulation of language within a more formal metrical convention, such as prevails in some of the other examples I have just presented, is not enough. Device within order gives way to device within the limited order of free-verse which gives way to an attempt to imitate cubism in language. It is entirely possible that what this poetical-cubism is, remains in Tate's poem, "Vision Beatific." But, then, one would not need to get so fancy as Crane to name the qualities of this poem. e. e. cummings and other "liberators" of words and typography are not difficult to see as its models:

You may walk among fuchsias unloud,
Enter, attend upon a drum crashing deliberately
Correctly walk with mouth unbowed
Rubato into ecstasy

Loop large petunias on stiff necks
Funicles maybe of magnolia trees,
Recoil on split suspicion, in silences,
Disjoined between Adonic concupiscency
And Nirvana of tweaking the
Nose of absurdity!

Well that will I whisper suffice, turn round
look at the violet finger (not touching it)
of death dripping on you out of memory
remembering an accident certain of Greece
how your gods fell dead

bringing brankursine strange with disease
he came--so beware a finger of violet of
death²

These examples and comparisons are intended to be

¹Ibid., p. 122.

²Allen Tate, "Vision Beatific," Folio, 1923, n.p.

fairly self-demonstrative of the point about "language as poetry" I have been trying to make. They are not intended as "proof" that Tate is clearly indebted to the passages or the poets with whom I compare him. He is, however, clearly participating in a kind of language faddism of the twenties and he is not doing so with any great amount of originality. In poem after poem he pursues the vagaries of language. In no two consecutive poems does he pursue it in the same way. And in almost every poem he pursues it in such a way that our attention is drawn to him as fabricator, manipulator of words, rather than as maker of meaning in poems.

He ranges from the light verse quality of language, such as that in his poem on Blake, to the metaphysical pretension of something like this:

Breast, eye: pearl, jet. Madam, have pity
 Consider the precarious poetry of my Race--
 How, strictly, even Vittoria piqued the Angel
 By that much beauty he inserted in her face;
 (Wherefore synthetic wrath may breathe a city
 Upon any dim and doubtful perhaps Hell).¹

On the way to pretentiousness he passes through naturalistic reportage, musical word-play, loose imagism, and fragmentary effusion that may be a kind of "cubism." He is the young poet in search of a style, and he seems to conceive style largely in terms of surface idiosyncrasies of language. And, somewhat at the mercy of his contemporaries' practices, he seems to write with determination and energy but with little sign of any directed change toward the achievement

¹Allen Tate, "Credo, An Aesthetic," The Fugitive, III, No. 3 (June, 1924), 87.

of better poems. Until he discovers that each poem is necessarily a new problem, or group of problems, but that this does not mean each must necessitate new stylistics, experiments, he continues to write with little more success than will continue to encourage his talents "at home." In time he learns that style is more than a peculiar verbal quality. He learns to be more himself and less the product of his sudden, changing enthusiasms. But it takes time for him to learn this.

CHAPTER II

THE MARK OF CRANE

Tate's rapidly shifting attacks upon language during his early years as a "fugitive" poet revolve about a few main and lasting interests. There are three poets he admires and by whom he is influenced beyond all the rest he turns to for instruction at this time: Hart Crane, E. A. Robinson, and T. S. Eliot. Chief among these, as any attentive reader of Tate cannot fail to have noticed, is T. S. Eliot, to whom I will come shortly. At the moment, however, let us look at Tate's attraction to Crane whose influence is certain and rather fundamental on the poet Tate has become.

Crane's more obvious influence, that which stands out immediately in the language of a poem such as Tate's "Prayer to a Mountain Woman," comes to Tate fairly early in his career. By 1923, after a few months of friendship by means of correspondence between the two, echoes of the Crane who wrote "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" and "Voyages" were appearing in Tate's language. His enthusiastic admiration for Crane's work was quite unabashed in his letters to him¹ and became explicit and implicit in his sonnet to Crane:

¹Crane wrote to Gorham Munson in February of 1923, "Allen Tate writes me the most glowing praises possible,

Unweathered stone beneath a rigid mane
 Flashing insurgent dusk to ancient eyes
 Dreaming above a lonely mouth, that lies
 Unbeaten into laughter out of pain:
 What is the margin of the lovely stain
 Where joy shrinks into stilled miseries?
 From what remembrance of satyr's tippled cries
 Have you informed that dark ecstatic brain?¹

The heavy emotional quality of these lines is more typical of the Crane of this time than it is of Tate, and the crowded emphasis on half-realized sensation which is especially clear in Tate's second line--"Flashing insurgent dusk to ancient eyes"--stands out as both a borrowing and a quality which Tate was drawn to by Crane. Above all, it is the forcing of each moment of language in a poem toward a richness of sense impression, a forcing typical of most romantic poetry and one which Crane was virtually ravished by in the poetry of Rimbaud, which Tate set out to accomplish. Beyond this, Tate tries to make his own Crane's individual expanding and contracting rhythms, his loose syntax, and heavy piling of verbal effects. In a most obvious instance, the result is a pair of stanzas that Crane himself might well have written:

Motherless still, we are unborn in living
 Among these crags of steel interior bone;
 Our anguish bends, minute on minute,
 Canticles toward an eternity of stone.

calls me the greatest contemporary American poet, etc. etc. . . ." in Hart Crane, Letters, 1916-1932, p. 118.

¹Allen Tate, "Sonnet, To a Portrait of Hart Crane," The Double Dealer, V, Nos. 27-28 (March-April, 1923), 123.

Sharp in grey cities, restless with sleep, white miles
 Of centuried swift dreams are noisy moments
 On the way we thrust beyond your basalt side--
 All to the same motionless consummate bride.¹

At a later date, the vocabulary which is Crane's does not attend on Tate's forcing of language toward a totality of sensation. He seems to outgrow the other poet's influence. Or, rather, it seems that Crane's influence blends with that of the sensation-conscious symbolistic poets of France with whom Tate became familiar. Still, I would say that Crane is responsible for much more of this consciousness in Tate's later work than many readers might think.

The friendship between these two poets, not without its disturbing complications but none-the-less active and constant, lasted from 1922 until Crane's death ten years later. During that time the two young poets, almost exact contemporaries, exchanged ideas, initial versions of poems, and criticisms with some regularity. Crane, erratic and at times almost overwhelmed by his disordered personal life, playing the American Rimbaud at great expense, was possessed of a brilliant though limited and inconsistent critical ability. The advice he was able to give Tate was by no means shunned or discounted, though often, it is apparent that Tate's insistence upon his own ways was more essential to him than the perception of rightness in Crane's criticisms. Yet it is obvious that he accepted without hesitation Crane's seniority in poetic achievement, and agreed with many of his notions about poetry.

¹Allen Tate, "Prayer to the Mountain Woman," The Fugitive, IV, No. 4 (December, 1925), 118.

Apparently Tate was more than gratified when Crane first wrote to him after reading one of his earliest published poems, "Euthanasia." Tate's answer to that introduction brought an immediate reply from Crane and opened the way for the years of interchange that followed. He wrote to Tate with youthful enthusiasm:

As I said before, it is because your poem seemed so much in line with the kind of thing I am wanting to do, that I felt almost compelled to write you. While I am always interested in the latest developments in poetry I am inveterately devoted to certain English old fellows that are a constant challenge. I refer to Donne, Webster, Jonson, Marlowe, Vaughan, Blake, etc. More "modernly", have you read and admired Yeats (later poems), Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Edward Thomas, Wallace Stevens?¹

There is little doubt that the poets Crane mentions are to be numbered among Tate's lasting interests and that, in differing ways, he has found them useful in creating his poetry. But, at the moment the point to be made again is that, early in his career, Tate kept himself in a position to develop in a number of directions. His relationship with Crane encouraged his more romantic tendencies. His imitations of Crane emphasize once more his poetic eclecticism and his facility for falling into clearly derivative writing. In the midst of all such early indecision there is, however, one direction best suited to what he could do, and in time would do. Crane recognized it as a traditional mode, based upon what his own interests kept returning him to, ". . . certain old fellows that are a constant challenge." Sensing much that he could not think out consistently, he thus came

¹Crane, op. cit., p. 88.

to advise Tate, with clever delicacy, to avoid less valid, debilitating influences such as that of T. S. Eliot.

In the end, more than anything else, Tate simply outgrew Crane's influence as his approaches to poetry became more intellectual and, critically, more complex. But, like many of the things men outgrow, Crane's mark was not completely eradicated in Tate's search for an individual style. The baroque texture of Crane's language, the highly emotional rhetoric and the verbal music which figures so basically in designing his finest poems, as well as his particular way for using metaphor and exploiting sensation are not, themselves, readily visible in Tate's more mature poems, but their teachings are. They can be seen, in various degrees of mutation and blending with teachings of the seventeenth century metaphysical poets and the French symbolists, in poems such as "The Mediterranean," "Ode to the Confederate Dead," "Causerie," and some of his most recent work, especially "The Maimed Man."

CHAPTER III

THE INFLUENCE OF E. A. ROBINSON

As I have indicated in an earlier note, there were times when Tate found Edwin Arlington Robinson's poetry instructive and wrote poems which were distinctly in his manner. The Fugitive gave quite a bit of space to these exercises--not only Tate's but those of his friends as well. Robinson was one of the most important masters of the fugitive poets as a school, and Tate, during these years distinctly of his school, practicing his lessons with his friends, could not have avoided his influence very easily. In a way it is fortunate that he did not avoid him, for he has had very few better masters.

It was Crane who, to my knowledge, first gave any critical attention to Tate's imitations of Robinson. Obviously, Tate wrote to him about his interest in Robinson, for, answering one of his letters Crane writes as an afterthought: "P.S. Robinson is very interesting--his work is real and permanent, yet it is also a tragedy--one of the tragedies of Puritanism, materialism, America and the last century."¹ Two months later he mentions Robinson again to warn Tate against a too-easy reflection of the poets he admires:

¹Ibid., p. 89.

Dear Allen:----Let me Salute you again. "Bored to Choresis" is as good as "Euthanasia", if no better. You do the trick here. Your vocabulary is exceedingly interesting--you have a way of meticulously accenting certain things in a quiet, yet withall so sharp note that the effect is greater than as though you roared. "Tribal Library", "Her rhythms are reptilian and religious", etc., are excellent. And then, of course, I like your lunge at the bourgeois literary biographical interests. No one has ever put it better than you have.

You see what is good about this poem is over and above the merely personal sketches and digs that Robinson has been getting you into. Here you come into something larger, as you did in "Euthanasia" where you hit all humanity a few slaps, but in so interesting a way! In other words,--this poem is creative where the ordinary "character" portrait is merely analytic and, generally, unimportant (at least in poetry).¹

A sampling of lines from Tate and a few remarks on Robinson should make relatively clear just what Crane was referring to. The following stanza might well have been one Crane had in mind when he wrote to Tate. It antedates by some two months Crane's advice.

And as his art, disjected from his mind,
Was utterly a tool, so it possessed him;
A passionate devil, informed in humankind,
It turned on him--he's dead. Shall we detest him?²

This is not very good Robinsonian verse, for, among other faults, it is not sustained in its rhythmical development through the stanza. The weight of accent, so typical of Robinson, used in the first two lines, is muted in the third and played out in the syntax of the fourth. But the influence of Robinson as we know him in the "character" portraits informs the whole poem.

¹Ibid., pp. 93-94.

²Henry Feathertop (Allen Tate), "To Intellectual Detachment," The Fugitive, I, No. 1 (April, 1922), 9.

The poet, in shaping his statement, establishes a moral judgment for the reader on the character, only in the end to assume a non-committal stance, or one that seeks balance in irony. This is particularly typical of Robinson. It is one of his major formulas for making a poem. Combined with certain metrical and sound devices such as heavy primary stressing and monosyllabic feminine rhymes, it constitutes a signature. In addition, the particular way in which Tate tries to use sentence structure as a counter-movement to an established rhythm, is reminiscent of Robinson's manner in his first book, Children of the Night, and especially of weak poems such as "Her Eyes" or "The Night Before." But for direct comparison with Tate's lines, "Eros Turannos" comes most immediately to mind:

She fears him, and will always ask
 What fated her to choose him;
 She meets in his engaging mask
 All reasons to refuse him;¹

It is, however, in Tate's poem, "Cul-De-Sac," that Robinson takes over rather completely. In tone, in the use of abstractions, in meter and the relation of heavy metrical accent to meaning emphasis, in the weight of rhymes, in the fragmentary and alluding plot structure, and in the approach to character study as an evocative lyric, Tate's active debt to Robinson's work is clearly reflected:

¹E. A. Robinson, "Eros Turannos," The Man Against the Sky (New York: Macmillan Co., 1921), p. 67.

God took a crayon in his hand
 And sketched a swift line of distress.
 Who will remember how they loved?
 Who will remember happiness?

The ringing canticles of hope,
 The azure rhythms of his brain,
 Threaded the years that else were blind
 And lured her back to him again.

The largeness of mortality
 Had met him sometimes in the dusk;
 The stench of this day's prophecies
 He perfumed with tomorrow's musk.

Then apparitions of the wolf
 Outside the scrim came stealthily;
 He turned his back; what did it matter?
 "My mind has thought for only me."

His classic taint of otherness,
 Changing his human blood to wine,
 Smirked at the doorway of her soul,
 Which he had told her was a shrine.

"Now here upon the laughing fire
 I lay the gleanings of the years--
 A mildewed faith, some mutterings--
 And scorched from passion all the tears.

"The white arcana of the just
 And precious secrets of her kissing
 Are devils dancing on my lips--
 All but the craziness is missing;

"So many words are they to me,
 A balancing of pretty sounds--
 Why does she stay looking at me
 Like a seared dog with salted wounds?"

And hope was gone and demons lingered.
 Yet was there ever hope in him?
 I knew him when his teeth were sharp--
 More sanguine was he but as slim.

And so the needle pricked her fingers;
 She fidgeted but didn't go;
 A faint forgetfulness of reasons
 Kept her with him. Time is slow.

The ins she saw but not the outs;
 The pots and pans conspired to rust--
 It made some difference I suppose:
 Her stare was dry as blistered dust.

Who will remember happiness?
 I can recall that they were dead.
 I know that heaven cracked one day,
 And only God knows what they said.¹

Of course, some of this is not particularly Robinsonian, nor much of anything else for that matter. Tate is much more melodramatic than sensitively precise and effective. And though Robinson may have such moments of melodrama in his poems, few persist in it, and fewer still, unlike this, combine obvious dramaticism with flatting statements ("He turned his back; what did it matter?/ My mind has thought for only me.") and collapsing rhythm ("Why does she stay looking at me"). Robinson's perception of human motives in clear, terse language justified by emotion proper to its situation and scope is missing here. Tate may borrow his language devices, but not his larger insight.

What Tate can use is Robinson's use of pseudo-precise imagery, an imagery which is usually directed more toward abstract meaning than toward sensory recreation, and a dramatic development which dominates the poem. Further, Tate's handling of sentence structure within the stanza and use of a vocabulary which defines and is defined by judgments external to the poem's subject-matter reflects the older poet's habits. These qualities are most readily available in the Robinson of "Eros Turannos," "Luke Havergal," "The Gift of God," and "Veteran Sirens."

In only one of his poems does Tate permit himself a

¹Henry Feathertop (Allen Tate), "Cul-De-Sac," The Fugitive, I, No. 1 (June, 1922), 52-53.

questionably close parallelism to Robinson. This occurs in his sonnet to Crane which I have already pointed out as showing evidence of a debt to that poet. The final image of this poem bears more than a casual resemblance to the final image of Robinson's "The Gift of God." These are Robinson's lines:

His fame, though vague, will not be small,
As upward through her dream he fares,
Half clouded with a crimson fall
Of roses thrown on marble stairs.¹

And these are Tate's lines:

From a dead time I wander--and pursue
The quickened year when you will come to teach
My eyes to hold the blinding vision where
A bitter rose falls on a marble stair.²

Such a similarity could well be accidental, but even in a young poet it is an unflattering accident.

In a few years Tate overcomes the obvious hold of Robinson to integrate and absorb what is useful to him: drive toward abstraction in the matter of a poem and, in technique, heavy firmness of meter and of the individual line. These he never fully abandons even in his, seemingly, freest constructions. They become part of his power in creating differing kinds of poems, and are to be seen in their reinvested form in poems such as "Elegy," "The Traveller," "To the Romantic Traditionists," "Shadow and Shade," and "The Eye." Beyond this more formal kind of similarity there is a qualitative

¹E. A. Robinson, "The Gift of God," The Man Against the Sky (New York: Macmillan Co., 1921), p. 11.

²Allen Tate, "Sonnet, To a Portrait of Hart Crane," The Double Dealer, V, Nos. 27-28 (March-April, 1923), 123.

similarity in the obscurantism one meets in Robinson in poems such as "Veteran Sirens" or "Lost Anchors" and in Tate in poems such as "Death of Little Boys" or "Shadow and Shade." In these poems the covert implications in union of imagery and statement defy interpretation. Passages in these poems can be only tentatively understood.

The influences of Crane and Robinson on Tate during his formative years are indisputable. But, as in the work of any poet, the question is "How deep, how lasting an influence are they?" In both instances Tate's real debt is to the manner in which these poets helped solidify his feeling for language. Robinson, with his terse and rather dry idiom, mannered but not eccentric, encouraged Tate's native tendency toward a rather plain style. Crane, with his grandiloquent texture, his devotion to sound effects, his eccentricity which often amounts only to sloppiness, enlarged Tate's desire for verbal effects and rhetoric which provide a larger margin of connotation to the words in a poem. In the end, that is, in what can be considered Tate's mature poetry, the mark of these two early instructors is not immediately apparent even to a practised eye. Crane blends into effects Tate might well have derived from the French symbolists or seventeenth century English poetry. Robinson blends into effects Tate might just as directly have derived from some of his classical affinities. But to make an overly obvious statement, there is no doubting that the Tate we know would be quite a different poet from what he is, had these two not appropriated him for a time as they did.

These observations but further reveal the problems of a young poet in search of a way to write poems. He could avoid living influences, specific and general, only with a certain amount of willful, unnecessary loss. By conviction he was a modern, a young man in "the twenties," and it would have been foolish for him to seek to be radically otherwise, though he might have demonstrated more artistic conscience in his work. He was certainly enthusiastic and little given to settling down into any one program for solving the problems in poems he attempted. And there was enough inconsistency in the midst of talent and promise to indicate that he would never be prone to acknowledge one master and never "appear" to be a poet who belonged comfortably to any definable "school." Inconsistency itself was one of the poetic norms of his time. With a vengeance, poets haunted Emerson's "stairway of surprise," too often unmindful that surprises revisited are usually embarrassing or boring.

CHAPTER IV

THE IRONIC DODGE

Before moving on to a discussion of Eliot's influence on Tate's early poetry, and in an effort to make that discussion more meaningful, I believe it is essential that one pause and consider Tate's easy and often dubious resort to irony, that element in Eliot's vision which Tate has found to be lastingly impressive. His uses of irony, his apparent attitudes toward it both as a literary device and a form of insight, further indicate his youthful cultivation of modernity. Like many recent poets and critics, he tends to identify the "true," the "modern" poetic afflatus with some form of irony.

I would like to use the term irony in my discussion in its most generally understood sense, but I am afraid that this is impossible. Like most important words, it has been extended and refined to have special meanings and value significances. My understanding of it, and my consequent use, involves the following considerations: The American College Dictionary defines irony as ". . . a figure of speech in which the literal meaning as a locution is the opposite of that intended." This is irony as rhetoric, a further definition of which requires an understanding that the one toward whom the irony is directed be aware only of the

locution's literal meaning. If he hears the literal and perceives its opposite directly as meaning, the locution becomes sarcasm. The uses of irony in more complicated expression than the direct rhetorical involve other considerations. In artistic contexts the use of irony generally involves the establishment by inference of an opposition between what is and what ought to be or of what is and what also is. The object of the best sort of irony is not simply ridicule or play but ethical insight. Thus, "Socratic irony," to use an explication from Irving Babbitt,¹ consists of an opposition between convention and Socrates' universal and ethical self. He opposes to traditional discipline and order others which are stricter because more universal. An opposite kind of irony, and one which is almost exclusively prevalent in nineteenth and twentieth century literature, is the "Romantic." The romantic ironist opposes to convention his own unique and private self. His aim is not ultimately ethical but selfish. In the guise of self-denigration, he celebrates the brave, noble, self-destroying objectivity of the special individual and ignores the worth of values greater or different from those which he chooses, at any indulgent moment, to consider. Socratic irony brings us to insights of complex human truths divorced from individual needs--though highly cognizant of them. Romantic irony brings us to concern for the personality that indulges in it. Between

¹Irving Babbitt, Rousseau and Romanticism (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1919), pp. 243-46.

these two extremes there are kinds of irony, such as that of Swift, which are less easily defined. Swift's, for instance, may be considered as having many, but not most, of the virtues of Socratic irony, and some of the vices of romantic irony.

I have already referred to the romantic irony in Tate's first published poem, "Impossible." The presence of irony, regardless of its quality, indicates how early and importantly an ironic manner figures among the devices and points of view he cultivates for writing poems. And beyond all other things, the irony persists in the midst of both deep and superficial changes in his results. It persists as method or frame for insight, as stylistic quality, and as manner. A clear and interesting demonstration of this fact can be seen in the progress of one of his earliest poems, "Euthanasia."

This poem was first written some time in 1921, later discarded, and then revived and improved as "Elegy" in 1930. By the time Tate came back to reconsider this piece, he had learned much about the business of writing poems. Certainly--as a comparison of these two versions of a poem indicates--he had learned something about the place of irony in poetic structure. At the same time, it is clear that he had not learned enough about the kind of irony he most naturally practiced to understand its shortcomings. Since the 1930 version is the one Tate chose to preserve, let us look at it first.

No more the white refulgent streets,
 Never the dry hollows of the mind
 Shall he in fine courtesy walk
 Again, for death is not unkind.

A civil war cast on his fame,
 The four years' odium of strife
 Unbodies his dust; love cannot warm
 His tall corpuscles to this life.

What did we gain? What did we lose?
 Be still; grief for the pious dead
 Suspires from bosoms of kind souls
 Lavender-wise, propped up in bed.

Our loss put six feet underground
 Is measured by the magnolia's root;
 Our gain's the intellectual sound
 Of death's feet round a weedy tomb.

In the back chambers of the State
 (Just preterition for his crimes)
 We curse him to our busy sky
 Who's busy in hell a hundred times

A day, though profitless his task,
 Heedless what Belial may say--
 He who wore out the perfect mask
 Orestes fled in night and day.¹

This is a more skillful and mature demonstration than the one we will come to in a moment. Mainly, it shows Tate to be aware of the weaknesses of a vague ironic posturing. He recognizes the need for a center of objective meaning in his poem, and to this he relates--as well as he thinks necessary--his irony. He knows that moment-to-moment attitudes hung upon a fragmentary and obscure plot are not in themselves capable of organizing meaning in a poem. This is the problem of his earlier version. Unfortunately, he does not write a

¹Allen Tate, "Elegy, Jefferson Davis: 1808-1889," Poems 1922-1947 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), pp. 89-90. In the remainder of this study, all quotations from Tate's poetry which appear without footnotes should be recognized as drawn from this volume.

completely new poem. He still does not seem to see that his ironic orientation is one which directs interest more to himself than to Jefferson Davis. He is more interested in displaying his own processes than he is in organizing his understanding of Davis's fate. Relatively speaking, he has not, as yet, solved the most important problem of his poem which is one of general understanding rather than particular structure.

What he does in his earlier version comes to virtually the same pass. The problem is different in little more than that it is quite obvious:

No more the white refulgent streets,
Never the dry gutters of the mind,
Shall he in hellish boredom walk
Again, for death is not unkind.

The graceless madness of her lips,
That was the powder-puff of life,
Cannot rouge those cheeks nor warm
His cold corpuscles back to strife.

What did he gain? What did he lose?
These questions for the pious dead
Are blown from bosoms of kind souls--
A scented sorrow, corseted.

High up above our busy heads,
Busied with gullets gorging dimes,
We raise him to a grinning sky,
Shouting his praise a hundred times.¹

First of all, Tate writes here with a distinct tendency to surrender his poem to the surface play of language. He is overly interested in particular niceties of vocabulary: "refulgent," "hellish boredom," "scented sorrow," "gullets

¹Allen Tate, "Euthanasia," The Double Dealer, III, No. 17 (May, 1922), 262.

gorging." Because he is overly aware of himself in the act of poetizing, he is unable to exert the kind of effort necessary for controlling his vocabulary in such a way that adventitious connotations or sudden dominations by particular meanings of words do not break down the central structure of his poem. His pose of objectivity is useless, for he operates upon a vague principle of expressive, ironic imagination.

In more detail: the title, "Euthanasia," sets up an expectation which is unfulfilled. Either this, or, what amounts to the same thing, it is so cryptic that it has no functional relation with the poem. The first stanza, in spite of an extended second line, is firm in meter and rhythmical unit of line. Meaning and vocabulary in this stanza are heavy-handed but individual in quality. The second stanza, though it maintains certain technical virtues, resorts to plot reference which is largely unconnected with the first. The plot goes adrift and seems to follow from the matter in the first stanza only because of a further display of irony, itself now directionless. The third stanza shifts to generalized rhetoric, again plot-conscious, and the commentary goes farther out of focus in the final radical image of perfumed and corseted sorrow. Bad taste poses as insight. The last stanza soars into a cloud of irony, and the poem ends in a carping at materialistic insensitivity. The whole poem jumps with irony, but it is rather difficult to tell what, centrally, it is ironic about.

In one form or another, this vague irony tends to be the main fault of most of Tate's early poems. They are elaborately emotive peripheries to weakly realized centers. In the poem "Euthanasia" the reason for the irony, if there is an objective reason, never gets into the poem. It remains lodged in the personality of the writer.

In a sense this fault stems from the poet's refusal to appear directly serious about what he is saying in order, ironically, to communicate how deeply serious and perceptive he really is. And this, in spite of my somewhat acrobatic statement of it, constitutes romantic irony in one of its purest forms. We are given a poem which, if it is directed to any end, is directed to a unique construction in language which celebrates the writer's personality as point of view.

Irony serves no more certain purpose than that of defining point of view, but if the method and context of its use are not sufficiently circumscribed, and if the writer in his act of irony fails to invoke some specific aim (defense of Jefferson Davis in "Elegy"), his irony loses its value as comment upon an objective situation and point of view breaks down. The irony becomes reflexive, a kind of imaginative play in the interests of feeling above all else. It loses its larger potential, that is, its potential as a device for organizing ethical commentary in the interests of total meaning, both rational and emotional. It becomes, then, a device for involving us with the writer's personality,

and our reception of the work in which it is the largest effect becomes committed to an evaluation of that personality. If we are interested in literary biography, such a work, such a poem, may serve us well, but if we are interested in "poems," the poet will get in the way, and, more often than not, we will be disappointed.

This happens to be the situation one is faced with again and again in Tate's early poetry. In the name of imagination and sophistication, he indulges in ironic insight which is heavily loaded with what he himself has called "mass language." This is a ". . . medium of 'communication', and its users are less interested in bringing to formal order what is sometimes called the 'affective state' than in arousing that state."¹ He informs us further that the practitioners of this sort of language ". . . arouse an affective state in one set of terms, and suddenly an object quite unrelated to those terms gets the benefit of it; and this effect, which is usually achieved, . . . without conscious effort, is sentimentality."² In Tate's usage, the quite unrelated object of the language is the poet's personality, an object difficult for the young poet to avoid, especially when he conceives his art largely in terms of language, that is, expressionistically. The unrelated object "benefits" more than once in "Euthanasia," but most clearly in the last stanza:

¹Allen Tate, Limits, p. 76.

²Ibid., p. 77.

High up above our busy heads,
 Busied with gullets gorging dimes,
 We raise him to the grinning sky,
 Shouting his praise a hundred times.

It calls for attention again in the last stanza of his

"Horatian Epode to the Duchess of Malfi":

It is moot whether there be divinities
 As I finish this play by Webster:
 The street-cars are still running however,
 And the catharsis fades in the warm water of a yawn.¹

And again in the last stanza of "Battle of Murfreesboro
 (1862-1922)":

I cannot say he walks in vain,
 Nor back of his leather-lips is pain--
 Only no bottle yields its cork
 And skyscrapers tower in far New York.²

And yet again in the last stanza of another poem:

We buried you in unremissive ground.
 I went home. Somewhere I heard the clang of a hearse.
 You are far away, dear Lady--
 As I light this cigarette--and under an inscrutable
 curse.³

What should be noted, then, is that, consistently,
 the two elements which are requisite in ironic statement,
 the contrarities of what is and what ought to be or of what
is and what also is, yield no special insight for they are
 too bald, or too obvious, or too insensitive. They ask us
 to appreciate the poet, and our appreciation, as it turns
 out, cannot be very flattering. We cannot fail to see that

¹Allen Tate, "Horatian Epode to the Duchess of Malfi,"
The Fugitive, I, No. 3 (October, 1922), 76.

²Allen Tate, "Battle of Murfreesboro (1862-1922),"
The Fugitive, I, No. 3 (October, 1922), 84.

³Allen Tate, "Elegy for Eugenesis," The Fugitive,
 I, No. 3 (October, 1922), 92.

the resolutions provided by Tate's irony at this time are overly simple for the complexities with which they pretend to deal.

It is further significant that at this point in his career, roughly between 1920 and 1930, Tate uses this kind of ironic commentary with great frequency as a device for completing a poem. It is clearly device. When used in a final position, as it is in each of the examples just quoted, the irony constitutes an attempt at structure, a claim upon the reader, and, more definitely, an artful dodge. It is a willful imposition on the poem. Structurally, it aims at poetry of statement, a summary, a pointing of the argument in the rest of the poem as clearly as that attempted by final sententiousness such as

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

Joyce Kilmer's lines, though more immediately sentimental and certainly more unfashionable, are directed to a similar structural end. Like Tate's conclusions, this one comments upon what has previously been presented and commands the reader to re-experience the poem in terms of its conclusion. Thus a construction of meaning and tone which the poet may not have been able to direct through implication in the body of his composition may be impressed upon it by the final commentary. The reader is explicitly advised how to read the poem. It often becomes clear that the form of the poem as meaning, has not been demonstrating itself as it develops, that its implications have a tendency to scatter, and that

the poem as a whole can only be pulled together by a belated demonstration of the poet's will.

Such arbitrary conclusion of a poem by means of device, in most instances--and no matter who the poet--can be considered detrimental to its structure. The fault itself is traditional, if you will, and that the central tradition of any art can have inherent weaknesses as well as strengths is too often overlooked. This particular weakness in closing a poem assumes various guises, some more generally condemned than others.

To pronounce what, here, can only be a series of obiter dicta, this fault appears in many of Shakespeare's--and others'--sonnets in which the final couplet fulfills the requirements of a formal rhetorical pattern but not those of the "informed" quatrains of the particular sonnet itself. The fault is typical in much of the vague moral-didactic verse of the nineteenth century. And it appears in some of the most widely admired works of our time. May not one hold the conclusion of T. S. Eliot's Waste Land to be such an "artful dodge"? And are there not other varieties of the same sort of thing: forms that pretend to accommodate more responses, ideas, and experiences than the writer can assimilate, and which seem to end up by claiming to turn their invalidities into virtues? Is this not at least partly the case with much contemporary irony, with e. e. cummings' typographical eccentricities, with Pound's potpourris, with many of Williams' images, with Yeats's mystical system,

Eliot's and others' allusions, or Joyce's stream of consciousness? Though enormous in their implications, the questions must be asked.

Partly in the light of such considerations, I refer to one use of irony in Tate's early poetry as an "ironic dodge." It is a catch-all means for concluding poems characterized by momentum which is lacking in specific sense of direction. It might be called a "mannerism," one which, in contemporary poetry, has the status of being poetic, just as certain subject-matters and kinds of vocabulary in the past have been considered as possessing the essence of poetry. In Tate's early verse, however, it is more than a simple mannerism; it is a serious and indicative fault.

There are, however, more subtle and integrated uses of irony in some of these poems. One would assume this to be the case, since not one of his attempts is lacking in some form of ironic "action." Constant repetition of even the most dubious of practices usually results in a fair perfection of them. It is only just, then, that I turn as I do to two of these poems which are not only more sophisticated in irony but also more than usually successful as completed poems.

The first of these, "The Wedding," is constructed on a simple ironic contrast. The poet, with whom the reader identifies himself, and who stands as audience, views the juxtapositions of youth and age and, in the end, of two processions: one of a marriage and the other of a funeral.

He alone recognizes the obvious ironies in what moves before him. The members of the wedding party are unaware of the ironies which encompass them.

I saw the hot late afternoon familiarly
Sweat the pocked fluting of an old man's face,
And the smiles of old women
And their weeping, and the high laughter
Of unending virgins offered a grace
So deep, so fearfully quiet, that the uneven blood
In my veins beat quickly a triumph
Over death.

From the bald hill where I stood
Golden rod sprinkled summer with tardy gold
Through the still valley,
And a shrill flivver collected its dust shroud
Tattering to a thread of burnished road--
A jangling flivver tottered and rattled
And stopped, and the bride and groom
Coming out of the church,
Like infants from the womb,
Stepped in, for the wedding was done.

From the churchyard
Down the listless and jagged single street
The returning guests went home, but I remained--
And remaining must ever seem pitiless
To a stranger who saw the black
Charred march of death from the same churchyard,
Down the same road.¹

In addition to the major structural contrast, the poem operates imaginatively on the principle of interpenetrations of life and death, promise and decay. Thus, at any particular moment, as well as in total effect, the content is ironic.

The time of day is late afternoon, not morning which is symbolic of promise and traditionally more appropriate to the beginning of a new life in marriage. The afternoon is

¹Allen Tate, "The Wedding," The Fugitive, II, No. 10 (December, 1923), 170.

hot, uncomfortable, but still in a tender way, "familiarily," it draws sweat, itself not readily associated with tenderness. The naturalistic fact, ". . . the pocked fluting of an old man's face," contains further disparity, for the lines in the old face tenderly viewed are like folds and grooves in cloth, not harsh, but these are blighted. We are given a contrast between an undertone or tenderness for the old man's face and explicit statement about it as a sweating, pocked, and furrowed thing. The old women and the young girls are yoked in activity and contrasted. The old women smile but weep too in the conflict between what is and what has been. They were virgins once. Thus, the "high laughter of unending virgins," though always with us as laughter and virgins, is obviously not in the individual sense, unending. And in the high laughter there is a fearful quiet, full of life, but only known to be so filled because it too passes into smiles and weeping of old women. All of this beats "A triumph/ Over death."--which, however, it must do "quickly" since even the triumph is subject to decay.

The remainder of the poem maintains this tissue of ironic contrasts between life and death, between the wonderful that is if rightly perceived and the terrible that also is if recognized. But since the principle upon which the ironies are constructed is clear and since it holds the poem together from beginning to end--in spite of such puerilities

as the "jangling flivver"--further explication here seems quite unnecessary.

"Credo, An Aesthetic," depends for its central effect upon a different kind of irony. At first it simply seems to be a kind which is typical of a few of the earlier, heavily-mannered pieces by John Crowe Ransom or Donald Davidson, two of Tate's fellow fugitives and instructors in the art of poetry. But then patient familiarity with the poem reveals its possible debt to at least two other poets: T. S. Eliot, and especially to poems from his Prufrock volume (1917) such as "Conversation Galante"; and Wallace Stevens, and especially to a poem such as "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman." Obviously, what Tate attempts to use in his poem is a rather popular kind of ironic quality, and, direct echoing aside, this is important. His weaknesses are encouraged by his contemporaries.

In the main, his irony in "Credo, An Aesthetic" is more decisively rhetorical, artificial and self-conscious than that which he uses in "The Wedding." The earlier poem is a meditative evocation of a scene in which the point of view, the observing personality, involves itself for the purposes of irony. Irony as comment defines the extent to which the speaker identifies his own self-conscious preoccupation with death with its place in the external world. This later poem is a type of dramatic monologue, a piece of direct address couched in an overly-urbane tone for ironic purpose.

Supposedly the irony here rises out of a dramatic

situation which is itself, if title and potential double entendre in the poem are at all valid, an analogical statement about a poet's beliefs and program for poetry. As I see it, Tate wishes his irony to operate on both levels of his statement, the social and the aesthetic. And this is a fairly ambitious aim, one which the irresponsibility of his ironic manner at this time places beyond him. Thus, as a reading of the poem should indicate, the social and artistic naivete, the irresponsibility, his irony claims to forswear merely places him in the position of demonstrating another kind of irresponsibility. But first the poem:

I can't revise my manner but I think
 If the decorative jet, which is your eye,
 And the restless pearl, which is your either breast,
 Would slough their antic imagery and shrink
 To impartial clay, I could be shriven as the rest.

Good manners, Madam, are had these days not
 For your asking, nor mine, nor what-we-used-to-be's.
 The day is a loud grenade that bursts a smile
 Of comic weeds in my fragile lily plot;
 Comic or not, heterogeneities
 Divert my proud flesh to indecisive guile.

Breast, eye: pearl, jet. Madam, have pity,
 Consider the precarious poetry of my Race--
 How, strictly, even Vittoria piqued the Angel
 By that much beauty he inserted in her face;
 (Wherefore synthetic wrath may breathe a city
 Upon any dim and doubtful perhaps Hell).

My manner is the footnote to your immoral
 Beauty, that leads me with a magic hair
 Up the slick highway of a vanishing hill
 To Words--that place of beryl and coral. . . .
 Often however I hear the music where
 Your sudden face rumors of twilight spill.¹

The poet here does not wish to appear unsophisticated

¹Allen Tate, "Credo, An Aesthetic, The Fugitive, III, No. 3 (June, 1924), 87.

about his art: he opposes to a romantic poetry of lilies and artificially beautiful manner one which is apparently more honest, unrevised, realistic as "impartial clay," organic, affronting yet directionless in the vague manner of "indecisive guile." At the same time he does not wish to appear sentimental in his address to his lady: he plays the courtesies of idealistic chivalry ("shriven," "lily plot," "jet," "pearl," etc.) against the naturally ingratiating manner one might use when dealing with a sexy woman ("My manner . . . your immoral/ Beauty," etc.). Yet, it is not only difficult, but also quite impossible to hold the poem to any consecutiveness of meaning on either of its two levels. When one level breaks down, the poet apparently assumes that the other will take over and prove diverting and clever enough to remedy this. He permits himself the indulgence of irony and intensity, and asks of his reader an organizing intelligence he does not ask of himself, content as he is with "indecisive guile."

Thus he resorts to obscure references, "Vittoria," who "piqued the Angel" (Webster's Vittoria, perhaps, but there's little way of knowing), and ". . . that place of beryl and coral . . .", and to a free flow of irony which draws the reader's attention to the cleverness of the poet, to personality as point of view. In spite of sophistication in manner and language, Tate's irony is still romantic, weakly directed. He accepts as a poet's right an emotional irresponsibility, and for poetic structure he substitutes another form of the "ironic dodge."

Such are some of Tate's understandings and uses of irony in his early poems. It is, for him, one of the things meant by poetry in a modern idiom. He makes of it his main, almost his sole, device for constructing tensions in meaning. His concentrations on it are weakly principled and obvious, and they blind him somewhat to other important ways for organizing the materials of experience and poetry. He is still a young poet determined to be modern in the manner of the prominent poets of his time. He turns to them and their devices, and he turns to the influence they hold to be important. As he has said, in reviewing his "fugitive" days:

. . . Hart Crane had seen one of my poems in The Double Dealer, a "little" Dial published in New Orleans; he wrote me a letter from Cleveland and sent me some back numbers of The Little Review. He said that my poem showed that I had read Eliot--which I had not done; but I soon did; and my difficulties were enormously increased. Anyway from Eliot I went on to the other moderns, and I began to connect with the modern world what I had already learned from Baudelaire, first through Arthur Symons, then from Baudelaire himself. . . . I began an impertinent campaign in Eliot's behalf in the South.¹

¹Allen Tate, "The Fugitive 1922-1925; a Personal Recollection Twenty Years After," op. cit., pp. 80-81.

CHAPTER V

IN THE COUNTRY OF T. S. ELIOT

Any sensitive reading of the poetry of Allen Tate, not only his early discarded poetry but also much of his later retained work, must soon discover that the "difficulties" which T. S. Eliot added to his lot as a poet are not to be easily overlooked. I do not think we can ever fully forget them. Certainly, Tate has not forgotten them, nor, in a way, is he ever likely to. His first acquaintance with Eliot's work clearly bowled him over, and in one of his early letters to Hart Crane he must have written both his excitement and disturbance over this event. Crane's reply is quite revealing:

What you say about Eliot does not surprise me,-- but you will recover from the shock. No one ever says the last word, and it is a good thing for you, (notice how I congratulate myself!) to have been faced with him as early as possible. I have been facing him for four years,--and while I haven't discovered a weak spot in his armour, I flatter myself a little lately that I have discovered a safe tangent to strike which, if I can possibly explain the position,--goes through him toward a different goal. You see it is such a fearful temptation to imitate him that at times I have been almost distracted. He is, you have now discovered, far more profound than Huxley (whom I like) or any others obviously under his influence. You will profit by reading him again and again. I must have read "Prufrock" twenty-five times and things like the "Preludes" more often. His work will lead you back to some of the Elizabethans and point out the best in them. And there is Henry James, Laforgue, Blake and a dozen others in his work. He wrote most of this verse between 22 and 25, and is

now, I understand, dying piecemeal as a clerk in a London bank! In his own realm Eliot presents us with an absolute impasse, yet oddly enough, he can be utilized to lead us to, intelligently point to, other positions and "pastures new." Having absorbed him enough we can trust ourselves as never before, in the air or on the sea. I, for instance, would like to leave a few of his "negations" behind me, risk the realm of the obvious more, in quest of new sensations, humeurs. These theories and manoeuvres are interesting and consolatory,--but of course, when it comes down to the act itself,--I have to depend on intuition, "inspiration" or what you will to fill up the page. Let us not be too much disturbed, antagonized or influenced by the fait accompli.¹

What Eliot had marked out as his technical and poetical reality, made difficulties for younger poets, who, perhaps because of their admiration for his results, found it too easy for them to discover that reality as their own. They accepted allegiance to his achievements as a part of their allegiance to the nature of modern poetry, only to find that it placed them in a closed system of perceptions and techniques which prohibited anything but clearly derivative writing.

In the main, it was Eliot's ironic vision that Tate admired most deeply, for it seemed apparent that Eliot had mastered an area of perception where all moderns ought somehow to dwell--that is, unless they wanted to be ineffectually "soft." One might be tempted to call the area "satiric" were it not for the knowledge that, for the most part, its products as poems of objective commentary tend to be less criticism of an age than reflection of personal spiritual conditions, contradictory insights, and confused states

¹Hart Crane, Letters: 1916-1932, p. 90.

of being that make satisfactory living and, by reflection, his age difficult for the poet. More often than not, the poet, in his writings, finds himself forced to recognize that his difficulties are not necessarily those of most men, nor does he think they ought to be. His work reveals that disturbed state of reflection in which what is deemed to be "right" is recognized as having not only no universal dominion but also no unshakeable place in his own mind. And if the "right" does become unshakeable in his mind, he is still faced with the necessity of knowing that an atomism in beliefs and assumptions still surrounds him. He is virtually cut off from satire as a literary form.

Satire requires the existence in a culture, even if only as a vague assumption, of an inclusive-exclusive frame of reference, its fixed values and their supporting beliefs, to which the writer appeals. It assumes, itself, a context of moral, ethical, spiritual absolutes. Within the limits of any one or all of these it can operate. But, lacking such absolutes, holding to schemes of relativities, a culture--its writer--finds resort to satire practically impossible. This being the case, irony becomes the resort of writers who perceive order confounded, to serve the ends of satire. Turned back from absolute decision which would be meaningful to a reasonably large number of other men, the writer simply implies a propriety which is indecisive, relative. Irony places in contiguity the orders it selects but leaves them in a state of indecision which promotes tension. Irony

becomes, then, a readily available and easily useable device for arousing affective responses.

It has long been Eliot's belief that his writing took place in a world which does not have realizable centers of value or assumptions about values such as those which were available in other times, say, those of Aquinas, or Dante, or possibly Shakespeare. In both his poetry and his criticism he has felt the need to expound this thesis in one fashion or another. It is, perhaps, in technique and theme the main burden of his poetry. And, in his essays it constitutes an idea which is central to other critical observations. For instance, in his essay on William Blake he concludes his discussion as follows:

Blake was endowed with a capacity for considerable understanding of human nature, with a remarkable and original sense of language and the music of language, and a gift of hallucinated vision. Had these been controlled by a respect for impersonal reason, for common sense, for the objectivity of science, it would have been better for him. What his genius required, and what it sadly lacked, was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which would have prevented him from indulging in a philosophy of his own, and concentrated his attention upon the problems of the poet. Confusion of thought, emotion, and vision is what we find in such a work as Also Sprach Zarathustra; it is eminently not a Latin virtue. The concentration resulting from a framework of mythology and theology and philosophy is one of the reasons why Dante is a classic, and Blake only a poet of genius. The fault is perhaps not with Blake himself, but with the environment which failed to provide what such a poet needed; perhaps the circumstances compelled him to fabricate, perhaps the poet required the philosopher and mythologist; although the conscious Blake may have been quite unconscious of the motives.¹

Tate has expressed virtually the same argument more

¹T. S. Eliot, Selected Essays, 1917-1932 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1932), pp. 279-80.

than once. As for Eliot, it is for Tate a marshalling idea about the nature of contemporary reality. It is highly useful in discussing numberless aspects of tradition, order, and structure in and out of literature. Tate uses a form of the idea in setting up his early essay on Eliot:

Every age, as it sees itself, is peculiarly distracted: its chroniclers notoriously make too much of the variety before their own eyes. We see the variety of the past as mere turbulence within a fixed unity, and our own uniformity of the surface as the sign of a profound disunity of impulse. We have discovered that the ideas that men lived by from about the twelfth to the seventeenth century were absolute and unquestioned. The social turmoil of European history, so this argument runs, was shortsighted disagreements as to the best ways of making those deep assumptions morally good.¹

All of this is to the point I wish to make: that such a lack of order--or poetry aiming at cultural commentary and written under the assumption that such order is lacking--must produce observations which appeal to personal, even arbitrary discriminations of the poet as standards of value. The poet finds himself in the uncomfortable position of presenting his own personality as a solution for the ills of his age.

Certainly, this state of affairs could be considered rather "romantic," Rousseauistic, were it very obvious. But the dramatic designations of contemporary poets seem to be anything but obvious. We are often either blinded by their surface particularities or lose ourselves in the delight of plumbing their cryptic significances. We do not see Eliot's "young man carbuncular" or Doris or Sweeney directly as

¹Allen Tate, Limits, p. 341.

critical-satiric exempla, part of the rhetoric of a personality-based satire. We tend to see them as symbols and proceed to get ambitious about their meanings. Perceiving ironies as the spirit of poetry, we often overlook the poem in the interest of abstractions we have been led to. Tate, himself, long a spokesman against heresies of this type, commenting on the seduction scene in Eliot's "Fire Sermon," arrives at such perception and indulges in the abstractions to which he has been led:

There is no despair in the scene itself. The critics, who being in the state of mind I have described, are necessarily blind to an effect of irony, have mistaken the symbols of an ironic contrast for the terms of a philosophical dilemma. It is the kind of metaphorical "logic" typical of romantic criticism since Walter Pater. Mr. Eliot knows too much about classical irony to be overwhelmed by popular dogma in literary biology. For the seduction scene shows, not what man is, but what for a moment he thinks he is. In other words, the clerk stands for the secularization of the religious and qualitative values in the modern world. And the meaning of the contrast between the clerk and Tiresias is not disillusion, but irony. The scene is a masterpiece, perhaps the most profound vision that we have of modern man.¹

It is apparent that what Tate admires in this passage from Eliot is its irony. Perhaps he only overstates his case, but he creates a misconception by denying philosophical dilemma to the scene, thereby denying all structural dilemma to it. Dilemma does exist in Eliot's poem and is the main device for the creation of irony. The kinds of love considered do not fuse, stand apart as facts, and promote no specific judgment. Tate's method of interpretation has become synonymous with his judgment of the work. What he most admires are Eliot's incorporation of an ironic

¹Ibid., p. 345.

effect which has large significance and his foundation of poetic method and structure upon irony.

In Eliot the drama of ironic contrasts is usually specific. Failing to see this, one may take his portraiture as satiric and obtain what is a distorted, if not really incomplete, understanding of a poem. The young man carbuncular and the secretary are contrasted with Elizabeth and Leicester and with Tiresias, the refuse-sown Thames is contrasted with Spenser's idyllic stream, romantic love which assumes it must but does not make sense is set opposite romantic love that at least seems to have made sense. Present and past, the disestablished and the established, the illusionary and the real, age and age, act fulfilled and fulfilling and act incomplete and inhibiting--all are structural contrasts whose commentary is ironic. The poet cannot fully advocate that what was ought to be, for what was--as he implies by interpenetration of contrasts--is the source of what prevails. The contrasts themselves are indecisive. They are part of a larger judgment. And that larger judgment is personal, religious, one with which his age obviously does not agree, and upon which it is didactically lectured in "Choruses from 'The Rock'." His artistic perception and his beliefs about the problems of his age prohibit to him the easy, compromised directness of an Auden or a Spender for whom satire is possible because their concentration is social and necessarily lacking in ultimate human implications.¹

¹For a sound treatment of this weakness in the poetry

Unlike the great satirists--among whom Auden and Spender would be very ill at ease--Eliot and the mature Tate are not occupied with attention to the great disparity between the real as perceived rationally and the ideal which is envisioned and known as a general assumption encompassing the rational itself. Their attention goes not to a critical consideration of such disparity but to promoting the relative values in which they personally believe. At best, their vision of disparity is based in a philosophical dualism typical of much contemporary literature, and like that dualism theirs moves ultimately toward a "properly" adjusted emotional condition for human life rather than toward a definable ethical order. And they can best handle this vision in their poetry, indirectly, by means of irony which is not resolved--dramatically or otherwise--within the poems in which it appears. Thus the unending, reflexive endings of "Prufrock," "Gerontion," The Waste Land, or of Tate's "Re-troduction to American History," "Causerie," or "Ode to the Confederate Dead."

The values of Eliot and his student, Tate, are covertly relative, religio-aesthetic, romantic in character. Their "modern" artistic consciences estrange them from rational definition and direct statement of their values in the form of poetry. They concentrate most of their creative

of Auden and Spender and others see D. S. Savage, "The Poet's Perspectives," in Little Reviews Anthology 1946, ed. Denys Val Baker (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1946), pp. 134-41.

effort upon the non-rational qualities and devices of poetic language and forms, and, for them this means that the way to subject matter and the matter itself must maintain a quality of reasonably insoluble complexity. This is much of what Tate learns from Eliot. In one way and another his learning is reflected in both his criticism and his verse. He becomes not only the young man who ". . . began an impertinent campaign in Eliot's behalf in the South" but also, in time, perhaps the most deeply influenced and independently successful follower Eliot has had, or is likely to have. And much of what I have to say in the later stages of this study will involve implicit and explicit reminders of this assertion.

Now Hart Crane was well-aware of what the young Tate was getting himself into, but Tate could not really make use of Crane's warning about Eliot. Crane knew, and time and much of the transitory poetry in the "little magazines" have demonstrated how right he was, that to be a convinced admirer of Eliot was stylistically dangerous. There could be no "school of Eliot" even as there could be no "school of Hopkins." There was Eliot and his acknowledged master, Ezra Pound. The line could go no farther. Eliot's style, in total form, matter, device, and language, was, and is, essentially untransferrable and untransmutable. Like most styles, romantic in character, so much of its energy is concentrated in its unique and eccentric aspects that to reflect instruction from it is, virtually, either to plagiarize or parody it. Tate's failure to fully perceive this fact

did complicate his problems as a poet. It is, perhaps, greatly to his credit that he was still able to do something after a time which, though marked by Eliot, could be so widely recognized as having independent virtues. I refer to Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead," which I will discuss later. The young Tate, however, was less successful in his uses of Eliot.

Writing to Gorham Munson in 1922, Crane said, "Allen Tate sends me a good poem, acknowledges myself and Eliot as his models. . . ."¹ And in poem after poem at this time the influence of Eliot on Tate is apparent enough for Crane to simply tell him to ". . . devote some extra effort into perfecting this poem, wilfully extracting the more obvious echoes of Eliot."² This provided Tate with a task which is not uncommon for young poets to face, but at this time it was one he was not really equal to. More often than not, when he wrote he was Eliot's man.

Tate could not escape Eliot's highly personalized rhythm, and his ear and language kept returning to it even in the midst of his echoing of other poets. Thus, like "Credo, An Aesthetic," a great many of Tate's early poems in their gathering together of diverse individual qualities from many sources fitfully reflect his admiration for Eliot. A few, however, contain more than echoes. "Nuptials," for instance, written in the last months of 1922, is a fairly

¹Hart Crane, Letters: 1916-1932, p. 102.

²Ibid., p. 122.

obvious imitation of Eliot. Considering the obviousness of its debt, it becomes instructive on the stringency of Tate's literary conscience at this time that he should have published this poem.

I have already quoted the opening stanza of "Nuptials" in another context in an effort to point out one of Tate's attempts at a kind of "literary realism" in language. This much does not appear to be particularly Eliotic in rhythm or language--though one can see in it reflections of Eliot's "Preludes." But, by the time Tate gets to the middle of his poem, he clearly surrenders to Eliot. Eliot's imagery, his language, his rhythms, his rhymes, are sifted into the argument of Tate's poem for ironic effects which pretend to the qualities of their original. But, lacking a central vision and structure of its own, Tate's poem merely succeeds in revealing how imaginatively dangerous admiration for another poet's effects can be. This is the last half of Tate's effort:

Along the river's rocky brink
A troop of titans trudges in the dusk,
No stench rises of hyacinth and musk
Nor any pillars of Athenians,
The dusk trails farther down the wharf
O darkness of impenetrable might!

The clink of empty dinner pails, the thud
Of feet, chatter of teeth, fetid eyes:
I have lived many years and many lies
But not before, on the dull stroke of seven,
Have I heard whispers on a rickety stair
And rain upon the cracked window-pane,
Suddenly had visions of beautiful dead hair.
Eight, nine, ten, eleven,
The arc of justice is the twist of truth
Achilles nine times dragged in mud

Wearing my new amethystine ring
 Mumbling phrases from the book of Ruth
 Down the straight street in luminous quest of truth
 I go to hear the ladies laugh and sing.
 Jenny opens the door and grins serenely,
 Laughs like a sparrow, chirps, recedes, is queenly.

The whistle blows for five oclock,
 He rubs an eye, pulls on a sock,
 Observes his bride still in bed,
 Wonders: Now is she in bed dead?
 She went to bed after I went to bed. . . .
 The dawn sifts through the casement, foggy,
 Lips are dank and eyes are soggy,
 But leaps into his overall,
 Puts on his hat, goes down the hall.

Buzzards float upon the sky
 Shrilling a metaphysic cry,
 Machines hum, midgets play,
 Another corpse is hauled away
 Hauled away.¹

The seriousness with which I have been discussing Tate's debt to Eliot's irony is not very well justified by a poem such as this. There is little here, if one knows Eliot's poetry, to recommend either the inventiveness or the sensitivity of this young poet. The rhythms, imagery, and irony which have a certain amount of integration, appropriateness, in Eliot's "Preludes" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" become the awkward machinery for an emotional self-demonstration in Tate's poem. And even if the endings of Eliot's poems are examples of the "ironic dodge"--

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;
 The worlds revolve like ancient women
 Gathering fuel in vacant lots.²

¹Allen Tate, "Nuptials," The Fugitive, I, No. 4 (December, 1922), 116-17.

²T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1935 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), p. 26.

and --

The bed is open; the tooth-brush hangs on the wall,
Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life

The last twist of the knife.¹

there is some perception in them--though they beg a lot of the reader. Tate's final dodge into irony not only lacks any such quality of individual perception but also any distinction in language. But then, even "Another corpse is hauled away/ Hauled away" may be defensible in terms of irony. However, it still remains that--in the words of Irving Babbitt rephrasing Heine--"Formerly . . . when a man had said a stupid thing he had said it; now he can explain it away as 'irony'."² With which point I had better leave this poem in fairness to Tate. He was young, enthusiastic, and enamored of a writer who has, in his own work, more problems than benefits to offer the unwary.

As a final example of Eliot's direct influence on Tate's poetry, none more clearly shows what Tate was trying to do than "The Screen," a poem very much like "Nuptials." There is a difference in time of less than a year between these poems, but in that time Tate had already begun to control what he was learning from Eliot. More simply, he was writing much poetry, and he was improving in his ability to unify language effects. The quality of seriousness and

¹Ibid., p. 30.

²Irving Babbitt, Rousseau and Romanticism (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919), p. 240.

emotional consistency which he could not manage in "Nuptials," the quality he was attempting to derive from Eliot, was more within the range of his powers. I quote only his last stanza:

Hope I have clutched beyond death,
 Stretched fingers down a street for light,
 Panted for a stronger breath--
 Cast jewels into a desolate sea.
 And afterward, like a brutal song
 Stabbing the young dusk to stillness,
 Comes the after-dinner hour,
 Bringing the years that patter down
 The streets of a broken empty town,
 Bringing the bellman to the tower
 Of a final gong for weariness--
 Bringing, at last, the ivory hand
 I have lived for, a lonely customer.¹

Further evidence of Eliot's influence on the young Tate may be found in exercises such as "Perimeters," "The Date," and "Vision Beatific." In one way or another the shadow of Eliot is to be seen hovering over Tate's work from this point onward. It is there in much of the poetry. It is there in much of Tate's criticism. And it is there in his total vision of life. In truth Eliot's influence is more important in the end than that of Tate's early blood-brothers, "the fugitives."

¹Allen Tate, "The Screen," The Fugitive, II, No. 7 (June-July, 1923), 70-71.

CHAPTER VI

JOHN CROWE RANSOM AND THE "FUGITIVE SCHOOL"

The most pronounced feature of a "school" is that it defines for its poets a central style and stylistic ideal which can be approached through a set of selected conventions. This style is, at first, usually a composite showing cross-influences and having a vague norm. It reflects theories and assumptions about the aims of poetry, the nature and functions of language and form, and what constitute "proper" literary-human objectives. Then, as the individual writers work together and as they begin to create in their practices the conventions that best serve their aims, their verbal manners and structural methods begin to coalesce. The area in which their perceptions and ideas function most successfully narrows down. They settle on recognizable devices for achieving poems, and their most thoroughly realized devices become practically synonymous with their style.

Though no single poem may serve to define clearly the boundaries of the style subscribed to by the group, there emerges in their work qualities of language and technique which make them readily identifiable as members of a group. Usually this quality belongs most completely to the best poet in the group. At the same time that this is true, its best poet's style itself is, to a great extent, a product

of his schooling in the group, and that his stylistic achievement is greater because of his relation with the group. This all pertains to the Areopagus Group and its Sir Philip Sidney, to mention only one historical example.¹ It is equally pertinent to the Gyroscope Group and Yvor Winters in our time;² and it is quite true of the Fugitives for whom John Crowe Ransom stands as the central voice and teacher of a school. Recalling his fugitive days, Tate confirms the leadership which a reading of The Fugitive's files indicates: "Uppermost in my mind are Donald Davidson and John Crowe Ransom, who for me, at that early stage, meant just about everything . . . We all knew that John was far better than we were, and although he never asserted his leadership we looked to him for advice."³

Certainly, by the time the fugitives had disbanded as a publishing group in 1925, Ransom had emerged as their

¹Other groups and schools would include, with their central stylists, The Metaphysicals, Donne; The Tribe of Ben, Ben Jonson; The Augustan Poets, Pope; The Lake Poets, Wordsworth; The Pre-Raphaelite Group, D. G. Rossetti; The Georgians, T. S. Moore.

²The Gyroscope Group of California in the 1930's has never gained much attention. Unlike some schools this one, largely through the effectiveness of its initial organizer, Yvor Winters, as a poet and professor of literature and writing, continues to grow, without degeneration. A roll call would now include these published poets: Winters, Janet Lewis, J. V. Cunningham, Don Stanford, Anne Stanford, Barbara Gibbs, Clayton Stafford, Howard Baker, Achilles Holt, Pierce Young, Donald Drummond, Edgar Bowers, Wesley Trimpi, Helen Pinkerton, Catherine Davis, and a number of others.

³Allen Tate, "The Fugitive, 1922-1925; A Personal Recollection," op. cit., pp. 77-78.

most consistently definable and most successful stylist and poet. Forced and somewhat inept to begin with, Ransom's "manner" quickly developed qualities of cleverness, intellectualism, courtliness--almost at times primness--and individual musicality. It became more and more clearly ironic until it matured to a highly functional pose--mask in Yeats's sense--which lifted manner to the level of total style. This style and its efficient pose are most plainly visible in poems such as "Vision by Sweetwater," "Piazza Piece," "Husband Betrayed," "Blue Girls," "Janet Waking," "Dead Boy," and a few others. The style which makes and is these poems, appears less fully and sporadically scattered about in the works of the other original fugitives: Walter Clyde Curry, Donald Davidson, James M. Frank, Sidney Miron Hirsch, Stanley Johnson, Merrill Moore, Alec B. Stevenson, Allen Tate, and (a later addition to the group) Robert Penn Warren.

Tate's fugitive poems, no less than those of his friends, occasionally show Ransom's influence. More often than not that influence takes the form of a mock sentimental attitude toward the subject matter of a poem. Along with the attitude goes a half-belittling, half-indulgently nostalgic tone. In device, the attitude involves the use of meiosis, diminishing; for this rhetorical figure, the great and varied extent to which it is used, more than any other specific device, tends to unify the other qualities of Ransom's style. Further, it is a device which is not easily

integrated, and when the younger fugitives resort to it they usually succeed in little more than a crude realization of its demands and a fairly obvious imitation of Ransom. Thus, one of Tate's attempts which clearly shows the influence of Ransom, "Elegy for Eugenesia," is an exercise in a genteel use of meiosis:

Your death, dear Lady, was quite cold
For all the brave tears and ultimate spasm.
So civilized were your thin hands, I marvel
They too, like jellyfishes, came from protoplasm.

O ineffable cheeks of rhododendron bloom,
It cannot be you've withered so mortally!¹

There is no exact parallel for this in Ransom's poetry, for one thing, because Ransom is not so heavy-handed. But the gentle ironic diminishing which this poem blunders at can be found in almost all of Ransom's better poems. For instance, in "Parting, Without Sequel" Ransom's rhymes--like those Tate tries--bear most of the burden of ironic play and set the key for the music and emotional tone of the stanza:

Away went the messenger's bicycle,
His serpent's track went up the hill forever,
And all the time she stood there hot as fever
And cold as any icicle.²

A number of other poems reveal Tate's instruction from Ransom: "William Blake," "Stranger," "Bored to Choresis," "To a Prodigal Old Maid," "Mary McDonald," and "Quality of Mercy." I name only these, though, in ways that one can be

¹Allen Tate, "Elegy for Eugenesia," The Fugitive, I, No. 3 (October, 1922), 92.

²John Crowe Ransom, "Parting, Without Sequel," Two Gentlemen in Bonds (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), p. 16.

less certain about, there are among Tate's discarded poems more that seem indebted to Ransom. In his later days as a fugitive, Tate moves away from Ransom, largely under the pull of Eliot and also under the attractions of metaphysical and symbolist poetry. In time, he achieves a style that has greater intensity, scope, and distinction than that of Ransom whose musically individualistic style, founded on sharply defined but limited conventions and gentlemanly emotional qualities, confines his possibilities. Tate's "Death of Little Boys," stands as a poem which reveals his movement away from Ransom in the direction of a more ambitiously conceived poetry. At the same time, it stands as indication of a final tie with Ransom, for the subject-matter, though directed to ends different from his, is still, in essence, partly Ransom's.

Although the clear definition of Ransom's stylistic limits, in the end, leaves him with a played out area for poetic invention and perception, his definition and consequent consistency serve as an instructive example to his fellow fugitives. What Ransom masters, an urbane posture--largely rhetorical and always ironic--his friends learn to use less effectively for their own purposes. As early as 1923 Ransom's style, the fugitives' central style, has taken on most of its unique qualities. These are apparent in his poem "Spectral Lovers":

They walked, they haunted a thicket of April mist,
 As out of the rich ground strangely come to birth,
 Else two immaculate angels fallen on earth.
 Lovers they knew they were, but why unclasped, unkissed?
 Why should two lovers be frozen asunder in fear?
 And yet they were, they were.

Over the shredding of an April blossom
 Her thrilling fingers touched him, quick with care;
 Of many delicate postures she cast her snare;
 But for all the red heart beating in pale bosom,
 Her face as of cunningly tintured ivory
 Was hard with agony.

Stormed by the little batteries of an April night,
 Passionate being the essences of the field,
 Should the penetrable walls of the crumbling prison yield
 And open her treasure to the first clamorous knight?
 "This is the mad moon, and must I surrender all?
 If he but ask it, I shall."

And gesturing largely to the very moon of Easter,
 Mincing his steps and swishing the jubilant grass,
 And beheading some field-flowers that had come to pass,
 He had reduced his tributaries faster,
 Had not considerations pinched his heart
 Unfitly for his art.

"Am I reeling with the sap of April like a drunkard?
 Blessed is He that taketh this richest of cities.
 But it is so stainless, the sack were a thousand pities;
 This is that marble fortress not to be conquered,
 Lest its white peace in the black flame turn to tinder
 And an unutterable cinder."

They passed me once in April, in the mist.
 No other season is it, when one walks and discovers
 Two clad in the shapes of angels, being spectral lovers,
 Trailing a glory of moon-gold and amethyst,
 Who touch their quick fingers fluttering like a bird
 Whose song shall never be heard.¹

Here one finds most of Ransom's particular qualities:
 winsomeness, sophistication, chivalric pose, delicate conceit,
 indulgent irony, lyrical tone, firm and roughened meter,
 metaphorical irrelevance, and original rhyme. These make up

¹John Crowe Ransom, "Spectral Lovers," The Fugitive,
 11, No. 7 (June-July, 1923), 68.

the texture of devices which Ransom coordinates and perfects--better elsewhere than here--in the creation of his particular idiom. Some of these qualities, of course, Tate and his friends never attempt; or if they do they fall so far short of achieving the quality or qualities they see themselves aiming at that they create something quite different. Tate, for instance, never achieves winsomeness or delicacy of conceit, though I am sure there are times when he attempts it ("Cul-De-Sac," "Elegy for Eugenesis," "To a Prodigal Old Maid"). With the exception of Donald Davidson--much of whose total quality is distinctly of his own making--none of the other fugitives is any more capable than Tate in arriving at the balancing of devices they admired in Ransom's work and which they so often tried to practice. And Davidson himself, one of the fugitive leaders and teachers, in spite of his individuality in a vein similar to Ransom's, at times seems only to imitate him. For example, the following stanza from his "Prie-Dieu" is more Ransom than Davidson:

Of what sins have you made confession here,
 Ardent Cecile? Not passion's intimacy,
 Or tangles of desire that mutineer
 A bold way through your maiden ecstasy.
 Those are not blamed . . . the penance not severe!¹

Yet, beyond this matter of quality and distinctly in line with it, Davidson's lines, like almost all of the fugitives' writings, are composed in the light of a rather formal notion of poetry.

¹Donald Davidson, "Prie-Dieu," The Fugitive, I, No. 4 (December, 1922), 102.

As a group, and later as individuals, the fugitives are clearly "formalists"; that is, they are formalists in the sense that they accept certain traditional burdens as to what a poem should be. And they accept them in a way that is neither legalistic nor unthinkingly lax. To be "formal" for them means accepting the advice of a certain objective style or tone in approaching the act of composition. In Ransom's words:

By formal we are not to mean the meter only; but also, and it is probably more important, the literary type, with its fictitious point of view from which the poet approaches his object, and its prescription of style and tone. And by tradition we should mean simply the source from which the form most easily comes. Tradition is the handing down of a thing by society, and the thing handed down is just a formula, a form.¹

These words were written some time after Ransom's fugitive days, but there is little doubt that, considering his criticism and poetry of those days, the notion of formal poetry he held at that time was not greatly different. There are, of course, potential evils as well as goods in such an approach to poetry. Though it often involves all of the fugitives--and most thoroughly, Tate--in an almost feverish kind of eclecticism, though it often leads them to the advice of any style that is handy--Ransom's, Crane's--or of any style that seems able to attract attention--Eliot's, Pound's, Cummings', Millay's--their notion keeps them returning to the more centrally traditional styles of English poetry, to Edwin Arlington Robinson's or those of the seventeenth

¹John Crowe Ransom, The World's Body (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), p. 29.

century poets. In truth, if there is a style whose "prescriptions" they most normally seek out, it belongs to the seventeenth century, to the metaphysical poets, and particularly to John Donne and Andrew Marvel. Certainly Tate turned to that period early in his career for study and inspiration. Under its direction, though frail, he writes one of his earliest preservable pieces, "Horatian Epode to the Duchess of Malfi" (1922):

"Where ye may all, that are of noble stem,
Approach, and kiss her sacred vesture's hem".

The stage is about to be swept of bodies.
You have no more chance than an infusorian
Lodged in the hollow molar of an eohippus.
Come, now, no prattle of remergence with the $\delta\upsilon\tau\omega\varsigma$ $\delta\upsilon$.

As (the form requires the myth)
A Greek girl stood once in the prytaneum
Of Carneades, hearing mouthings of Probability,
Then mindful of love dashed her brains on a megalith.

So you, O nameless Duchess who die young,
Meet death somewhat lovingly
And I am filled with the pity of beholding skulls.
There was no pride like yours.

Now considerations of the Void coming after,
Not changed by the rare gesture of your death,
Bisect the straight line of pessimism
Into two infinities.

It is moot whether there be divinities
As I finish this play by Webster;
The street-cars are still running however,
And the catharsis fades in the warm water of a yawn.¹

But even though this poem comes to light under the spell of seventeenth century studies, it reflects the craft

¹Allen Tate, "Horatian Epode to the Duchess of Malfi," The Fugitive, I, No. 3 (October, 1922), 76.

of poetry of that time only in a bit of Webster's blank verse and another of ironic attitude. More completely the poem is a demonstration of contemporary irony, or romantic irony. But, then, that too is very much a part of being a fugitive poet.

They are all ironists, and, like Tate at this time, none of them, not even Davidson with his occasional resort to a cosmic bitterness, is able to arrive in his poetry at an ironic insight which amounts to a world view such as Ransom's. Yet, in this, in his early criticism as well as his poetry Ransom instructs them. One wonders if he did not inform most of his fellows that, in his terms, they usually occupied a lesser position in their ironic exploits. This, for one, is what he says to them:

The romantic poet comes to the point of puncturing his own illusions, objecting to his own romantic treatment of Nature, and cancelling the line which his own creative fancy has projected. He has advanced at this point to a third position (in philosophy) which is later and further--though not all would say higher--that (sic) the position he has just vacated. Certainly it is not merely a return to his first position, though it is an affirmation of dualism. For too much history has intervened, he is a dualist with a difference--reluctant, speculative, sophisticated rather than ingenious, and richer by all the pathetic fallacies he has ever entertained. There is a naive, unqualified, strictly-business sort of dualism, and there is a matured and informed dualism which though critical is also romantic and poetical;--and his is not the latter. It may be that most poetry is composed wholly from the point of view of the second, the purely romantic position. Nearly all the poetry of the Nineteenth Century, for example; Byron returned in great bitterness to dualism, but Wordsworth, Shelley, Tennyson, and Browning continued indefinitely (with few lapses) to find sufficiency in their romantic escapes. But the earlier and greater poets (Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton) along with or following their own share of lovely romantic adventures, turned back to the stubborn fact of dualism with a mellow wisdom which we may call irony.

Irony may be regarded as the ultimate mode of the great minds--it presupposes the others. It implies first of all an honorable and strenuous period of romantic creation; it implies then a rejection of romantic forms and formulas; but this rejection is so unwilling, and in its statements there lingers so much of the music and color and romantic mystery which is perhaps the absolute poetry, and this statement is attended by such a disarming rueful comic sense of the poet's own betrayal that the fruit of it is wisdom and not bitterness, poetry and not prose, health and not suicide. Irony is the rarest of the states of mind, because it is the most inclusive; the whole mind has been active in arriving at it, both creation and criticism, both poetry and science. But this brief description is ridiculously inadequate for what is both exquisite and intricate.¹

This is rather long, but it is important, for it comes around to asserting the preeminent position of the ironic vision. Such an assertion is central to fugitive notions about poetry. It ties in nicely with their other beliefs as formalists, traditionalists, their attachments to the irony-conscious metaphysicals. Thus, one can realize rather well how they come about to their conception of poetry as a finely difficult compound of conscious craft, special intelligence, and proper sensibility.

The proper sensibility they tend to take for granted as a direct product of active awareness of the condition and nature of modern man. They view modern man as confounded in a world characterized by disorder and aimlessness which are glossed over by superficial order and inhuman (scientific) direction. Thus, in a way, they promote a view with which T. S. Eliot--out of Babbitt, More, and Hulme--has come to be identified. They, for their own purposes, tend to make an

¹John Crowe Ransom, "Thoughts on Poetic Discontent," The Fugitive, IV, No. 2 (June, 1925), 63-64.

analogical identification between the forces that define their own sensibilities and those that defined the seventeenth century metaphysical sensibility. Thus, when they think "modern sensibility," they generally mean a kind which is "neo-metaphysical."

This, combined with their rejection of a more directly emotional nineteenth century poetic tradition, because it directs them toward a tradition in which the analytical temperament and poetry requiring frequent specialized knowledge holds sway, leads them most naturally to a demand for special "intelligence" in poetry; they set themselves in opposition to any concept of primitivism or naivete as a basic "poetic" component of sound literature. They think of poetry as a thoroughly serious undertaking for mature minds and necessarily dependent upon the poet's ability to demonstrate comprehensive cerebration as well as emotional complexities in a poem. They expect, and demand, a certain amount of irony in a poem--at the very least an irony which shows the poet's awareness that he is a seriously limited human being and not a creature of infinite possibilities. Commenting on a romantically effusive passage in a poem, Robert Penn Warren phrases it this way: "After a few lines like these, one cries out for something tough and bitter. In short, his verse is often cloying, it needs spice; for the most part it lacks what is known in current critical vernacular as cerebration."¹ And Ransom makes the same point more extensively, saying,

¹Robert Penn Warren, Review of Sunrise Trumpets by

. . . I came late into an interest in poetry, after I had been stuffed with the law if not the letter of our modern sciences, and quickly I had the difficulty of finding a poetry which would not deny what we in our generation actually are: men who had aged in these pure intellectual disciplines, and cannot play innocent without feeling very foolish. The expense of poetry is greater than we will pay if it is something to engage in without our faculties . . . The kind of poetry which interests us is not the act of a child, or of that eternal youth which is in some women, but the act of an adult mind; and I will add, the act of a fallen mind, since ours too are fallen. . . . The poetry I am disparaging is heart's-desire poetry. . . . It denies the world by idealizing it: the act of a sick mind. . . . Where is the body and solid substance of the world? It seems to have retired into the fullness of memory, but out of this we construct the fullness of poetry, which is counterpart to the world's fullness. . . . Poetry is the kind of knowledge by which we must know what we have arranged that we shall not know otherwise. . . . For such moderns as we are poetry must be modern. It is not as in a state of innocence, to receive the fragrance of the roses on the world's first morning, that our moderns the scarred veterans may enact their poetry, but in the violence of return and regeneration. They re-enter the world, but it is the world which they have marked with their raids, and there is no other world they can enter.¹

Ideally, for the fugitives, the complexities of which they are aware, can best be transformed into poems by the exercise of traditional controls. They seek order and coherence in explicit form as the natural correlative to their other aims. Thus, they practice regular iambic meter as a norm, use rhyme as consciously as possible, and work within the limits of sonnets, couplet forms, and firm stanzaic structures. Again, their attitudes here unmistakably dominate the poems they write, and they support their attitudes with critical pronouncements.

Joseph Auslander, The Fugitive, IV, No. 1 (March, 1925), 30.

¹John Crowe Ransom, The World's Body (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), pp. viii-xi.

For Ransom, meter constitutes a form of logical order which is objective and absolute, ". . . a powerful intellectual determinant marshalling the words, and, inevitably, the things."¹ Certainly, he and his friends, exploring the functions and possibilities of meter in adhering to a traditional metric are not, like many contemporary poets, "insensitive to metrical niceties as the poets of no earlier period have been; and . . . insensitive to the poetic function of the meters."² He, and they, see meter as having ". . . the value of compelling the poem to offer a meaning-texture with its logical structure, and . . . also the value of being itself a phonetic texture."³ This is a Ransom speaking, older, by almost twenty years, than the fugitive with whom we are concerned. In 1922, however, using less personal jargon, he was saying essentially the same thing:

In America prosody is the issue in dispute. Whether happily or otherwise, we have in this country outstanding persons, periodicals, schools--an impressive lot, whether under the quantitative or the qualitative analysis--who conform no longer to the prosodical tradition; and we have the fact that many genuine talents receive a genuine inspiration and then dissipate the energies that ought to go into creation in a blank agony about form. The Britisher accepts the limitations which prosody puts about his speech, harnesses his inspiration, and achieves now and then (witness Yeats and Bridges and Graves and even Hardy) a marvelous ease of phrase without committing one substantial heresy. In America the inroads of sophistication are early, and it is American gospel to indulge

¹Ibid., p. 114.

²John Crowe Ransom, The New Criticism (New York: New Directions, 1941), p. 254.

³Ibid., p. 260.

it; the result is that poets throw off the confinements of meter before they have established conclusively that these are not habitable. They abhor the thought of changing the considered phrase that perfectly expresses them, in the interests of an irrelevance called meter.

How irrelevant is meter to poetry remains to be seen, . . . it would seem that the determinate mathematical regularities of meter which are imposed upon words have as much to do with the total effect of a poem as, in a sister art, the determinate geometrical regularities of outline which are imposed upon the stones have to do with the total effect of a work of architecture.¹

This is clearly an attitude toward poetry as craft, and embraces traditional techniques as a way of working toward the creation of a sound and efficient poetic.

In principle the fugitives conceive themselves to be, if not thoroughly anti-romantic, at least beyond romanticism. Although their ironic vision does not usually do so, their vision of poetry pierces through the nineteenth century even if it cannot completely escape its language effects. They see in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries an established tradition in poetry which, more fully than any other, serves the needs of their modern sensibilities.

They come to think of themselves as a part in the revival of the metaphysical tradition: difficult because intellectual and not simply emotional. They accept the possibilities and dangers of obscurity:

. . . the Doctors would have it that youth is the only age for poetry. And the poets generally agree: and if they are not young, they cultivate such an ingenuous and callow simplicity that they appear so, and the full-blooded reader puts them down in disgust and picks up the book of prose, which bears no license-tag permitting it to be silly. But generally and now certainly

¹John Crowe Ransom, "Editorial," The Fugitive, 1, No. 3 (October, 1922), 68.

some poets are not so tractable. These are pre-eminently concerned with the problem of stating their own minds, and not the mind of the hypothetical Wonder-Child; and from a trifling generation they will have to bear the charge of being wilful and obscure. So they are; but may it not be a sin on the nobler side?¹

Like many other moderns more experimental than themselves, the fugitives feel only a troubled and affronted duty to an audience which has already been lost. They write as best they can and, admittedly, in the way they want to and for their own ends.

Of course this last could have led to the most private kind of expressionism. It did not, because, for one thing which should not be overlooked, they were "university men" in the simplest sense of the term. They admired learning, intelligence, the traditions of humane letters and values, and they believed that poetry was the repository, protector, and projector of these. Poetry was always, in itself, poem after poem, a kind of special knowledge, inescapably cultural and qualitative, non-scientific. And Allen Tate, the fugitive, became a leader in promoting these notions.

Finally, what did it mean to Tate; this being an active fugitive poet? In theory of poetry it meant what I have just outlined. In the practice of poetry it meant the frequent writing of character-sketch poems and short analytical, dramatic lyrics which affect plot meaning. It meant the use of fairly traditional, orderly meters and

¹John Crowe Ransom, "Mixed Modes," The Fugitive, IV, No. 1 (March, 1925), 29.

rhythms, a preference for rhyme, a concentration on the concrete integrated image, an extension of imagery into some kind of logical total structure, an undeviating attention to ironic effects, and the creation of an implicit point of view, even pose, which encompasses and animates a poetic structure. It meant the exploitation of verbal cleverness in the interests of a highly self-conscious, cerebral poetry; and, above all, it meant "complexity" as the constructive guide for the poet.

This, then, is the immediate context of Tate's early poetry. As a fugitive he came to poetry. As a fugitive he formed himself and was formed to practice a certain kind of poetry. Out of the fugitive scholar came the poet Tate. By the time he published his first book, Mr. Pope and Other Poems, in 1928, he was the poet we know.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY

Thus far, I have discussed Tate's early poetry as if it were sharply divisible from his mature poetry. Actually there is no clear dividing line between the two. Yet, one is faced by a simple recognition that of these two the early poetry is unsuccessful, indecisive, and that the mature poetry has a sense of direction and is, on the whole, successful. This alone provides a sensible basis for division. But more important, as far as possible, I have used Tate's own form bases for value judgments in separating his period of training from his first professionally productive period. Most of what I have dealt with has been removed by him from the body of poetry he wishes to preserve.

His reasons for editing his work as he has seem to center in two fundamental perceptions: that the act of composition must be approached as a problem in total form rather than a problem in language as poetry, and that the poet must work through and dominate the marks of specific influence which tend to make poems into exercises in borrowed sensibility rather than formal constructions of his own.

Tate's earliest efforts reveal too much dependence upon superficial manipulation of language. His talent for

this fosters other superficial habits in feeling and thought. But the variety of his approaches to language for poetry provide him with a circumspect, sensitive grasp of the individual word and of rhetoric. His apprenticeship in this respect is a sound prelude to the heavily-loaded, tense, complex style of the mature poet. For a while, his main writing method consists of exploiting his verbal talent in the interests of a poetic personality. This is, of course, a common way to approach the problems of writing poetry. It is a sign of the poet who approaches the art as poetry in general, literary expression, rather than as poem in particular, formal definition.

He reflects too easily his admiration for other writers, learns first from this one, then from that, shifts from one individual language tectonic to another. He is the young poet faced by the usual number of possible and half-realized alternatives for writing poetry. He can invent another experimental mode, or create a style out of the flux of experiments that surrounds him, or become a member of a school of fairly similar writers, or choose a master and work out a style through that man's vision and achievement, or he can be and try all of these. He can be thoroughly eclectic--without consciously practicing eclecticism--and take from the poetry of the past and present everything that will best serve his changing needs. In this last way he will stand a much better chance for evolving an idiom markedly his own yet close to the heart of the tradition

to which he is born. This is what Tate has done, and done largely because he was a member of a fairly conservative school of poets.

Crane, Robinson, Eliot, and Ransom provide Tate with much of the material for his schooling. As echoes they come and go in the changing texture of his lines which always show an underlying firmness in diction, a firmness that has more affinity with a classical use of language than a modern epigonic use. At the same time there is a pronounced intellectual quality in his poems which, in spite of surface inconsistencies and frequent vagueness of formation, still persists as a level of appeal. From the beginning of his career he demonstrates an assumption that a poem is more than an affective structure--though, more often than not, the way in which he works out a poem reveals his inability to establish an integral relationship between the rational and emotional elements of his structure. Thus, affective devices such as irony are resorted to as crutches for his failure. And, further, he becomes an obscure poet in ways because his poetic powers are not equal to the complexity of matters to which he is drawn. Faced by these complexities, he usually attempts a resolution of his problem for a poem by drawing the reader toward his own personality. Generally this personality is not much of a recommendation for the poetry. As Tate was to say twenty years later:

My conceit must have been intolerable. Had not the editors of The Double Dealer written me a letter saying that they saw in me the White Hope of the South? Add to that the easy lesson in shocking the bourgeoisie that I

had learned from reading French poets, and was relearning from Ezra Pound, and you have before you the figure of a twenty-two year-old prig as disagreeable as you could possibly conjure up, until you see in him several varieties of snobbishness, when he becomes even more disagreeable.¹

But even this changes in time, and by the end of his fugitive days, the personality resorted to is itself more complex, less facile. If in no other way, there is a change in Tate's poetry from its beginnings up to the later nineteen-twenties which is instructive. Most directly that change is from simplicity to complexity, and, in this, to the creation of a problem which even now, in his latest poetry, he still has not mastered: the problem of complexity itself which more than anything else has come to determine the permanent features of his style.

¹Allen Tate, "The Fugitive 1922-1925; a Personal Recollection," p. 81.

PART TWO

THE MATURE POETRY OF ALLEN TATE

CHAPTER I

PROLOGUE

In his mature poetry, Tate has assiduously practiced the "arts" of heightened self-consciousness and complexity. As a result the framing terms in which that poetry can be considered must be fairly flexible and complicated, lest, in the interests of perception and order, one reduce the poetry to something it is not. Further, the number of readily applicable terms for such consideration is itself large and confusing: metaphysical, symbolist, classicist, romantic, satirist, ironist, eclectic, and more. Ideally, one ought to regard Tate's work, or that of any poet, in the light of all its possible designations. Deciding against such an exhaustive ideal, one may touch on a number of these and concentrate on a few. I have already given a certain amount of special attention to Tate as an ironist. In the following pages I will concentrate and direct my notions about Tate's mature poetry by considering it from the view points of three useful--though grammatically disjunctive--terms: metaphysical, symbolist, and sensibility. That my means for concentrating attention do not result in over-simplification or other distortions, remains to be seen.

In the main, Tate's mature poetry, unlike his apprentice work, shows little definable development. His poetry

for a period of about twenty years, up to approximately 1950, can best be examined as a piece in which there are apparent differences, successes and failures in practice, rather than distinct advancing changes. His latest poetry, after 1951, differing clearly from almost everything that precedes it, shows--paradoxically--both an advance and a decline in poetic powers.

Like all poets, Tate does not write a greater, more impressive poem every time he sets himself to the task. Not that Tate is a careless writer whose success depends upon the intensity of the "inspiration" by which he is visited. Actually, he is a more than usually consistent and calculating writer from poem to poem--though within individual poems he may seem to be flagrantly inconsistent at times. In spite of his occasional lapses, he manages to hold to a level in quality of composition which is quite high, higher than that of Frost, or Auden, or W. C. Williams, to mention only a few. His level is justly, if on occasion hesitantly, comparable to those of Stevens, Eliot, Pound, or Winters, our best living poets.

Yet, though this appraisal may be true, Tate is a poet whose work is difficult for many readers to judge with any comfort or final satisfaction. The main reason for this state of affairs is that in poem after poem Tate seems to stand on the threshold of lastingly impressive achievement, but that he never seems able--in spite of his apparent capability--to take the step which would bring him to that

place. He always remains a poet with "problems," problems which cast in doubt even his most highly regarded work. Certainly, all poets have their lesser moments, but Tate's--as I will try to show--are such that one cannot easily think of his poetry freed from the nagging reminders of things that compromise it. As his work stands now, there are, perhaps, but four poems which securely withstand the assaults of those reminders, reservations. The four are "The Cross," "The Mediterranean," "Ignis Fatuus," and "Seasons of the Soul."

This may seem to be an absurdly small list of singular accomplishments for a poet who has been before the public now for over thirty years--especially since that poet has earned for himself a considerable reputation. To be worthy of prolonged study a poet, it seems, should have produced more than four lyrics--three of them quite short--that one can call lastingly good. And what, then, does one do with so widely recognized and often praised a poem as "Ode to the Confederate Dead"? Does it become a poor poem? I do not think so. But I do think that the reservations one holds about it, as well as those one holds about many of his other poems, are important and must be explained, understood, in order to know what Tate's achievement as a poet is.

One can best begin to know what some of Tate's achievements are and what sort of reservations they occasion by seeing him for a moment as a poet who strives for what he calls a "Poetry of the center." As he sees it this is a poetry which exists somewhere between the extremes of the metaphysical

achievement, on the one hand, and the symbolist, on the other.

CHAPTER II

THE METAPHYSICAL AND SYMBOLIST STRATEGIES

It is doubtful if we understand one another very well most of the time when we use the words "metaphysical" and "symbolist." Yet, our usual literary discourse takes place under the assumption that these words have a meaning, or at least an area of meaning which makes ready sense. But when one presses the terms, or follows their highly intricate passage through books such as a Rosamund Tuve's Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery and Elizabeth Sewell's The Structure of Poetry--to mention only two out of the many books one might think of--he is likely to realize that their usable sense is illusory, that varying sense is too readily admitted by the many ways in which these terms can be used. Yet it is apparent that we cannot well do without these two terms in discussing much contemporary poetry, for if anything lies behind this poetry other than "romanticism" it is the criticism on and achievements of the metaphysical and symbolist poetries. At least, there is little doubt that these two terms must be brought into play in any adequate discussion of Allen Tate's poetry.

We cannot escape the initial problem of defining "metaphysical" as easily as Robert Hillyer and say, "Metaphysical is a word with small merit and so many meanings

as to have no meaning at all. It should be dropped from the language--especially in criticism."¹ On the other hand we cannot hold it to be a perfectly satisfactory word. Its changes and the great amount of recent critical expatiation it has received make this apparent enough. Its initial and literal meaning is philosophical and indicates that branch of philosophy which includes ontology and cosmology. More loosely, it indicates that which is abstrusely if not obscurely philosophical. When it becomes a literary term it tends, for some, to retain its loose philosophical meaning, and yet it becomes something quite different. From Dryden² to Samuel Johnson³ it tends to lose the little precise philosophical meaning it had when Drummond of Hawthornden⁴ first used it. And from Johnson in the eighteenth century to T. S. Eliot in the twentieth it has been considerably broadened

¹The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne and the Complete Poetry of William Blake, Introd. by Robert Silliman Hillier (New York: Random House, 1941), p. xxxiv.

²"[Donne] affects the metaphysicals, not only in his satires but in his amorous verses, where Nature only should reign; and perplexes the mind of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy. . ." Essays of John Dryden, ed. W. P. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), II, 19.

³Samuel Johnson, "The Life of Cowley," The Lives of the English Poets, ed. A. Murphy (London: Jones and Co., 1825), pp. 1-21.

⁴" . . . In vain have some men of late, transformers of everything, consulted upon her [poetry's] reformation, and endeavored to abstract her to metaphysical ideas and scholastic quiddities, denuding her of her own habits, and those ornaments with which she hath amused the world some thousand years." Excerpted from Wm. Drummond's letter to Arthur Johnson, Physician to the King [c. 1630?] in David Masson's Drummond of Hawthornden (London: Macmillan and Co., 1873), p. 357.

in significance as a term for a particular poetic genre. Further, it has been completely turned about in value designation. Johnson used the word, metaphysical, to frame a judgment against a kind of poetry which he believed to be pretentiously learned and obscure. John Donne as the leader of the "metaphysicals" draws his greatest censure for creating such absurdly ingenious verse. But in his censure Johnson sets down clearly certain metaphysical characteristics which have since earned the highest praise:

. . . wit, abstracted from its effects upon the hearer, may be more rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of discordia concors; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Of wit, thus defined, they have more than enough. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together, nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased.¹

Eliot has been a leader in praise of this kind of poetry. He and a few others, such as H. J. C. Grierson,² have developed fairly well defined notions of the word,

¹Samuel Johnson, "The Life of Cowley," op. cit., p. 6.

²H. J. C. Grierson, Introduction to Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921). Also see his Notes and Introduction to The Poems of John Donne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912). A few other valuable readings relevant to this question and to the poetry in particular are: G. Williamson, The Donne Tradition (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1930); C. M. Coffin, John Donne and the New Philosophy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937); J. F. Bennett, Four Metaphysical Poets (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934); J. B. Leishman, The Metaphysical Poets (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934); H. C. White, Metaphysical Poets (New York: Macmillan Co., 1936); Ruth Wallerstein, Seventeenth-Century Poetic (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1950).

metaphysical, as a literary term in their criticism. Many other critics--largely following Eliot's lead--have proceeded to overwork the term until it has become, more than anything else, a means for indicating the poetry which, for Moderns, is necessarily "good." Scholars have worked to recapture the word--and the poetry of the seventeenth century metaphysicals¹--from this unhappy fate. Works like those of Rosamund Tuve² and Odette de Mourgues³ again begin to give it a comprehensive respectability.

In the meantime, however, many poets who had previously been recognized as respectable neo-classicists or romantics had shown signs of actually being metaphysical poets of sorts. Did not Keats in his odes or Arnold in "Dover Beach" or "Philomela" reveal their "basically" metaphysical qualities? At least, so goes the renovating argument. Finally the word has been complicated by a widespread assumption that it refers to a sensibility remarkably like the "proper" contemporary creative sensibility.

But, in spite of all this activity--and a comment such as that by Robert Hillyer--the term does have meaning for us, and obviously, that meaning is closely connected with what poet-critics such as Ransom and Tate use it to mean.

¹Merrit Y. Hughes, "Kidnapping Donne," University of California Studies in English and Comparative Literature, IV (1934).

²Rosamund Tuve, Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947).

³Odette de Mourgues, Metaphysical, Baroque, and Precieux Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953).

Their discussions of metaphysical poetry--poetry in the tradition of John Donne for the most part, but occasionally including Milton, Emily Dickinson, or R. P. Blackmur--are dependent on certain other words and phrases. This is a brief listing of some of them: paradox, irony, wonder, miraculism, rhetorical device, supernaturalism, intellection, wit, conceit, analogy, courage of metaphor, complexity, unified consciousness, imaginative unity. And the list is by no means complete. It is, however, already complete enough to include terms--such as "complexity" and "miraculism"--which make the meaning of metaphysical too inclusive for firm use.

At the same time that this is true, one thing should also be apparent. One ought not use the word, metaphysical, simply to mean preoccupation with abstruse subject-matter. There is very little important poetry that is not metaphysical in the philosophical sense. Further, many different kinds of poetry have what Grierson and de Mourgues consider to be metaphysical poetry's most distinctive characteristic: ". . . the peculiar blend of passion and thought."¹ One

¹H. J. C. Grierson, Introduction to Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century, p. xvi. Grierson's brief definition of metaphysical characteristics remains the best statement we have on this poetry: ". . . the more intellectual, less verbal, character of their wit compared with the conceits of the Elizabethans; the finer psychology of which their conceits are often the expression; their learned imagery; the argumentative, subtle evolution of their lyrics; above all the peculiar blend of passion and thought, feeling and ratiocination which is their greatest achievement; . . . their desire to approximate poetic to direct, unconventional, colloquial speech."

should mean more exclusively by the word a kind of style or total creative method, or, as Tate and Ransom would have it, "strategy." One should mean stylistic devices, qualities of language, ways for ordering a poem, and attitudes toward the technical problems of poetry.¹ There is little doubt that this more technical conception is what Tate and Ransom imply when they discuss metaphysical poetry. This is certainly what Ransom intends to convey when he speaks of a "metaphysical strategy." In the following pages I intend to use the word metaphysical in its technical sense. By doing so, I may be able to show most clearly Tate's particular metaphysical stratagems.

Tate also practices a symbolist strategy in his poems. And, again, reader and poet are faced by the problem of meaning in a key word: symbolism.

In open discussion the word symbol has a number of generally compatible meanings, all of which tend to signify "something which stands in meaning for something else." In particular fields of knowledge--science, philosophy, religion, psychology, linguistics, and literature--it receives special and extended treatments. There is little need to go into each of these, and, for present purposes, it is enough to reflect that in all instances symbols are held to be more inclusive than exclusive in meaning. That is, more than most of our substantial terms, a symbol refers to an area of

¹Leonard Unger's short but clear and extremely sensible book, Donne's Poetry and Modern Criticism (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1950), furthers and supports this notion.

meaning not apprehendable by the reason. This is considered by some to be one of its most important virtues and the quality which serves most to distinguish it from signs. Thus, in literature, the chief virtue of the symbol as a "device"¹ in expression is often considered to reside in its indefiniteness, what Ransom would call its "margin of irrelevancy." I think we will see how Tate's incorporation of symbolism shows this to be fundamental in his idea of its uses.

"Symbolism" as a program for literary activity, as a strategy for making poems in particular, is a matter somewhat different from mere use of symbols. Poets have always used symbols of a kind simply because they have had little choice as to whether they would use them or not. Symbols are human knowledge and communication. This is especially true of knowledge and communication of religious, magical, and ritualistic matters. In spite of what may seem to be the contradictory evidence, then, of such uses of symbolism in literature, in spite of a long tradition of allegory and the symbol uses of such men as Boehme, Swedenborg, Spenser, and Bunyan or Blake--not to mention the emblem-minded metaphysicians--it was not until the nineteenth century that a kind of expression developed which tried to make total structures that would communicate only in the mode of the symbol. That

¹Other devices, of course, are hardly considerable if one asserts that all language is "symbolic." But, in the terms of my discussion some other devices would be metaphor, simile, trope, image, rhetoric, etc. Some of these may, themselves, be symbolic but not necessarily.

is, as much as possible, writers tried to operate in that area of word-meaning which is non-rational, indefinable, and "irrelevant." The symbolistic movement in France,¹ with Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, and Valéry as its major figures, produced a body of work which--paradoxically speaking--carried such a notion about language to its most "logical" extreme. The extreme itself turned out to be one of the furthest reaches of the romantic sensibility: the musical privacies of Mallarmé's sonnets or "L'après-midi d'un faune," the glittering chaos of Rimbaud's Une saison en Enfer, or the frosty and exhausting snares of Valéry's M. Teste.

The symbolistic writers are preoccupied with deep and supersensible considerations of the nature of language in poetry. They become "language centered"--as opposed, say, to "meaning centered"--in their poetry. They become absorbed in doing something radical with language (as instrument) which will revive, recreate poetry. For them, as for many others in recent times (Ransom, Tate, Winters), each word is possessed of a double character. They invariably conceive words as consisting of a core of reasonably definable meaning (denotation) surrounded--and, in a sense, opposed by--

¹My discussion on French symbolism and the characteristics of symbolist strategy which I offer, are based on the writings of a few important French poets of the last one hundred years: Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Corbière, Laforgue, and Valéry. I am not concerned with Les Symbolistes, Moreas and his followers. Thus, in order to avoid possible confusions, instead of referring to the poets I write about as symbolistes--which is quite usual in recent American criticism--I refer to them as symbolistic writers.

an aura of unreasonable meaning (connotation). This aural aspect of a word includes both its general connotations in the language and its special associations in the mind of the poet. Thus, guided by their notion of a word's "duplicity," they might work toward exploitation of either of its extremes, its core or aura, in attempting to give it new life. To choose the core only would result in the elimination of all that is recognizably personal. Such a course, if not admittedly impossible for a human being to achieve, is obviously not acceptable. It might be the object of a mechanical mind but not of a creative one. To choose the aura would mean choosing celebration of all that is individual, if not absolutely personal (a condition obtainable only in pure silence, and one which Valéry's M. Teste approaches). They choose the aura. In language strategy and techniques they become symbolists.

Rimbaud, for instance, describes the extremes of verbal alchemy to which he aspired as follows:

J'inventai la couleur des voyelles!--A noir, E blanc, I rouge, O bleu, U vert.--Je réglai la forme et le mouvement de chaque consonne, et, avec des rythmes instinctifs, je me flattai d'inventer un verbe poétique accessible, un jour ou l'autre, à tous les sens. Je réservais la traduction.

Ce fut d'abord une étude. J'écrivais des silences, des nuits, je notais l'inexprimable. Je fixais des vertiges.¹

Rimbaud, working out his own program for the creation of absolute, infinite sense by means of disorder can be seen as

¹Arthur Rimbaud, "Délires, II: Alchimie du verbe," Une saison en Enfer, in Oeuvres Complètes (Lausanne: Henri Faeser, éditeur, 1948), p. 240.

extending the program of meaning-by-confusion which Baudelaire first set down in his poem, "Correspondances." In such a program Rimbaud is also to be seen as pushing language toward that abyss¹ to which Baudelaire had come earlier beyond his forest of symbols, and toward "le hasard" to which Mallarmé came in Igitur and Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard.² Certainly the symbolists' quest for an adequate language becomes their most striking characteristic, becomes central to their entire poetic strategy. Anna Balakian defines this aspect of strategy in her book on Surrealism, a literary movement which, though not equatable with symbolism, is clearly indebted to its achievements. She writes:

. . . there must be destruction of logical language, which proves inadequate to express alienation of sensations, the "élans" of instinct, the "souvenirs du futur," which in short is incapable of conveying the desired mystical disorder. This aspect of Surrealism is the most obvious of course, and the most strikingly unusual; and it has, therefore, often been mistaken for an end in itself, or a pose; it is rather a means of avoiding natural, orderly imagery in poetry by those who are seeking to create a new idiom to express the new poetic

¹In his "Voyage, VIII," Baudelaire writes
Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel,
qu'importe?

Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!
Les Fleurs du Mal (Paris: Calman Lévy, éditeur, 1900), p. 351.

²For Mallarmé it is the plane of Le hasard on which meaning arrives at an infinite condition. In Igitur he writes:
". . . dans un acte ou le hasard est un jeu, c'est toujours le hasard qui accomplit sa propre Idée en s'affirmant ou se niant. Devant son existence la négation et l'affirmation viennent échouer. Il contient l'Absurde--l'implique, mais à l'état latent et l'empêche d'exister: ce qui permet à l'Infini d'être." Igitur (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Française, 1925), p. 60.

mysticism that they have conceived. From Mallarmé to Breton the poet will prefer silence to the risk of misinterpreting his newly found surreality.¹

Yet the theory and expostulation of the symbolistic writers went farther toward significant insignificance than language in poetry itself could go. Baudelaire and Valéry always worked fairly close to a center of reasoned significance in their poems, and none of these writers ever completely gave up language to pure personality and meaningless verbalization, to the extremes of Dadaism and what Tristan Tzara claimed for it in his manifestoes: "Dada travaille avec toutes ses forces à l'instauration de l'idiot partout."² To all of the symbolists appreciable form and the qualities of rhetoric and forensic speech have a value and beauty to which they are also committed. All of them do meet in trying to make a poem arrive at "the condition of music," some--like Mallarmé--thinking of music in Wagnerian terms, some--like Valéry--thinking of it as pure meaning, a kind of mathematical perfection which is absolute in definition. And all arrive at a virtual accord in the principle that a poem has nothing but itself for its object.

In poetic strategy, their decision to exploit the more symbolic aspect, the aura, of words was tied to, or resulted in, attempts to deal with the true character of existence in a fluid time dimension. Two of these poets,

¹Anna Balakian, Literary Origins of Surrealism (New York: King's Crown Press, 1947), p. 18.

²Tristan Tzara, Sept Manifestes Dada (Paris: Jean Budry, 1924), p. 82.

Mallarmé and Rimbaud, seeking to project a sense of psychological time, worked to disestablish the more traditional, fixed time-sense. They both tried to create total structures in poetry whose overwhelming characteristic would be a feeling of temporal simultaneity in spite of the fact that their poems must necessarily consist of word by word, image by image, moment by moment sequences in linear time.

As Elizabeth Sewell points out in The Structure of Poetry the ways in which Mallarmé and Rimbaud sought to achieve this effect were tactically antithetical. Mallarmé's poems aimed at the special time-sense by fitting words together in such a way that their result would be, literally, "nothing." The image of a perfect poem for him would seem to have been a blank space, aesthetically ordered and completely isolated from nothing by naught. Rimbaud on the other hand, aimed at poems whose sense of simultaneousness would be achieved by the quality of being "everything." For him the image of a perfect poem would have been almost more unstatable than that of Mallarmé. It would seem to be that image which somehow could represent the infinite which itself encompasses God in His omni-attributes in the moment of time which is no time.

For human recognition, such quasi-mystical ends would seem to send their disciples along the road of nightmare and nonsense beyond mere hallucination--which they did cultivate--out to a pitiless outpost of absolute inconsequence. Yet, apparently, not so. This is the way Elizabeth Sewell sees it:

Where the process is fully achieved, the world of the Illuminations is the world of Nightmare, a closed system, an inviolable unity which can absorb all disorder. The sense of similarity and succession has been suppressed, but with it has been suppressed its opposite, the sense of incongruity and incoherence. Once the poet has occasioned this state of mind in the reader, the latter is no longer in a position to reject any chance association of ideas as irrelevant and incoherent, and therefore will accept any idea as relevant and join it into the system; so chance has become necessity.¹

Thus, supposedly, Rimbaud's occasional result is not nightmare or nonsense. It only seems that way--the vision and end that Rimbaud himself prefigured when he said:

Le Poète se fait voyant par un long, immense et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens. Toutes les formes d'amour, de souffrance, de folie; il cherche lui-même, il épuise en lui tous les poisons, pour n'en garder que les quintessences. Ineffable torture où il a besoin de toute la foi, de toute la force surhumaine, où il devient entre tous le grand malade, le grand criminel, le grand maudit, --et le suprême Savant! --Car il arrive à l'inconnu! Puisqu'il a cultivé son âme, déjà riche, plus qu'aucun! Il arrive à l'inconnu, et quand, affolé, il finirait par perdre l'intelligence de ses visions, il les a vues!²

Certainly Rimbaud's vision, like most excited adventures of its kind, must end in the paradoxes of hallucination.

Yet, in spite of paradoxes and infinities of hasard, Rimbaud and Mallarmé were unable to, and by no means wanted to, avoid the reason that made their efforts possible. In the end, what they succeeded in making were forms which turn out to be not quite so elusive as the theorizing about them. Their poems are no more possessed of a quality of simultaneous-

¹Elizabeth Sewall, The Structure of Poetry (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1951), p. 133.

²Arthur Rimbaud, "Lettre a Paul Demeny," Oeuvres Complètes (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1946), pp. 254-55.

ness or infiniteness than most great and not-so-great poems. Paradoxically, like most symbolistic poetry, theirs is ambitiously concrete, and the obscurities this concreteness brings them to--through intention and inadequacy--are not radically new to poetry. Their intentions and inadequacies in concretion and in imagery in general are merely those of the "romantic" as opposed to say, the medieval or renaissance poet. Bergson has written much to the point on this matter. As the symbolists and most poets after them, are preoccupied with creating an object with an inner life which can only be known by an empathizing intuition, so is Bergson, in the following passage, occupied with the problem of intuiting the inner life of an object characterized by its quality of duration:

Now the image has at least this advantage, that it keeps us in the concrete. No image can replace the intuition of duration, but many diverse images, borrowed from very different orders of things, may, by convergence of their action, direct consciousness to the precise point where there is an intuition to be seized. By choosing images as dissimilar as possible, we may prevent any one of them from usurping the place of the intuition it is intended to call up, since it would then be driven away at once by its rivals. By providing that, in spite of their difference of aspect, they all require the same kind of attention, and in some sort the same degree of tension, we shall gradually accustom consciousness to a particular and clearly-defined disposition--that which it must adopt in order to appear to itself as it really is, without any veil. But then consciousness must at least consent to make the effort. For it will have been shown nothing: it will simply have been placed in the attitude it must take up in order to make the desired effort, and so come by itself to the intuition.¹

¹Henri Bergson, An Introduction to Metaphysics, trans. T. E. Hulme (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1922), pp. 16-17.

What Bergson says here is, of course, not exactly new, but its emphasis on intuition makes it different from what earlier periods and writers held to be important about image, metaphor, and discordia concors. Certainly, Bergson, like the writers he supports, has offered a philosophical poetic for the poets of "everything" and "nothing." If one comprehends them, the French symbolistic poets demonstrate his intuition of significance.

If Mallarmé and Rimbaud, for instance, do not arrive at their sought-after qualities of "nothing" and "everything" they do succeed in creating a number of poems that trouble "intuition" with a density and opacity of concreteness and "language action" in general. One senses that everything in their poems has significance: word, syllable, letter, accent, sound, line, stanza, spacing, whole, image, syntax, and more--all are presumably meaningful.

This, perhaps one can say, is true of most valuable poetry. But it is true that everything in a poem is presumably meaningful only if the poet creates a system of relationships in his language which informs his readers about limits as well as possibilities of those relationships. As the nature of his artistic conscience permits him, his compromises with language will show that varieties of ordering must somehow be available to "possible readers with possible intelligences": that is, intelligences which are potentially, if not at the moment of initial encounter--actually, similar to that which made the poem. Such an

awareness involves not only hope but reason and judgment as well. The symbolists are acutely aware of this problem in obscurity, yet they cannot really avoid it. Their whole program for poetry commits them to preoccupation with the arcana of personal absolutes, with forming into "aesthetic wholes" the experiences which have become vaguely intelligible to them in what amount to quasi-mystical indulgences in sensation or speculation.

The questions, of course, still remain as to what specific devices, what characteristics, are most distinctive in the metaphysical and symbolist strategies; and, if Tate uses them, what does he conceive to be important in these strategies? I have refrained from giving concise formulation to the strategies until now, when I can present them in concurrence, because the two appear to be consciously interwoven in Tate's mature poetry. Further, it is by seeing relations of some of their more usual characteristics that one may best understand how these essentially antithetical methods may be made to work in one poem at the same time.

I have constructed comparative lists of ten elements which are fairly typical in the metaphysical and symbolist strategies. In this listing my intention is not directly to define genres but to clarify certain elements in the two sources from which the vague contemporary genres spring: for the neo-metaphysicals such as Tate, Ransom, R. P. Warren, and Stanely Kunitz,¹ seventeenth century metaphysical

¹Kunitz's poetry is not very well known, though it

poetry; and for the contemporary symbolists such as Dylan Thomas, Wallace Stevens, Tate, and Eliot, nineteenth century French symbolistic poetry. My lists are by no means absolute or complete, being rather schematic. Emphases, inclusions, and exclusions of these elements necessarily differ from poet to poet and, even within one poet's work, from poem to poem. Some poems which one might call metaphysical or symbolist could fall more without than within the range of these listings. Derived largely from the poetry of Donne and Rimbaud--since they can be seen as influencing Tate directly at times--the elements I single out might be somewhat inadequate or distorting if one forced them too simply upon poems, say, by Herbert or Valéry. However, they do serve to delineate important qualities in poems ranging from John Donne's "Anniversaries" or "A Nocturnal

deserves to be; therefore, I include here one of his most clearly metaphysical poems, "Ambergris":

This body, tapped of every drop of breath,
In vast corruption of its swollen pride,
Is perfected to be the whale of death;
Yet, I believe, the hand that plumbs its side
Will gather dissolution's sweet increase,
Exquisite fern of death--in nature, ambergris.

Meanwhile, thinking of love, I have been dressed
For such destruction. Though it surely break,
Come pluck the deep wild kernel of my breast,
That wafer of devotion, and partake
Of its compacted sweetness, till it bring
The soul to rise upon the fleshly wing.

If gentle hearts are scorned in scorn of it
I shall immerse it in such bitterness,
Bathe every pulse in such an acid wit,
That from my mammoth, cold, and featureless
Event of age, my enemies will flee,

Whereas my friends will stay and pillage me.
S. Kunitz, Intellectual Things (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday,
Doran and Co., 1930), p. 17.

upon St. Lucie's Day" to George Herbert's "Church Monuments" or "To Ye Queene of Bohemia" on the one hand, and on the other, poems ranging from Rimbaud's "Bateau ivre" or "Après le déluge" to Valéry's "La jeune parque" or "Le cimetière marin."

One must, at the same time that he distinguishes between the metaphysical and symbolist methods, still bear in mind certain considerations. For instance, the final distance between a richly ambitious poem by Donne and one by Valéry is not necessarily great. As a result of his own particular uses of symbolist techniques, his perfection of some and exclusion of others, Valéry, in a poem such as "Le cimetière marin," writes a poem which is probably more intellectually demanding and successful than any poem by Donne. One might almost say that Valéry's best poems are symbolist in quality but metaphysical in result, a partial paradox which should become meaningful in the light of my later discussion of some of Tate's poems. Another consideration that should be borne in mind is that Donne or Herbert or Vaughan or Marvell are symbolizing poets, and, as such, are often called symbolists.¹ Their symbolizing, however, is subservient to their larger metaphysical method and differs rather clearly from that of the symbolistic poets, especially Rimbaud and Mallarmé, in being directed toward rational definition rather than toward emotional extension.

¹Most writers on the metaphysicals come around to discussing their symbolism in one way or another. For a sound

Further explanation required by the characteristics which I single out in the next few pages will be found, where pertinent, in later discussions of Tate's poetry.

1) A typical metaphysical poem is about something, has what one can call a paraphrasable subject-matter. For the most part, it deals in a decidedly "intellectual" manner with what is assumed to be expressible. It often requires that the reader have "special," learned, knowledge. Its mysticism and symbolic emblemism are directly in the Christian tradition; that is, they are formal, ritualistic and not simply emotional. It generally constitutes an example of poem as discourse. A symbolist poem is certainly concerned with something, but its aim is to be "only itself," not really "any definite notion at all." Skirting what is commonly conceived to be subject-matter, it is much preoccupied with the absolute and infinite, the inexprimable. It is generally rather non-"intellectual" in that it strives for a totality of self-contained referents, seldom requires "special" learning. Its "romantic" mystical qualities stem from its concentration on emotionally exaggerated states of mind, its striving for supra-real detail, and its frequent resort to the vague and ineffable in human experience and to the calculated use of hallucination. It frequently constitutes an example of poem as dream.

recent study of their symbolism as it relates to poetic technique, cf. Ruth Wallerstein, Seventeenth Century Poetic (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1950).

2) The metaphysical poet's use of words tends to move toward the denotative pole of language-meaning. He derives much of his total effect from verbal concentration, from the vertical relations of meaning between greater and lesser orders of significance, and from complex controlled interrelations between words as rational counters. His uses of word-sound admit to notions of decorum, the "proper" adjustment of sound to sense. The symbolist poet's use of words tends to move toward the connotative pole of language-meaning. He masses word-effects for the purpose of overall attenuation, relating his words in such a way that their preponderance of meaning is emotional. He proliferates word relations along a horizontal plane of meaning through similar, emotionally consecutive orders of significance. He tries to disrupt the logic of language. He pushes word-sound to extremes of musicality, uses sound in and for itself and attaches special meanings, at times, to individual sounds.

3) The metaphysical poem tends in structure toward the condition of dialectic. It often moves and develops in the form of argument and represents in final form a recognizable assertion. It aims at an objective statement which may also have a quality of "psychological realism." The symbolist poem tends toward the condition of music in its structure. It moves and develops most frequently as evocation and incantation. It aims at the development of a subjective content whose most pervasive quality is that of being a "psychologically true" mental event. It imitates the mind as an associative continuation of sensation.

4) In a metaphysical poem, the major orientation of materials is generally logical. The meaning functions of order in language are depended upon to organize and direct other kinds of meaning. Rhetorical devices reflect the poet as an ordering will. Abstract statement is used to guide and summarize the central form, the argument, of a poem which moves sequentially and causally in time. In a symbolist poem the major orientation of materials is essentially non-logical. The meaning functions of order in language are often held to be inhibiting, inadequate to the creation of new insights, and, therefore, are disordered. Rhetoric is used more largely for its evocative than its ordering ability. Abstract statement is used more for expanding and keeping momentary meaning in flux than for defining it. Explicit summary is avoided. Conscious or subconscious association, rather than logical sequence, which implies causal relations, prevails along with calculated derangements of order. The poem is not a linear relation of moments in time but an event characterized by simultaneousness.

5) The metaphysical poem is strongly situational, that is, it depends upon schemes which operate in the manner of plot to externalize subjective dramas of relationships. In handling the relationships it shows a complexity of attitudes, ranges from extreme subtlety to boldness in the taste and decorum of its handling. The symbolist poem is generally non-emphatic in situation, and though it often affects narrative schemes it uses even these to confine itself to

intense but somewhat amorphous internal dramas. Attitudes toward relations in these dramas are complex but less by expanding definition than by confusion. The confusion rises out of an elusive shifting of the relations between, and interpermeation of, perceiver and things perceived in a poem. In keeping with its other antipathies, it often makes a practice of affronting normal, more usual, sense of taste and decorum.

6) The metaphysical poem is developed in the confines of tight, explicit form. Such form is artificial--that is, a matter of willed "artifice"--and is only accidentally "organic." Stanza patterns are often quite intricate,¹ but, once established, they are usually adhered to closely. End-rhyme is always used. General rhythmical variations, and variations from the almost exclusively iambic metrical norm, are less radical than they are often held to be. Metrical departures combined with occasional rough diction and complicated phrasing often result in rugged or awkward effects. Logic in verse technique reflects larger qualities of "formal" order. The symbolist poem is usually written in a clearly defined explicit form, but it may also be written in liberated form. At its extreme of "organic form" it becomes a prose-poem. In stanzaic pattern, it is seldom so ingenious as the patterns frequently found in poems by the metaphysicals. End-rhyme

¹Of the 169 poems in The Temple (1633) by George Herbert, 116 are written in patterns that do not occur again.

or some other artificial sound scheme, is always used. Rhythm and meter are, generally, constructed with much attention to their musical contribution. Verse techniques, or apparent abdication of them, reflect qualities of artistic will which is perhaps more self-consciously intense, even if less orderly, than that of the metaphysicals.

7) Metaphysical poetry does not aim directly at sensory fullness in its figurative devices. Its uses of imagery vary in levels of sense-intensity from the quite immediate to the relatively divorced, abstract. There is little or no clear use of synaesthesia, to pre-nineteenth century poets a figure which indicates confusion more than imagination. Symbolist poetry constitutes a veritable immersion in sensation. Its imagerial level is almost exclusively intense, immediate. It attempts to convert every kind of experience and knowledge into sensory terms; thus, there is a desperate quality about its sensory explorations. Synaesthesia is frequently used; for poets like Rimbaud it signified a unified imagination rather than confused sensations. Extreme sensory emphasis becomes a chief way for creating experience which cannot be translated into any other terms.

8) The metaphysical poem depends heavily on antithesis to preserve a complexity of vision. This is natural to most ramified expression which seeks to define, often by means of exclusion, the experiences selected by the poet. Wittily intellectual paradox is used with great frequency

to indicate humanly discrete and multiple attitudes. The irony used usually depends closely upon paradox and is rich in ethical implications. The symbolist poem also uses antithesis to create an effect of complexity, but its qualities differ from that of the metaphysical poem in being devoted largely to a non-ethical, aesthetic and emotional end. Paradoxical devices of a type similar to synaesthesia are used not so much to indicate a multiplicity as to enforce a sense of identity on what logic would deem to be disparate attitudes or responses. The most typical kind of irony resorted to is essentially "romantic."

9) The metaphysical poem displays metaphor rather than simile, and its metaphors, though disjunctive, radical, show great respect for the logical correlation that can prevail in the imaginative union of widely separated elements of experience. A metaphor is an assertion which the reader may be sure renders reasonable meaning. The symbolist poem also displays metaphor rather than simile to indicate an "imaginative" perception of relations. Its metaphors are equally radical, but, unlike the same type of metaphysical figure, the symbolist metaphor is often distinctly fortuitous--one might say "more emotionally determined." It strives for an imaginative union of elements which will resist any but the most general logical reduction.

10) The characteristic most often referred to in metaphysical poetry is the conceit. As the metaphysicals practiced it, the conceit is a form of analogical development,

an exacting working, of an elected figure. It is a means for converting a metaphor into a complex point of view, a means for making a particular experience expand into its potential universal relevancies. It differs from allegory in that it may be worked intermittently and in that it implies not only the one to one relationship of a vehicle to an abstraction but also the one to many relationships of a vehicle to its variable correspondences. The symbolists practice a method of complex correspondences which is similar in many ways to the metaphysical conceit. In its most ambitious uses it approximates the effects of allegorical structure, but is still very flexible. The elected figure usually moves through emotionally parallel correspondences and is free to change its nature at any moment and become submerged in another figure which it had initially sponsored. It moves on the law of a compounding interest which somehow divorces itself from the principal which makes it possible.

I cannot emphasize too strongly, however, before I go further, that in discussing Allen Tate as a metaphysical and a symbolist poet, a poet of highly complex sensibility, I do not intend that one should think of him too simply as a split poetic personality--metaphysical in one poem and symbolist in another. If he is at all unique as a modern poet, it is in his attempt to unite the strategies and effects of the basically disparate metaphysical and symbolist styles. Where this brings him in the end we will see in a poem such as "The Cross."

There is no doubting that he consciously strives for such a unity. As he states it, even Tate's conception of strategy, closely synonymous with his conception of form as ". . . meaning and nothing but meaning," points to what follows closely after it, his idea of the relation between the two poetries:

Strategy [is] the point on the intensive-extensive scale at which the poet deploys his resources of meaning. The metaphysical poet as a rationalist begins at or near the extensive or denoting end of the line; the romantic or Symbolist poet at the other, intensive end; and each by a straining feat of the imagination tries to push his meaning as far as he can towards the opposite end, so as to occupy the entire scale. I have offered one good (Donne's "Valediction: forbidding mourning") and one bad (Cowley's "Hymn: to light") example of the metaphysical strategy, but only defective examples of the Symbolists, which I cited as fallacies of mass language: Thomson [in "The Vine"] was using language at its mass level, unhappily ignorant of the need to embody his connotations in a rational order of thought. The great Symbolist poets, from Rimbaud to Yeats, have heeded this necessity of reason. It would be a hard task to choose between the two strategies, the Symbolist and the metaphysical; both at their best are great, and both are incomplete.¹

Then, ranging through "touchstone" quotations from Dante to Eliot, he speaks of a "poetry of the center: poetry of tension, in which the 'strategy' is diffused into the unitary effect."²

Now, obviously, what Tate admires most in poetry is writing which lives at the mid-point of such a metaphorical "extensive-intensive scale." And, further, if one moves sensibly within the framework of his argument and implications,

¹Allen Tate, Limits, p. 86.

²Ibid.

one must see such a poetry as the product of a poet's fine adjustment of strategies--metaphysical, Symbolist, and, for that matter, romantic, classical, and neo-classical, imagist, etc. The fine adjustment, the proper wedding, of strategies, then, should ideally result in a "best" deployment of the poet's "resources of meaning." He will, perhaps, succeed in creating a unique, a "right" form; and the form itself will be a special kind of knowledge. I think this can be taken as the heart of Tate's functioning aesthetic for the writing of poems. Of course, this is theory, but Tate is a poet, unlike many, who lives and can prosper as poet by his theories.

CHAPTER III

PROBLEMS IN THE FUSION OF STRATEGIES

Allen Tate's "Death of Little Boys" represents a turning point, a point where his powers and his learning come together with significant results, in his career as a poet. It is a much better poem than most of those I have previously discussed, and it is a poem with certain permanent virtues as well. Not the first nor the best of his early "preservable" poems, it is one which remains important in any meaningful study of Tate's work. Others, for example, "To a Romantic" (1924) and "Mr. Pope" (1925), were written earlier and, though slighter in aim, are, in what they pretend to, more completely achieved. Yet, it is among the first of his poems in which one senses that Tate has specific notions both as to what he is doing and how to do it. It seems to be a hopefully calculated effort, supported by a good deal of specialized consideration of method. In the terms of my argument, it appears to be the first of Tate's poems which reveals him practicing a kind of metaphysical-symbolist strategy. In spite of Yvor Winters's justified condemnation of it for "trickery" and "overwriting,"¹ one still recognizes in it an announcement of Tate's coming into

¹Yvor Winters, In Defense of Reason (New York: The Swallow Press and William Morrow and Co., 1947), pp. 529-33.

his own as a poet. In this poem an individual, though often giddy, play of creative will begins to displace products so liberally invented through inspiration, the accidents of personality and its sudden enthusiasms.

Yet, "Death of Little Boys" is, in the end, a failure. It succumbs to its own calculations and becomes a lesson in strategies. Tate's attempt at a fusion of a metaphysical and a symbolist strategy remains unrealized and his poem becomes obscure both in structure and form. Now, the obscurities are not inherent in the subject matter: the death of a child can be overwhelming, can signify and be the agent of gravely unnatural disorder in the world. The obscurities are a result of a poetic method, of language devices, and of sentimentality. The first problem for us is to see as clearly as possible just what this method and these devices are. We may then see the poem's sentimentality and understand its shortcomings. Because I deal with it at length, I quote here the entire poem:

When little boys grow patient at last, weary,
Surrender their eyes immeasurably to the night,
The event will rage terrific as the sea;
Their bodies fill a crumbling room with light.

Then you will touch at the bedside, torn in two,
Gold curls now deftly intricate with gray
As the windowpane extends a fear to you
From one peeled aster drenched with the wind all day.

And over his chest the covers in the ultimate dream
Will mount to the teeth, ascend the eyes, press back
The locks--while round his sturdy belly gleam
Suspended breaths, white spars above the wreck:

Till all the guests, come in to look turn down
 Their palms, and delirium assails the cliff
 Of Norway where you ponder, and your little town
 Reels like a sailor drunk in a rotten skiff.

The bleak sunshine shrieks its chipped music then
 Out to the milkweed amid the fields of wheat.
 There is a calm for you where men and women
 Unroll the chill precision of moving feet.

In general character the poem is much more symbolist than metaphysical. Its metaphysical characteristics, however, are quite important. First, it is patently about something, has a serious subject-matter: experiencing Death in attending the death of a little boy. Second, it is strongly situational: the drama of a particular death provides the framework for the entire poem. Last, it pretends to a temporal sequence which emphasizes causal connection between moments in the poem from beginning to end, and it is apparently resolved in a final summary statement. For logical analysis, this all seems to be well enough. But logical analysis actually becomes confounded by the way in which non-logical events in the poem fill out the overall appearance of logical structure.

At the same time as the poem is about death, it is more directly concerned with rendering the truth of experiencing death, not so much by dramatizing the death as by dramatizing the state of mind occasioned by it. The greatest emphasis of the poem is subjective, is placed on its psychological realism.

The "real" climax of the poem is at a tangent to its central subject-matter, the particular death. It is arrived

at through a series of increasingly radical figures whose function is that of defining the state of mind which is the point of view. The point of view, the protagonist, is complicated by being both inside the poem as dramatic figure and outside of it as controlling will. The viewer and the viewed are indecisively inter-related. The subject-matter remains essentially fixed, a line of factual coherence in relation to which the poem's figurative action takes place. In a sense, what happens is that through the non-logical action the formally important meaning of the poem becomes displaced. The center does not hold, and the poem is given over to its peripheral effects.

Each successive image is a little farther removed from the objective dramatic situation which rests at the poem's center. Thus, the figures, instead of expanding the area of the center, shift ground and break down the poem's formal coherence. When little boys die ". . . The event will rage terrific as the sea;/ Their bodies fill a crumbling room with light." You will see them then ". . . As the windowpane extends a fear to you." And you will sense his death more deeply ". . . while round his sturdy belly gleam/ Suspended breaths, white spars above the wreck." Then, watching the mourners and being one of them, ". . . delirium assails the cliff/ Of Norway where you ponder, and your little town/ Reels like a sailor drunk in a rotten skiff." And "The bleak sunshine shrieks its chipped music. . . ." This is the real climax of the poem. Self-

concern in the point of view has created a secondary dramatic situation which takes over the poem. Certainly, there is a goodly distance between ". . . little boys grown patient at last," and ". . . a sailor drunk in a rotten skiff."

Now, all of this may be taken as a demonstration of Tate's notion about the nature of a metaphysical "conceit." He has said:

It is an idea not inherent in the subject, but exactly parallel to it, elaborated beyond the usual stretch of metaphor into a supporting structure for a long passage or even an entire poem. It may be torn away from the original meaning, like the Angels in Donne's "Elegie XI," and yet remain the vehicle of "poetic truth"; that is to say, of heightened emotion in the poet's dramatization of his own personality. The conceit in itself is neither true nor false.¹
(The italics are mine.)

One can see how "Death of Little Boys" may be supported by such an argument about the nature and purpose of a conceit. Certainly, in one respect Tate's definition seems more applicable to his own work than to most of Donne's. The notion of poetry as "heightened emotion" and dramatization of the poet's personality lends an intention to, and places an interpretation on, Donne's work which is overly-contemporary and neat. The same notion plus that of the conceit as "supporting structure" (this last fits Donne's uses) does, however, indicate something about Tate's own dramatic intentions. But, still, the dramatic disparities in Tate's "Death of Little Boys," as well as the disjunctive way in which they are created, define Tate's use, not of metaphysical conceit but of a symbolist technique for steering

¹Allen Tate, Limits, p. 331.

language toward its connotational pole of meaning. Tate's figures do not really provide a supporting structure that runs parallel to the subject. The poem fails as conceit at which it seems to aim. Its major strategy is not metaphysical but symbolist.

A few other pronounced symbolist devices in the poem, moving in step with this larger method for ordering meaning, are worth a brief mention. The imagery in the poem is totally heightened, is richly and intensely sensory. The figures already considered demonstrate such heightening, and every other language formation in the poem, as well, is constructed to participate in sensory effects, in "concretion." In a sense the poem is stripped of all but the sparest abstract language, itself semi-concrete in function. The language in the first lines of the poem has such a quality: "When little boys grown patient at last, weary,/ Surrender their eyes immeasurably to the night. . ." But, at least partly as a result of this forcing of language toward complete concretion, the level of language-tension in the poem becomes almost meaningless. The emotion in the poem becomes melodramatic. Further, because of over-concretion, other momentary problems in meaning arise. One may call them problems. To a symbolist they are but further devices for ordering meaning through disorder.

First, the heavy-handed synaesthesia in the last stanza, if meaningful at all, is meaningful only in a vague emotional way: "The bleak sunshine shrieks its chipped

music. . ." Second, in the opening description of the poem we are presented with a puzzling fact. When little boys die ". . . Their bodies fill a crumbling room with light." We derive a kind of reflected meaning from the phrase, "crumbling room"; surrendered bodies crumble. But in what way can we take, or are we, to take, as fact the crumbling room? It seems more understandable that the bodies fill a room with light. If the phrase is intended to signify general decay in the world, it is compromised by lack of support and by its other potential. It is, like the drunken sailor in his skiff, a psychological fact, a reflection of the disturbed point of view. What, at first sight, seems to be sharp concretion turns out to be nothing very certain. Third, and somewhat similar to the question of the crumbling room, is a syntactical problem in the second stanza. The phrase, "torn in two" is in a highly ambiguous position of being able to modify three substantives: "you," "bedside," and "curls." Any one of the three modifications makes quite as much sense as another, and, perhaps, all three are relevant. But, if this last is to be held true, order in language must begin to lose the already frail significance it usually has. It then becomes but an easy step to nonsense, the sort of thing one might get if he held that, in the last stanza, it is the sunshine and not the protagonist that goes "Out to the milkweed amid the fields of wheat." On second thought, however, it seems that we have merely uncovered another ambiguity. The sunshine may very well be going out to the fields. One

cannot surely know what sense is intended by "Then" in the first line and by "there" in the third line of this last stanza. Certainly, the signals given by language in the poem are fragile, and one begins to wonder if it isn't more by confusion than construction that the poet tries to arrive at his meaning. And this brings one directly to the final problem, or device, to be considered in this poem: what I have chosen to call "pseudo-syntax."

I have said the poem has what seems to be a causal sequence of events. At least the language signals causal connections between one moment and another. But the sequence turns out to be less trustworthy than it pretends to be. Now, the when-then-and sequence is sound enough and directs meaning in the first three stanzas of the poem reasonably well. But one cannot solve with logic the directives that claim to order meaning logically in the remainder of the poem; the logical and non-logical elements tend to confound each other and the poem loses real structure. Why, after the guests turn down their palms (?) and delirium sets in, should the raging event of death, the disturbance, the decay, the fear, all be displaced? Is one form of disorder really seen as changing the nature of another which, supposedly, caused it? Surely Tate's "till" at the beginning of the fourth stanza means only "then." Further, are we to read the last, the crucial stanza of the poem held away from meaning by its ambiguities? Is the last stanza merely a pair of contiguous imagic assertions or a pair of developments that grow

out of, and have a stated relation with, what has gone before? One cannot know.

What I wish to maintain here is that the stated logic of sequence in the poem is essentially unreal, if not actually false. Rather than a sequence of reasonably understandable events, each caused by its predecessor, the poem consists of a number of contiguous and individually evocative images, each having its own relation to moments in the frail central event, the death of a child. Further, each of the images is more a willful assertion than a demonstration of meaning through experience. And, when the imaginative insight of a poem depends so heavily on concretion which "asserts" much more than it communicates dramatically, when the logic of sequence in images is such that significance moves away from rather than toward central meaning, the poem surrenders both form (as meaning) and structure (as ordering) in the interest of immediate verbal and emotional effects. It becomes largely a sentimental transcript of what for the imagination is raw experience. In "Death of Little Boys," the poet depends on an assumed center of sentiment in his readers. He uses the reader's extra-poem attitudes toward the death of children with golden locks and sturdy bellies. Now, the density of the poem tends to conceal its construction by sentimentality. Tate's "intensive" method becomes a way of dealing with a subject-matter which is almost unavoidably sentimental. In an effort to avoid this problem, the kind of "mass-language" response it usually involves, he falls into another, that of incoherence, by which I do not simply mean obscurity.

Ransom's poem, "Dead Boy," a treatment of virtually the same material, provides us with an instructive parallel to Tate's poem. I quote only the first and last stanzas as a general reminder since my remarks will be brief:

The little cousin is dead, by foul subtraction,
A green bough from Virginia's aged tree,
And none of the country kin like the transaction,
Nor some of the world of outer dark, like me.

.
He was pale and little, the foolish neighbors say;
The first-fruits, saith the preacher, the Lord hath taken;
But this was the old tree's late branch wrenched away,
Grieving the sapless limbs, the shorn and shaken.¹

Ransom's method for dealing with sentiment in his poem is to use irony. Like Tate's resort to imaginative inventiveness, Ransom's irony dominates the central drama of the death. But, unlike Tate's strategy, Ransom's serves to integrate all of the elements in his structure. Thus, rather than direct flight from sentiment, he acknowledges its presence, skirts it by using its ironic potential to achieve imaginative insight into the emotionally complex situation of which it is usually a part. Tate, expending his energies on the imaginative potentialities of his subject, fails to avoid its inherent problem of sentimentality and adds to it another. He sacrifices coherence to exercise imaginative virtuosity which pretends to an insight it is unable to communicate. In the end, "Death of Little Boys" is a better example of aesthetic notions than of poetry. It is clearly an experiment in creative strategy, a poem approaching the

¹John Crowe Ransom, "Dead Boy," Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), p. 3.

manner of Rimbaud of "Les poètes de sept ans," "Les premières communions," and "Le bateau ivre."

I am, however, aware that to ascribe symbolism to Tate's poetry involves one in a certain amount of exaggeration. He has apparently never attempted to write a thoroughly symbolist poem. "Death of Little Boys" comes close, but manages to stay within the limits of a more traditional convention of English poetry. At least it does appear to be part of a certain convention, if we accept--and I think we can--Tate's way of considering that convention. In "A Note on Elisabethan Satire" he says:

In a . . . poet like Greene the new courtly conventions are too weak to sustain his restless sensibility. Although Greene never mastered a style, his great vitality of image and rhythm is largely due to a naively skeptical grasp of the conventions of Sidney and Spenser. He uses them without ever quite believing them: as in the verse of Raleigh the convention offers just enough resistance to expression to lend to the poetry tension and depth. . . . It is this resistance of the language to full expression, the strain between images and rhythm, opposites "yoked by violence together" in varying degrees of violence, that gives to English lyrical verse its true genius. It is a genius that permitted Milton to bring to the pastoral style a richness and subtlety of effect that Spenser never achieved. It is that quality of style which is superior to age and school. It was perfectly mastered as early as Wyatt. . . . It is in the lyrics, even in the political satires, of Dryden, but it begins to disappear in Pope, to reappear in the nineteenth century perhaps in Landor and Browning alone. It is a quality, not of system or of doctrine, but of immediate intelligence acting directly; a definite but unpremeditated limitation of moral and metaphysical idea to the problem of the work to be done. It is unmoralistic and anti-allegorical. Out of that long and neglected stream of English tradition comes a kind of poetry that we have named in our age symbolism--a curious misnomer borrowed from the French.¹

Again, what Tate is asserting here, and what places

¹Allen Tate, Limits, pp. 338-39.

his own "metaphysical-symbolist" poems within a normal English tradition of verse, is that one may think of the symbolist strategy as typical of a definable "genius," "style," "stream," in the English tradition. What seems best to characterize this poetry--like that which characterizes the symbolist and metaphysical poetries--is a quality of "resistance," of "tension" between its language as instrument and its language as meaning.

Now an affective state of tension or resistance does not seem to prevail when the forces involved are virtually equal to one another. Tension becomes arousing when one force is noticeably greater than another, but not so much greater as to be overwhelming to its opposite. The greatest amount of affective tension seems to prevail when the differential between the forces involved is the slightest that will be apparent. There are, obviously, greater and lesser degrees of tension in poetry, and--at least as Tate "images" it--the emotional quality of the tension is determined by the relationships between a poet's vocabulary and his meanings within the poem.

Examined with reference to this notion, then, "Death of Little Boys" becomes a problem in tension: how to create emotional imbalance, a condition of irresolution between total and particular meanings, and between these and the language which creates them in the poem? I have already analyzed Tate's solution for such a problem in other terms. In brief, the disparities in the poem are such that the

resistance of meaning to the force of language is slight. Meaning is overwhelmed by language display. Thus the poem demonstrates a condition of relatively slight poetic tension.

There are other poems, however, in which the forming of tension by means of irresolution is more successful. One such poem, more obscure than "Death of Little Boys," more metaphysical in its strategy--though somehow equally symbolist--is "Shadow and Shade."

The resistance of vocabulary to meaning in this poem is greater than that prevailing in "Death of Little Boys," but at the same time the differential between total meaning and its vehicle is smaller. The final quality of tension in the poem is therefore greater. How is this brought about? Again, by a fusion of the two strategies Tate has called to our attention. This time the fusion brings him closer to his "poetry of the center," for the strategies are more equally adjusted.

The overall quality of the poem is strongly metaphysical. Part of this is due to what the poem "seems" to be about: sexual love, its companionable virtue, and the paradox of its infusion with original sin. This touches on the great subject-matter of the English metaphysical poets, the complex inter-relationships of profane and divine love, of the secular and theological visions of the human condition with love as its abiding center. Of course, such subject-matter is to be found not only in the metaphysicals. It is everywhere in Baudelaire in various guises, and it works

deeply in Rimbaud--not to mention other symbolistic poets or writers ranging from Plato to Eliot and beyond. The metaphysicals, however, especially Donne, have a peculiar dialectical manner which they bring to bear in their treatments of this "difficult" relationship.

The relationship is usually revealed in an internal drama closely resembling the virtual action of argument. The quality of language is often legalistic or has about it an air of rational precision which may be real or fictitious depending on larger purposes in the poem. A similar dialectical manner and quality of language which supports it are, along with a particular subject-matter, the important metaphysical characteristics of Tate's "Shadow and Shade." Notice the "sense" of logical definition and explanatory argument which directs meaning in the following stanzas:

The torrent of the reaching shade
Broke shadow into all its parts,
What then had been of shadow made
Found exigence in fits and starts

Where nothing properly had name
Save that still element the air,
Burnt sea of universal frame
In which impounded now we were:

"Definition" and "argument", then, make possible on one level the kind of tension, the vocabulary-meaning relationship, which so largely defines a metaphysical strategy such as one finds operating in John Donne's Songs and Sonnets.

But the strategy of the poem can with equal justification, be described as symbolist. The informing structure of the poem, rather than the logical, narrative organization

it hints at, is largely non-logical. It appears for a time to have a real narrative structure of events. But actually, because the principal terms (shadow and shade) in the progress keep shifting the required order of attention to what is going on, the poem ends up by playing on the effect of a causal order it does not really have. In this quality, however, it is opposite to "Death of Little Boys," for, whereas that poem could be known in its particulars but only vaguely in total, this poem can be known in total but only vaguely in its particulars. The moment after moment meaning of "shadow" and of "shade" is indeterminate. But the total meaning of the poem which depends upon the collusion of potential meanings of "shadow" and "shade" in their repeated uses turns out to be fairly knowable.

The final statement is an embracing summary of all that transpires in the poem:

Companion of this lust, we fall,
I said, lest we should die alone.

Accepting this statement as fact, we can see that the preceding stanzas have allegorical, allusive relations to meanings outside the frame of the poem in language situations essentially similar to it: the garden of Eden myth, the archetypal responses to degrees of darkness as indication of varying degrees of evil:

The shadow streamed into the wall--
The wall, break-shadow in the blast;
We lingered wordless while a tall
Shade enclouded the shadow's cast.

.

I took her hand, I shut her eyes
 And all her shadow cleft with shade,
 Shadow was crushed beyond disguise
 But, being fear, was unafraid.

Thus the working meaning of words such as "shade" becomes very largely connotational, moving within a flux of familiar meanings which exist outside the poem in similar contexts of theological-moral considerations. Meaning is at all times held relevant to an ordering center. The poem becomes a demonstration of form as meaning.

But it has this successful formal property almost in spite of itself. It would not have this property outside of a Christian tradition which has insisted that we remember the fine and tortuous distinctions which make lust of sex and thus make "the fall" of man inescapable. The persistent driving of language, presented as imagery, beyond imagic realization into clear abstract meaning would be confounding if it were not for the poem's larger cultural environment. We could not enter the dramatization of lust as a condition of being without it. The securing of identity through its disintegration in sin, the winning by losing, the paradox and antithesis would be meaningless. We know Tate's poem as an interpretation of the terror which is implicit in an imaginative insight into the nature of original sin. By anchoring the symbolist device of immediate unintelligibility in a metaphysical device of inscribed area of discourse, Tate arrives at a successful strategy for his poem.

"Shadow and Shade," then, turns out to be a poem demonstrative of intense creative will. That is, it shows us

a poet who ". . . has the courage of his metaphors." The mature Tate believes in working on this principle. And the principle, as Tate states it, is directly related to other considerations. Taken together, these help to clarify further what I have already said. He says:

. . . the sea boils and pigs have wings because in poetry all things are possible. . . if you are man enough. They are possible because in poetry the disparate elements are not combined in logic, which can join things only under certain categories and under the law of contradiction; they are combined in poetry rather as experience, and experience has decided to ignore logic, except perhaps as another field of experience. Experience means conflict, our natures being what they are, and conflict means drama. Dramatic experience is not logical; it may be subdued to the kind of coherence that we indicate when we speak, in criticism, of form. Indeed, as experience, this conflict is always a logical contradiction, or philosophically an antinomy. Serious poetry deals with the fundamental conflicts that cannot be logically resolved; we can state the conflicts rationally, but reason does not relieve us of them. Their only final coherence is the formal re-creation of art, which "freezes" the experience as permanently as a logical formula, but without, like the formula, leaving all but the logic out.¹

In terms of the strategies being considered, this passage would seem to support as most proper the metaphysical technique for making a poem strongly situational. There is hardly a poem in which Tate does not use the technique. But, at the same time, his attitude toward drama as non-logical, experiential, and toward poetry as dealing ". . . with the fundamental conflicts that cannot be logically resolved," leads directly to the inclusion of symbolist devices for presenting the non-logical. In principle it leads to confusion, to the violation of casual sequence which is the

¹Allen Tate, Limits, pp. 251-52.

informing quality of dramatic presentation as we generally understand it. But the passage may still be taken as a statement about the area in which the metaphysical and the symbolist strategies come together: the conception of poetry as an "immediate" dramatization of a unique experience.

By reflection one can see that it is principally in this area of drama that the strategies came together in the poems, "Death of Little Boys" and "Shadow and Shade." It is in the area of this twilight zone of technique that Tate creates a great number of his intense lyrics. From here he can move freely to the extremes of the two strategies in effects and still maintain some degree of central order in his poems. "Shadow and Shade" is one such poem. It moves toward the symbolist pole of irresolute meaning yet maintains central order by means of an interior drama.

"Mother and Son" pursues a course similar to these two, but is less obscure in the way it shifts attention and emphasis from exterior to an indefinite interior drama. The opening conflict in the poem is between the bedridden son who "Hastens the dark with inattentive eyes, . . . craves the impalpable night." and the anxious mother who is "Transfigured by her own possessing light:" and wants her son to live. More fully, she is the total mother; the life she gives and the death she makes possible because of the life she gives are one: "Her hand of death laid on the living bed;/ So lives the fierce compositor of blood." But we are led to hold a complex and morally determined attitude toward

the conflict. We are both inside and outside of the son's mind, and never in the mother's; from both points of view we see her as evil, a "falcon . . . harsh command . . . the dry fury of a woman's mind." The son, possessed by a desire for death and a horrid fear of it, hovers in a nightmare of hate for his ambivalent mother:

Loosed betwixt eye and lid, the swimming beams
Of memory, blind school of cuttlefish,
Rise to the air, plunge to the cold streams--
Rising and plunging the half-forgotten wish
To tear his heart out in a slow disgrace
And freeze the hue of terror in her face.

Then, after an apostrophe which is an evocative means for beginning the total drama anew from a quieter point of view, the two dramas become one. The objective scene becomes identical with the internal scene and finally only the one disaster of mortality prevails. Death, and life, become symbols of natural disorder:

The dreary flies, lazy and casual,
Stick to the ceiling, buzz along the wall.
O heart, the spider shuffles from the mould
Weaving, between the pinks and grapes, his pall.
The bright wallpaper, imperishably old,
Uncurls and flutters, it will never fall.

The poem pretends to move from virtual drama to resolution in image.

In some of Tate's poems, rather than such a semblance of development from objective drama toward symbolic image, the drama itself may be totally symbolic. "The Wolves" is a poem in this manner. Here, as in other poems--for instance "The Cross"--the drama is an obvious metaphor, the statement of an artificial external situation which has only internal

significance. Man is forever the prey of mortality, lives in a state of siege, and therefore he ". . . can never be alone." The drama, so couched as to assert only its ulterior significances, tends toward the condition of allegory. It fails to have the force and tension which are created by the movement (virtual action) of cognition from one plane of meaning to another. It stops short of evocative symbol in a static equation of signs:

There are wolves in the next room waiting
With heads bent low, thrust out, breathing
At nothing in the dark;

This is made quite explicit:

I have brooded on angels and archfiends
But no man has ever sat where the next room's
Crowded with wolves
.
The day will not follow night, and the heart
Of man has a little dignity, but less patience
Than a wolf's, and a duller sense that cannot
Smell its own mortality.

And, in the end, the poem returns to an image which restates the situation:

Now remember courage, go to the door,
Open it and see whether coiled on the bed
Or cringing by the wall, a savage beast
Maybe with golden hair, with deep eyes
Like a bearded spider on a sunlit floor
Will snarl--

In strategy the achievement is quite clear, but strategy alone is not enough to make successful poems. The clarity here is attended by a lack of tension in language and an over-simplification of subject-matter. This can be best understood as a failing if one looks at a few other poems in which Tate deals with essentially the same subject-matter

with variations on the same strategy: "The Cross," "Ignis Fatuus," and "Ode to Fear."

I take "The Cross" first, one of Tate's finest poems, because, like "The Wolves," it is constructed upon a metaphorical drama which holds together everything else that transpires in the poem. In this instance, however, the drama is neither heavily explicit nor simple in its significance. This is partly because--as in "Shadow and Shade"--the central drama draws upon common connotations from the literary-cultural tradition which it enters: the descent into hell. Further, and partly because of its traditional parallels, it is openly evocative and dramatic. It has only a limited allegorical significance. It avoids internal commentary of an urbane, ironic sort, and has metaphorical integrity. Finally it has a distinction and richness of language relations which the other poem renounces in order to create a conversational tone.

In "The Wolves" one is informed by the manner of presentation that the images are statements of a general, ulterior feeling which is paraphrasable. Other imagic vehicles might serve it quite as well. In "The Cross" the figurative expression is taken as direct statement of facts; the terms are inherently adjusted to presenting a highly individualized, tortured, spiritual condition:

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 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:

One does not transliterate the assertions, but accepts them as unified rational-emotional events which have no simple equivalents. One, thus, tends to accept as proper the symbolist device of making images the main vehicle of meaning. But he does so largely because of the way in which images and abstract statements are fused, and because those statements not only justify the images but also give them wider significance. In "The Wolves," the imagery is static and the abstract statements merely toy with their significance. Here, both image with its Christian, literary counterparts and abstraction with its definite Christian parallels have equal importance and their inter-penetrations are in balance. Notice how inseparably related they are throughout the remainder of the poem:

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 the 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.

In a sense the poem is as metaphysical as symbolist in its devices. It is a structure of images, abstract statements, drama, and allusions, each and all of which are fairly paraphrasable assertions. In total form they constitute a definition of one state of spiritual despair--the torment of

the former Christian who, no longer able to comprehend and believe in it, still lives within the confines of the central Christian mystery of the crucifixion and resurrection.

The "place" in the first line of the poem is, of course, Calvary which is synonymous with the central Christian miracle. It is the place in which he has "foundered," like the friends he had written of earlier in "Causerie" (1926-27):

For miracles are faint
And resurrection is our weakest clause of religion,
I have known men in my youth who foundered on
This point of doctrine: John Ransom, boasting hardy
Entelechies yet botched in the head, lacking grace;
Warren thirsty in Kentucky, his hair in the rain, asleep;
None so unbaptized as Edmund Wilson the unwearied,
That sly parody of the devil. They lacked doctrine;

The scene in lines three to seven is that of the crucifixion:

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all
the land unto the ninth hour.

.

And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in
twain, from the top to the bottom; and the earth did
quake, and the rocks rent;

And the graves were opened;

Matt., 27: 45-52.

Tate's scene closes with a play on words, "The kingly sun. . ." which is both Christ and the sun of that terrible time. This gives way to an argument which defines the plight of those who have lost faith in ". . . our weakest clause of religion." The argument itself, confused in syntax and complicated by imagery, begins on a somewhat "scholastic" turn of phrase. "For love so hates mortality" is obviously a parallelism to "For God so loved the world. . ." This, in its extension, becomes a disturbed comment on the Christian paradox of living

by dying. And all of the argument is double in that it worries the paradoxes of this miraculous event and also states the jeopardy ("A stag charged both a heel and head") of those who cannot "see" and who are, thus, condemned to a condition of "Being from all salvation weaned--." In the light of "the blinding rood" which makes earthly life itself meaningless (" . . . the world-destroying pit"), those who would have immortality, lacking belief, can apparently have it only as incorporate evils, "Instructed by the fiery dead."

Perhaps this is all too brief a statement of what the poem may mean, but what I intend is more a guide than a complete redaction. As I see it, Tate does achieve here an example of his "poetry of the center," and in so doing writes one of the very best short lyrics of our time. This is accomplished largely by bearing symbolist techniques for non-logical expressiveness toward the more metaphysical pole of meaning. The poem has a clearly metaphysical cast in its qualities of argument and definition. Yet, like W. B. Yeats's "Second Coming," it moves through a symbol-image assertion of human terror to a resolution only in another image of greater terror. It becomes, then, an example of successful union between the metaphysical and symbolist strategies.

Another poem similar to the two I have just discussed is "Ignis Fatuus" (1927). In achievement, it too ranks among the finest of Tate's poems. However, unlike "The Cross," it is not so thoroughly a symbolic definition, and unlike "The Wolves," it is not a fairly simple, semi-allegorical statement.

It is rather a total symbolic drama of pursuit. Pursuit of what? At first it seems to be a pursuit of all those most serious things that men have pursued in order to "see," things that may be delusions but which--men being men--probably are not. But, in the end, the "foolish fire" here pursued is belief and faith in the Christian mystery which beckons but cannot be caught:

High in what hills, by what illuminations
Are you intelligible? Your fierce latinity
Beyond the nubian bulwark of the sea
Sustains the immaculate sight.

The chase is dramatized on two levels, that of a physical pursuit of the flitting phosphorescent night fire, and that of a spiritual-mental pursuit, out of fear, of knowledge of death. As exterior dramatic tension, there is a tight and necessary relation between stated action and its meanings. The richness of the imagery and the movement of abstract statements toward a figurative level of meaning hold in check an under-riding allegorical tendency in the structural metaphor. The dramatic effects resist the simple allegory, and thus, like the vocabulary-meaning equation, for tension, this resistance becomes a line of formal tension in the poem:

In the twilight of my audacity
I saw you flee the world, the burnt highways
Of summer gave up their light: I
Followed you with the uncommon span
Of fear-supported and disbursed eyes.
Towards the dark that harries the tracks
Of dawn I pursued you only. I fell
Companionless. The seething stacks
Of cornstalks, the rat-pillaged meadow
Censured the lunar interior of the night.

Then, in despair, the first questioning; and the poem leaves direct metaphor to move to its solution in argument. The true order of a somewhat irresolute progress in the first half of the poem is defined by a metaphysical development in the last half. Death is at the heart of the issue, and the church creed that one utters out of memory is but memory:

To the green tissue of the subterranean
Worm I have come back, two-handed from
The chase, and empty. I have pondered it
Carefully, and asked: Where is the light
When the pigeon moults his ease
Or exile utters the creed of memory?

Again, a real fusion of strategies, has made possible a broad but sensitively closed system of meanings. "Ignus Fatuus," like "The Cross," comes to own the unitary effect that marks, for Tate, a poetry of the center.

The last poem of this group, "Ode to Fear" (1932), is a rather different matter. I have chosen it because it moves away from the unitary center toward a symbolist extreme, and because, in subject-matter, it impinges on the three poems I have just treated and, like them, reflects much of Tate's sensibility. This last I will deal with in a later part of this study. Let us begin directly with the text:

Let the day glare: O memory, your tread
Beats to the pulse of suffocating night--
Night peering from his dark but fire-lit head
Burns on the day his tense and secret light.

It is strange that a poem which seems to be related to the eighteenth century tradition of allegorical odes ("Ode to Fear," Variation on a Theme by Collins) should begin with an apostrophe not to Fear but to Memory. But this is at

the heart of Tate's "variation," for without memory there is no fear, without tradition--racial memory--there is neither fear nor lasting life:

You are our surety to immortal life,
 God's hatred of the universal stain--
 The heritage, O Fear, of ancient strife
 Compounded with the tissue of the vein.

Fear and memory, then, are essentially indivisible. The strategy of subject-matter becomes that of presenting the dramatic unity of the two elements. This is done, as in "Ignis Fatuus," by submerging the allegorical figure in its more important dramatic effects. Collins develops his poem by defining Fear's attributes and its semi-dramatic person:

I know thy hurried step, thy haggard Eye!
 Like Thee I start, like Thee disorder'd fly,
 For lo what Monsters in thy Train appear!
 Danger whose Limbs of Giant Mold
 What mortal eye can fix'd behold?
 Who stalks his Round, an hideous Form,
 Howling amidst the Midnight Storm,
 Or throws him on the ridgy Steep
 Of some loose hanging Rock to sleep:
 And with him thousand Phantoms join'd,
 Who prompt with Deeds accurs'd the Mind:
 And those, the Fiends, who near allied,
 O'er Nature's Wounds, and Wrecks preside;
 Whilst Vengeance, in the lurid Air,
 Lifts her red Arm, exposed and bare:
 On whom that ravening Brood of Fate,
 Who lap the Blood of Sorrow, wait;
 Who, Fear, this ghastly Train can see,
 And look not madly wild, like Thee?¹

Tate works more indirectly than Collins to achieve a more direct effect. He inverts the methods of personification. Instead of using effects and acts to define the

¹William Collins, "Ode to Fear," The Poems of William Collins, ed. Edmund Blunden (London: Frederick Etchells and Hugh Macdonald, 1929), pp. 75-76.

figure, he imports the figure as a symbolic attendant into a series of metaphorically stated human conditions:

Night peering from his dark but fire-lit head
Burns on the day his tense and secret light.

In each instance, the drama, rather than its allegorical potential is emphasized:

Now they dare not to gloss your savage dream,
O beast of the heart, those saints who cursed your
name;
You are the current of the frozen stream,
Shadow invisible, ambushed and vigilant flame.

Again, as in "The Cross" and "Ignis Fatuus," the dramatic method, the working toward psychological realism, brings about a level of formal tension: allegory and drama struggle for momentary supremacy. Dramatic effect always prevails. Allegory's tendency toward abstraction is inverted and supports dramatic effects. This becomes clear if one compares Tate's with Collins' treatment of the Oedipus image. Collins works on an abstract level:

Wrapt in thy cloudy Veil th' Incestuous Queen
Sighed the sad Call her Son and Husband hear'd,
When once alone it broke the silent Scene,
And He the Wretch of Thebes no more appear'd.

O Fear, I know Thee by my throbbing Heart,
Thy with'ring Pow'r inspir'd each mournful Line,
Tho' gentle Pity claim her mingled Part,
Yet all the Thunders of the Scene are thine!

Tate works for concrete, dramatic effects:

My eldest companion present in solitude,
Watch-dog of Thebes when the blind hero strove:
You, omniscient, at the cross-roads stood
When Laius, the slain dotard, drenched the grove.

Now to the eye of prophecy immune,
Fading and harried, you stalk us in the street
From the recesses of the August noon,
Alert world over, crouched on the air's feet.

In device this is all essentially symbolist. The margin of indefinition is pressed outward by working within a series of metaphors, evocations of a state of mind which is intense but vague. As in "The Wolves," "The Cross," "Ignis Fatuus," and a number of other poems, for instance "The Subway," Tate communicates a sense of jeopardy and unreasonable terror by symbolic dramas. These work together to compose a total drama which, like a flexible net, restrains meaning at the same time that it allows the meaning to have access to larger significance. In his "Ode to Fear," larger significance is written into the poem. Without the specific relating of fear to racial memory, man's sense of sin, the poem would stand, strategically, at an extreme symbolist pole. Like Eliot's "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," it would be little more than evocation. But by "making" the relationship, Tate brings his poem toward the center of his extensive-intensive scale of meaning. The final image of the poem becomes an inevitable conclusion: acute sensory experience of the natural world, immediate life itself, is fear:

And I when all is said have seen your form
 Most agile and most treacherous to the world
 When, on a child's long day, a dry storm
 Burst on the cedars, lit by the sun and hurled!

Now, all of the poems I have thus far examined stand facing toward the symbolist pole of meaning. When successful, they are brought to a more centered position, arrive at a more unitary effect, largely by way of symbolist techniques. There are, however, poems in which Tate appears to be working in relation to the opposite, the metaphysical, pole of meaning.

The three most noteworthy examples of this are "The Paradigm" (1931), "The Last Days of Alice" (1931), and "The Mediterranean" (1933).

The first of these has all the appearance of a poem-length figure which is coaxed and turned by logical application to render complex dramatic meaning. The title itself, "The Paradigm," would promise us such a play, a showing-forth of pattern which comprises a figure. The overall figure turns out to be a particular dramatic, silent meeting of two whose love has turned to hate. It is also intended to be a model or pattern of such a universal human event:

For when they meet, the tensile air
Like fine steel strains under the weight
Of messages that both hearts bear--
Pure passion once, now purest hate;

From this point on, however, in spite of the strong implicit sense of logical organization in imagery, the poem as formed meaning grows increasingly difficult to realize.

Let me try to organize the poem into statement. The air "Like fine steel" becomes air "like a cold hand" and seals the former lovers "in their icy land" where their hearts turn into stone, and "pass/ Once more their impenetrable world." In this manner "each heart's looking-glass" fades out, turns to stone, and with it the image, a "surface hurled/ By all the air," fades out too. Now, glass is not air. The air is harder, like steel or a hand. Thus, strangely now, not the image, the love, but "their fleeting enmity" (heart of stone?) is crashed "Like a hard mirror crashed by what/ The quality of air must be." This happens

because "in the air all lovers meet/ After they've hated out their love." One can say, then, that love is only the "echo of retreat/ Caught . . ./ And lost . . ." by a sunbeam which stretches above their "exile from the earth." The lovers have an equality and a common holding in their birth; "Each is the other's crime." The pattern or model of this crime is hate.

Superficially the poem makes sense. But suddenly the sense it makes is allusive rather than direct. We have another interpretation of original sin. The Garden of Eden myth is the paradigm. If one makes a dramatic translation of the last six lines and moves thence backwards through the poem to the line "Pure passion once, now purest hate," the poem expands into symbolic allusion:

Love's but the echo of retreat
Caught by the sunbeam stretched above

Their frozen exile from the earth
And lost. Each is the other's crime.
This is their equity in birth--
Hate is its ignorant paradigm.

In terms of comprehension, in terms of the experience of coming to know the poem, there takes place a sudden rush from commanded logic of the particular drama through possible universal application toward a symbolist pole of allusive, hovering meaning. Phrase by phrase one can almost, but never really, translate the apparent dramatic meaning into an ulterior, allegorical reading of the condition of Adam and Eve at the moment of vituperation after the fall. One senses that he is in a Miltonic country, but cannot be sure. Then,

read again the particular drama. It really isn't there in spite of all the seeming controlled play on metaphor. What remains? A tangled interplay of two figurative structures, neither of which is realized. Instead of a fusion of the two strategies one is brought face to face with the symbolist strategy as evasion. The poem is inviting because of the promise it holds out to the reader by virtue of its language qualities, but, in the end, it is unsuccessful, a collection of evocative hints with which a reader might write a poem. Tate has written down the notes and notions necessary for that poem, but the poem itself is largely missing.

In speaking of "The Paradigm," I began by saying that Tate, working for a poetry of the center, did not always depend more upon a symbolist strategy than a metaphysical. It seems apparent that "The Paradigm" has all the superficial language tension which one can associate naturally with a metaphysical poetry. That it swings away from such tension beyond a strategic centering into symbolist obscurity does not radically violate what Tate asserts. I repeat: "The metaphysical poet as a rationalist begins at or near the extensive or denoting end of the line; the romantic or Symbolist poet at the other, intensive end; and each by a straining feat of the imagination tries to push his meanings as far as he can towards the opposite end, so as to occupy the entire scale." Certainly this is a figurative expression of his theory, and, looked at in one way, a poem such as "The Paradigm" meets the theory more fully and successfully

than a poem such as "The Cross." Yet, it is by no means as good a poem. "The Cross" realizes "the entire scale" by drawing its extensive-intensive potentials toward a balanced center where strategy becomes, as Tate also says, ". . . diffused into the unitary effect." Yet the strategy apparent in a poem such as "The Paradigm" can be made to serve more successfully than it does.

The strategy is, however--as "The Paradigm" shows--one which has inherent dangers: the struggle between the created resistance and the attempted fusion of logical and allusive elements threatens constantly to break a poem down to the level of trivial word-mongering. This is exactly what happens in quite a few of Tate's poems. "Eclogue of the Liberal and the Poet" (1939), "The Trout Map" (1939), "False Nightmare" (1940), "Ode to our Young Pro-Consuls of the Air" (1942), "Jubilo" (1944), and "Two Conceits for the Eye to Sing" (1950), are such poems. The last of these strikes an astonishing low. This is the second conceit:

Big, inside the tub,
 Rubbed hey dub-a-dub;
 Little did with rub
 Dub the spinning tub,
 Big-little, Great-
 Small; Big then ate
 Little and his plate,
 Small a little Great;
 Little big as Big
 Apple round the pig;
 Apple little and trig
 Inside little Big;
 All inside the sky
 'S voluminous eye
 Whose singular supry
 Laughed a belly-sky.

So the dubbed conceit
 Played nursery of cheat
 To clear the eye of sleet;
 Wiped Eye dripping conceit
 And tipped by tubby fear
 Slipped into the ear
 All the I's old gear,
 Semi-circled a tear
 With blind sound. . . .

but Mary

Mary quite contrary
 Light as a green fairy,
 Dances, dances. Mary.¹

Now, admittedly, poets ought to be permitted their fun, and one may simply give up such a poem to satiric-humorous attention. Tate is playing here as he is, perhaps more seriously, in the other poems placed within this group. But play or not, these are distinctly lesser poems. Only a serious lapse in critical attention brought about by interest in one's own theories could overlook this simple fact. Vivienne Koch, one of the few critics who have devoted time and intelligence as well as writing to their interest in Tate's poetry, falls into error in this fashion:

. . . the didactic impulse and conscious moral aim is too strong in Tate to suffer any diminution with time and courses along, a parallel stream of intention, with the early revitalized romanticism. Now, however, the moral aim is almost always concealed in satire; the discursiveness which in the past sometimes threatened to dull the critical edge is absent, for an even stricter formal control directs it with finer precision. Tate's own critical prescription for this mode of writing is certainly met by his achievement in 'Jubilo,' 'Ode to our Young Proconsuls of the Air,' and 'Eclogue of the Liberal and the Poet': the moral intelligence, he had written in 1940, 'gets into poetry . . . not as moral abstractions, but as form, coherence of image, and metaphor, control of tone and of rhythm, the union of these

¹Allen Tate, Two Conceits for the Eye to Sing, if Possible (Cummington, Mass.: Cummington Press, 1950), n.p.

features.' He shows himself in these poems to be the master, not the dupe, of the satire. His essays in this form are vigorous, enormously witty, and, as in classical satire, full of honest prejudices. A prejudice, let it be noted in passing, is different from a willed belief (abstraction). 'Jubilo,' using as refrain a phrase from a Negro popular song, is a tongue-in-cheek celebration of boys who 'caress the machines they ride.' The mock-heroic epic, while not at all a model, makes itself felt in 'Ode to Our Young Proconsuls' in the deliberately heightened mock-allegorical language which raises the invective to dramatic irony.¹

By Tate's own notion of poetic morality, these poems would have to be considered fairly immoral, for the kind of "control" and "union" of technical features they show seldom rises above the level of cleverness. As for poetic development, with which Miss Koch is directly concerned, they seem to show Tate in a decline rather than in an advance. The ". . . stricter formal control . . . with finer precision," of which she speaks, is superficial. What Tate knows as ". . . form, coherence of image, and metaphor, control of tone and of rhythm, the union of these features," becomes in a poem such as "Jubilo" merely craftsmanlike control of explicit language-form:

Tail-spinning from the shelves of sky
 See how it dips and tacks and tosses
 To cast a beam in the mind's eye:
 Who will count the gains and losses
 On the Day of Jubilo?

Public accountant with double entry
 Enter in red war's final cast
 In the black column the pacing sentry,
 Old woman picking the hog's mast
 For the Day of Jubilo

¹Vivienne Koch, "The Poetry of Allen Tate," Modern American Poetry, ed. B. Rajan (New York: Roy Publishers, n.d.), p. 27.

The difficult, tension-forming relationship between logic and imagery is too easily surrendered to moment by moment verbal play. Double-entendre is scattered like buckshot. The poem becomes a victim of its strategy. However, as I have said, it is a strategy which can be made to work more successfully. Though I have remarked its faults, "The Paradigm," with respect to this method and results, is a better poem than any of those most recently mentioned. And "The Last Days of Alice," or, better still, "The Mediterranean," shows what success Tate can achieve with a logic plus allusion strategy.

"The Last Days of Alice" (1931) is what one can call a "literary" poem. It takes place within the framework of another literary vision of life, that of Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass. It uses that vision as a structural metaphor, makes of it a psychological myth. It has the logical properties of a metaphysical poem, provides the machinery for direct abstract arguments and assertions, and is, certainly, in its metaphorical play, "intellectual." One must know Carroll's work or miss much of the poem. And, in addition, one should be somewhat aware of what modern psychological interpretation can do with Alice and her adventures as "symbolic" statements. But, at the same time, one must be constantly aware in his reading that Tate's poem is not a closed system of meanings based upon the relationships of a fixed set of meanings in the poem with a fixed set outside the poem. It is not, then,

fully metaphysical in the manner, say, of Donne's "Air and Angels," though in method it is like such a poem. And it appears to be allegory but is not. The relations of things inside to things outside the poem never arrive at a state of virtual rest. They move toward symbolist irresolution as a device for expanding significance. Thus, the reader is constantly led outside of the poem as a way for getting inside of it. Confusion, complexity, and tensions result from this mental action. The "formal" strategy of the poem depends heavily upon continuation and, then, final resolution of this mental action. Tate's poem apparently begins as drama:

Alice grown lazy, mammoth but not fat,
Declines upon her lost and twilight age;
Above in the dozing leaves the grinning cat
Quivers forever with his abstract rage:

The drama is not identical with the one we meet in Carroll, for unlike the story-book Alice, this metaphor of her has been re-transported from a world of dream to a real world. Alice, as a psychological myth with philosophical meanings, is not a fantasy; she becomes the imaginative assertion of a human truth. She is used to represent the sensibility of modern man.

The reader is presented with a condensed restatement of Carroll's narrative. In method, the restatement is purely interpretive and quite abstract. Immediate dramatic situations, in spite of imagery, do not exist in the poem. They exist in Carroll's work, and are alluded to only in so far as they can provide Tate with material for interpretive

statements having ulterior significance. Concretion in Tate's poem is merely a gloss to Carroll's basic text, and is itself on a level of abstract statement:

Whatever light swayed on the perilous gate
Forever sways, nor will the arching grass,
Caught when the world clattered, undulate
In the deep suspension of the looking-glass.

Bright Alice! always pondering to gloze
The spoiled cruelty she had meant to say
Gazes learnedly down her airy nose
At nothing, nothing thinking all the day.

The Alice in Wonderland, the spoiled child, alternately gigantic and minute in being as a result of her appetite, is lost or trapped in her personal world of sensation, the nightmare of private experience:

Turned absent-minded by infinity
She cannot move unless her double move,
The All-Alice of the world's entity
Smashed in the anger of her hopeless love,

All this, of course, is but a solipsistic prelude to pure self-love, the Narcissism of the Alice of the Looking-Glass:

Love for herself who, as an earthly twain,
Pouted to join her two in a sweet one;
No more the second lips to kiss in vain
The first she broke, plunged through the glass
alone--

Alone to the weight of impassivity,
Incest of spirit, theorem of desire,
Without will as chalky cliffs by the sea,
Empty as the bodiless flesh of fire:

She has surrendered herself, willfully, to a romantic desire for infinite existence, and has thus lost touch with human life. She becomes a dramatic representation of Tate's (and Hulme's) criticism of the "romantic" view of life:

All space, that heaven is a dayless night,
 A nightless day driven by perfect lust
 For vacancy, in her bored eyesight
 Stared at the drowsy cubes of human dust.

She, like modern man, lives in a scientific, pragmatic world of abstraction, cut off from a religious, moral experience and knowledge of life:

--We too back to the world shall never pass
 Through the shattered door, a dumb shade-harried
 Being all infinite, function depth and mass
 Without figure, a mathematical shroud

Hurled at the air--blessed without sin!
 O God of our flesh, return us to your wrath,
 Let us be evil could we enter in
 Your grace, and falter on the stony path!

Again, this reflects very strongly--as the whole poem does--T. E. Hulme's arguments about various "-isms" and religious-secular views of life such as the following:

It is necessary to realise that there is an absolute, and not a relative, difference between humanism (which we can take to be the highest expression of the vital), and the religious spirit. The divine is not life at its intensest. It contains in a way an almost anti-vital element; quite different of course from the non-vital character of the outside physical region. The questions of Original Sin, of chastity, of the motives behind Buddhism, etc., all part of the very essence of the religious spirits, are quite incomprehensible for humanism.¹

The force of abstract argument in Tate's poem has completely hemmed in the allusive figure. Controlled allusion, sequence of argument, and summary assertion create a strategy that moves toward the metaphysical pole of denotative meaning. Unlike "The Paradigm," "The Last Days of Alice" has a controlled structure. Allusive play is directed to a defined larger meaning and both of the visions involved in the play--Carroll's and Tate's--profit by it.

¹T. E. Hulme, Speculations (London: Routledge, 1949), pp. 8-9.

Another, and more powerful, poem which depends on virtually the same strategic deploying of meanings is "The Mediterranean" (1933). As his work stands now, this is, without much doubt, Tate's greatest lyric in the metaphysical-allusive mode.

Like "The Last Days of Alice" it is distinctly a "literary" poem. Again, Tate reduces to a core of usable significance a well-known work: this time, Virgil's Aeneid. Again, by allusion and abstract statement, he inhabits another vision of life in order to interpret a problem of the modern sensibility. However, in a very important way, the working-out of the strategy in this poem makes it superior to "Alice."

In addition to a dramatic complex alluded to, there is in the poem itself a fully realized immediate dramatic situation. The voyage of Aeneas with its final discovery of "the appointed ground" is alluded to not by interpretation but by a parallel drama of voyage and discovery. Tate's voyage is imaginatively conceived in its own terms. Thus, it is and it is not the voyage of Aeneas, which turns out to be the main point of the poem. We are led to experience the tense opposition between the vitality of the past and the effeteness of the present. To do so we must dwell in the rich myth of the voyage of discovery. This is the way we begin the tale of that voyage:

Where we went in the boat was a long bay
A slingshot wide, walled in by towering stone--
Peaked margin of antiquity's delay,
And we went there out of time's monotone:

Where we went in the black hull no light moved
 But a gull white-winged along the feckless wave,
 The breeze, unseen but fierce as a body loved,
 The boat drove onward like a willing slave:

Thus, we sail in the present out of the past which we take
 with us. Our immediate voyage knowable only as past, moves
 into history. History repeats itself, but with a different
 meaning:

Where we went in the small ship the seaweed
 Parted and gave to us the murmuring shore,
 And we made feast and in our secret need
 Devoured the very plates Aeneas bore:

". . . Our secret need" is not the simple hunger that
 led Aeneas and his men to eat the slender cakes, the cereal
 mats, on which they had heaped their food, thus fulfilling
 the Sibyl's prophecy of the appointed ground. The heroic
 Trojan host could know their wanderings were ended, that
 where the prophecy was fulfilled they could create a perma-
 nent place, establish a culture, found an enduring tradition.
 But our hunger is without lasting meaning:

Where we feasted and caroused on the sandless
 Pebbles, affecting our day of piracy,
 What prophecy of eaten plates could landless
 Wanderers fulfill by the ancient sea?

In their past lay ruined Troy, in ours--the declining West.
 Ours is the sweet-sour taste of history; theirs was the sweet
 draught of a future. We are not, then, Aeneas' companions:

We for that time might taste the famous age
 Eternal here yet hidden from our eyes
 When lust of power undid its stuffless rage;
 They, in a wineskin, bore earth's paradise.

The drama of the voyages pauses while we contemplate the fine

wonders of a past we cannot enter and the destroyed future
we have assured ourselves:

Let us lie down once more by the breathing side
Of Ocean, where our live forefathers sleep
As if the Known Sea still were a month wide--
Atlantis howls but is no longer steep!

What country shall we conquer, what fair land
Unman our conquest and locate our blood?
We've cracked the hemispheres with careless hand!

Lacking a sense of wonder, without tradition, we speed to
no discovery. The epigraph to the poem rings out: "Quem
das finem, rex magnae, dolorum?" We come but home to our-
selves, to nothing, and the over-ripe harvest, to weariness
in the midst of meaningless plenty:

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 wine: in that land were we born.

All the elements in the poem are fused in the final
image. Organized working of logic and allusion bring one to
a participation in the historical consciousness of the dis-
turbed modern man. The Aeneas myth has become a means for
getting at certain important historical abstractions. This
is accomplished in a somewhat Donneian manner which, as Tate
points out in "A Note on Donne" (1932), is not itself his-
torically or mythically directed. He says further:

The distinction between abstract ideas and mythology
is extremely important in the study of Donne . . . Dante
could afford to be philosophical; the terms were a system
that he acknowledged as truth. But it is different with
Donne; the vocabulary is merely vocabulary, and it lacks
the ultimate character of a myth. It is only a step
from his lawyer-like use of ingenious terms to the

intricacy of personal sensation as the center of consciousness. And from that it is but one more step, for the philosophical egoist, to the dramatization of oneself against the background of society or history. It is a step that Donne could not take, but doubtless would take were he alive today.¹

¹Allen Tate, Limits, pp. 330-31.

CHAPTER IV

MORE PROBLEMS IN STRATEGY

In "The Mediterranean" Tate has taken the step that Donne could not, but, by using an objective myth as the framework for his perception he has largely avoided "personal sensation as the center of consciousness" in his poem. Certainly, the nature of dramatization against history, here evokes a personal center as point of view. But the point of view has larger significance. It has significance as a kind of historical thought, holds up for consideration not the image of a personal notion or the despairs of a special personality but the image of an age's attitudes toward itself. The shadows of Arnold, Spengler,¹ Toynbee, and Eliot ride in Tate's small ship. ". . . walled in by towering stone . . . out of time's monotone: . . ." and driven "onward like a willing slave" the ship arrives at a tragic vision of the life of Western man. Again, in strategy, we see Tate arrive at his poetry of the center.

Out of variations on this same historical consciousness comes a group of poems which has determined, for most readers, Tate's reputation and rank as a contemporary poet. I refer to poems such as "Causerie" (1926), "Ode to the Confederate Dead" (1926-36), "Retroduction to American History" (1928), "Message from Abroad" (1931), "Aeneas at

¹In a letter to Waldo Frank in 1928, Hart Crane says: ". . . Tate was somewhat bowled over by Spengler--as wasn't I?" cf. Crane, The Letters, 1916-1932 (New York: Hermitage House, 1952), p. 285.

Washington "(1932), and "Fragment of a Meditation" (1935).

All these poems have a distinction and power in language and thought which place them among the better poems of our time. They constitute a kind of poetry and represent a kind of strategy which Tate has practiced more successfully than any other recent poet. They are not, however, to be numbered among Tate's best poems. Not even the famous and much debated "Ode to the Confederate Dead" rises to the level of "The Mediterranean" or "The Cross." This may seem to be a rather hasty statement at the moment. But, the propriety of such judgments can best be seen by looking at these poems from the point of view exercised in the previous pages, that of the metaphysical-symbolist strategies. The course of analysis should validate the judgments.

"Aeneas at Washington," as the title would serve to indicate, is a poem that has affinities with "The Mediterranean." Both are "literary" poems, variations on the central theme of the Aeneid. Both look at moments in the history of Aeneas from a weary point of view, compare a troubled modern emptiness with the fullness of a heroic past. They are not, of course, the same poem. Matters in the Aenean myth which are invoked for their allusive powers differ. But, most important, the poems differ in the ways they deploy meaning, the levels on which metaphysical and symbolist techniques are brought together.

"The Mediterranean" is a symbolic narrative, firmly enough anchored in a specific area of meaning, concentrated

enough in its verbal structure to remain at a center of reasonable significance. The poem is complex and always develops toward the definition of a total dramatic symbol. "Aeneas at Washington" seems to have virtually the same characteristics. But there are decisive differences between the two poems.

"The Mediterranean" is written in a highly organized explicit pattern. Rhythmical and metrical controls contribute richly to the total definition of meaning in the poem. Musical evocation is nicely adjusted to emotional significance. Matter and manner are beautifully interanimating. "Aeneas at Washington" shows little of this subtle kind of craft. Not that the poem is lacking in prosodic merit, but that its merit is of a lower order. It is a poem written in a special convention of dramatic blank verse, a convention, perhaps, admirably suited to the dramatic monologue (which it is). But the convention does not offer the high sort of order in a short lyric that it does within the structure of a play. An entire level of language-form tension, to use Tate's own kind of standard is sacrificed to obtain certain semi-prosaic qualities which could be obtained as well--though with more difficulty--in a more restricted and, therefore, potentially, more meaningful explicit form. Tate resorts to a richly evocative use of language:

I stood in the rain, far from home at nightfall
By the Potomac, the great Dome lit the water,
The city my blood had built I knew no more
While the screech-owl whistled his new delight
Consecutively dark.

And such language is fairly similar in design to that which he uses in "The Mediterranean," but it lacks much of the power of the more complexly organized statement, such as this:

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.

Another important difference in strategy between the two poems lies in their uses of allusion. "The Mediterranean" plays its dramatized perceptions against the background of a condensed meaning of The Aeneid. "Aeneas at Washington" restates incidents from the literary myth from a point of view within the myth. This device promotes "dramatic immediacy," but it also inspires a clever sort of double entendre. Thus, the poet falls prey to an allegorical frame of mind (one which Tate clearly dislikes). Simplified comparison and irony induce sentimentality and the reflections that steer alter-meanings become somewhat blatant:

I myself saw furious with blood
 Neoptolemus, at his side the black Atridae,
 Hecuba and the hundred daughters, Priam
 Cut down, his filth drenching the holy fires.
 In that extremity I bore me well,
 A true gentleman, valorous in arms,
 Disinterested and honorable. Then fled:
 That was a time when civilization
 Run by the few fell to the many, and
 Crashed to the shout of men, the clang of arms:

Troy, and the South, have fallen. One flees, bearing tradition and the past toward a new world. This is not quite so heroic as it might seem to be:

Cold victualing I seized, I hoisted up
 The old man my father upon my back,
 In the smoke made by sea for a new world
 Saving little--a mind imperishable
 If time is, a love of past things tenuous
 As the hesitation of receding love.

But this past was vigorous, calculating, successful, promoted
 ". . . fixed triumphs." Still, Troy is past, "And tawny
 corn, the thickening Blue Grass/ All lying rich forever in
 the sun" are of the past.

One is confronted by ". . . the 'pastness' of the
 past . . . our framework of idea is the cultural cycle . . ." ¹
 Thus, Troy is history for the modern Aeneas to consider, long-
 ingly:

Stuck in the wet mire
 Four thousand leagues from the ninth buried city
 I thought of Troy, what we had built her for.

The strategy of double statement seems successful.
 Certainly it makes possible this drama on an intellectual
 level, but, consider a moment; there is in it almost too
 much device for the results. The method of relating meaning
 to a specific work or recognizable area of meaning outside
 the poem itself has become a craftsman's trick. There is
 less poetry here than there appears to be. But, not too
 strangely nor without reason, this is the last of such
 poems. The next time this kind of device appears, in
 "Seasons of the Soul," it has lost its obviousness, has been
 sophisticated.

From what I have said thus far, it should be fairly
 clear that "Aeneas at Washington" is a poem which reflects a

¹Allen Tate, Limits, p. 329.

metaphysical strategy. One can see this in the way Tate attempts to control language, in the way he constructs his dramatic situation, in the way he works a chosen figure from the first to the last line, and in the way he keeps the poem ultimately oriented in specific meaning. Beyond this, however, and distinctive of the poems I have most recently singled-out, is the monologue technique which marks the overall strategy for composition. When the monologue blends with or gives way to verse-essay, as it does in some of these poems, strategy has moved toward a distinctly rational convention in English poetry. Tate is closer to the Donne of "The Anniversaries" than he is to the Baudelaire of "Correspondances."

One can, with good reason, call this particular strategy as one meets it in Tate's poetry, "metaphysical." It may have certain neo-classical affinities, but as Tate--or Pound, or Eliot--practices it the earlier seventeenth century lineaments show. The poem as essay having the dramatic properties of a section lifted from a play in verse, in spite of Browning's achievement, is more Jacobean than anything else. It is the Jacobean stage of Webster, Middleton, and Tourneur--men possessed of a distinctly metaphysical sensibility--that one hears over and over again in the lines of these contemporary poets.¹ There is little doubt that

¹At least one critic, Yvor Winters, has argued a very illuminating point on this matter. He says: "In [Crane's] Faustus and Helen I and III, the style . . . was probably modeled on the style of the nonsense passages in The Alchemists."

Webster, the stage's counterpart to the lyric poet, Donne, is the patron saint of this kind of poetry. I have already pointed out the appearance of neo-Websterian verse in Tate's "Horatian Epode to the Duchess of Malfi" (1922). What in that work was largely a sign of his admiration for Eliot, in time becomes something more alive in its own right. But, unlike Tate's best "kind of poetry," his controlled lyrics, this kind is always slightly compromised. It is seldom completely his own. But let us look at some of these poems.

Before other matters, what are the principal characteristics of poems in this strategy? There is in them a certain amount of adventitious and half-realized figurative language, a good deal of Eliot-like associative development of ideas, and general symbolist evocation; but most important, there is in these poems a predominance of thought and argument

It is curious that a man of Crane's talents should have set out to model his poetic character, not on Jonson, but on two scoundrels and obscurantists whom Jonson satirizes. As a matter of fact, however, it is almost equally curious, that Mr. Eliot and subsequent neo-Websterians should have allowed themselves to be so profoundly influenced by that ambiguous and unconvinced villain, Bosola, who, of all Webster's characters, is the most inflated and evasive in his metrics and his feeling alike, the most profoundly "Websterian" of them, in what appears to be the recent sense of the term. Such attempts to create for oneself a poetic character after models given by older masters, not of The Poetic Character, but of dishonesty and villainy, are bound to result in confusion: the modern experimenters have been neither dishonest nor villains, and their tortuous efforts to raise the conventions adopted to the level of universal morality, have been an interesting but also a distressing spectacle. A poetic convention has a life of its own: the election of a poetic convention involves perils of no mean order." "T. Sturge Moore," Hound and Horn, IV, No. 3 (April-June, 1933), 537.

over everything else. In a sense, technique itself becomes subject-matter. The poems are forensic exercises in cognition, are "intellectual" essays in which Tate is seen thinking out and arguing with himself serious personal and cultural questions.

First, there is the question, and its attendant human problems of religious belief in a world gone spiritually dry. It is a question in which our age has been tutored by Eliot. And Tate considers it largely through his vision, and at times, as in the following passage from "Causerie" (1925-31), with some of the language of the Wallace Stevens of "Sunday Morning":

Year after year the blood of Christ will sleep
 In the holy tree, the branches sagged without bloom
 Till the plant overflowing the stale vegetation
 In May the creek swells with the anemone,
 The Lord God wastes his substance toward the ocean.
 In Christ we have lived, on the flood of Christ borne up,
 Who now is a precipitate flood of silence,
 We a drenched wreck off an imponderable shore:
 A jagged cloud is our memory of shore
 Whereon we figure hills below ultimate ranges.
 You cannot plot the tendency of man,
 Whither it leads is not mysterious
 In the various grave; but whence the impulse
 To lust for the apple of apples on Christ's tree,
 To desire in the eye, to penetrate your sleep,
 Perhaps to catch in expected leaves
 The light incentive of your absolute suspicion?
 Over the mountains, the last barrier, you'd spill
 These relics of your sires in a pool of sleep,
 The sun being drained.

Or, in "Fragment of a Meditation" (1928), his forensic talent carrying him toward blasphemy, Tate sees the question of belief half with the vision of Yeats:

Perhaps at the age of thirty one shall see
 In the wide world the prodigies to come:
 The long-gestating Christ, the Agnulus

Of time, got in the belly of Abstraction
 By Ambition, a bull of pious use.
 O Pasiphael mother of god, lest nature,
 Peritonitis or morning sickness stunt
 The growth of god in an unwholesome juice,
 Eat cannon and cornflakes, that the lamb,
 Spaceless as snow, may spare the rational earth
 (Weary of prodigies and the Holy Runt)
 A second prodigious, two-legged birth.

There is also, for Tate, the question of an age that has accepted science and social-science as the proprietors of "truth." He couches his argument against such an error in pseudo-logic and rhetorical irony:

The essential wreckage of your age is different,
 The accident the same; the Annabella
 Of proper incest, no longer incestuous;
 In an age of abstract experience, fornication
 Is self-expression, adjunct to Christian euphoria,
 And whores become delinquents; delinquents, patients;
 Patients, wards of society. Whores by that rule,
 Are Precious.

("Causerie")

And much like this, shaped in the excited dramatic periods of Webster, there is the problem of cultural determinism. Tate haggles with despair. Life is lacking in absolute meaning. The best intentions, and what seems right, may too easily result in the evils one had tried to avoid:

Where is your house, in what room stands your bed?
 What window discovers these unsupportable dreams?
 In a lean house spawned on baked limestone
 Blood history is the murmur of grasshoppers
 Eastward of the dawn. Have you a daughter,
 Daughters are the seed of occupations,
 Of asperities, such as wills, deeds, mortgages,
 Duels, estates, statesmen, pioneers, embezzlers,
 "Eminent Virginians," reminiscences, bastards,
 The bar-sinister hushed, effaced by the porcelain tub.
 A daughter is the fruit of occupations;
 Let her not read history lest knowledge
 Of her fathers instruct her to be a petty bawd.
 Vittoria was herself, the contemporary strumpet
 A plain bitch.

("Causerie")

There is also the question of meaning in an age that has no myths, that lives mechanically by the morality of biological evolution, psychological determinism, and medical faith. And to state this requires logic in figurative and abstract expression:

More sanitation is enough, enough remains: dreams
Do not end--lucidities beyond the stint of thought.
For intellect is a mansion where waste is without drain;
A corpse is your bedfellow, your great-grandfather dines
With you this evening on a cavalry horse. Intellect
Connives with heredity, creates fate as Euclid geometry
By definition:

The sunlit bones in your house
Are immortal in the titmouse,
They trip the feet of grandma
Like an afterthought each day.

.

For Pelops' and Tantalus' successions were at once simpler
If perplexed, and less subtle than you think. Heredity
Proposes love, love exacts language, and we lack
Language.

("Retroduction to American History")

There is, simply, the question of morality in an age of rampant and insensitive self-interest. Tate's rational selectivity in stating this gives way to urgent emotionalism. We are offered a list of frantic indictments. The poetry, imitating a state of mind, breaks down. What Yvor Winters argues against and calls the "fallacy of imitative form," Tate practices here in one of the poorest passages he still owns to have written. The poet's creative morality is corrupted:

Narcissus is vocabulary. Hermes decorates
A cornice on the Third National Bank. Vocabulary
Becomes confusion, decoration a blight; the Parthenon
In Tennessee Stucco, art for the sake of death. Now
(The bedpost receding in stillness) you brush your teeth
"Hitting on all thirty-two;" scholarship pares

The nails of Catullus, sniffs his sheets, restores
 His "passionate underwear;" morality disciplines the other
 Person; every son-of-a-bitch is Christ, at least Rousseau;
 Prospero serves humanity in steam-heated universities,
 Thousand dollars a year. Simplicity, Flamineo, is obscene;
 Sunlight topples indignant from the hill. ^{three}

("Retroduction to American History")

And there is, in the end and all-in-all, the question of history, of tradition and the "'pastness' of the past." How can one deal with the troubling relationships of moments, meanings, which are separate in time but not in mind. History is memory flushed with mortality. This is the problem that encompasses all the others. It is the periphery and the center, the great question which, as in most of Tate's poems, determines the motive power and the emotional-rational form of a poem.

Again the tendency of language, heightened, elocutionary, is toward abstract significance. As in all these poems, the figurative language, the imagery, is largely a form of rational argument. Now, all metaphysical imagery is argument, assertion, which states that this or this in particular is the area of relevant feeling for this particular moment in the development of meaning in a poem. It is also both a means for extending and contracting the area of rational relevancy. Obviously it is very complex in function, but in brief--it functions, psychologically, more toward the intension than the extension of significance; and it functions, logically, toward sensitive exclusion of the irrelevant. In order to be strategically firm, a

poem must somehow present imagery, figurative expression, whose logical functioning balances with or partially dominates psychological functioning. Different gradations in the prominence and condition of balance of these two functions largely determine whether one will consider a poem to exhibit a metaphysical or symbolist strategy. In the poems under discussion the logical aspect almost always predominates. The poems, thus, have a predominantly metaphysical quality. This is true of the following passage which takes up the problem of history:

What years of the other times, what centuries
Broken, divided up and claimed? A few
Here and there to the taste, in vigilance
Ceaseless, but now a little stale, to keep us
Fearless, not worried as the hare scurrying
Without memory . . .

Provence,
The Renaissance, the age of Pericles, each
A broad, rich-carpeted stair to pride
With manhood now the cost--they're easy to follow
For the ways taken are all notorious,
Lettered, sculptured, and rhymed;
Those others, incuriously complete, lost,
Not by poetry and statues timed,
Shattered by sunlight and the impartial sleet.
What years . . . what centuries . . .

Now only
The bent eaves and the windows cracked,
The thin grass picked by the wind,
Heaved by the mole;

("Message from Abroad")

Essentially the same method and the same question are at work throughout "Fragment of a Meditation." Here the historical consciousness ruminates on more immediate matters; first, on ". . . Calhoun who divined/ How the great western star's last race would run/ Unbridled round our personal defect," and then on "The crazy Poe, who was not of our kind."

Both of these men, victims of mortality, are history, are tradition. And the essay in American history continues; figurative and abstract expression commingle ambitiously:

After Calhoun the local tenements
Of nature, tempered to the exigencies
Of air and fire, blurred with the public sense,
Diffused, while the Black Republicans
Took a short memory to their hot desire,
And honor turned a common entity
Crying decisions from the evening news.
Yet, in a year, at thirty, one shall see
The wisdom of history, how she takes
Each epoch by the neck and, growling, shakes
It like a rat while she faintly mew.

In the light of history, what can modern men come to? Eliotic interjections such as Tate uses in "To the Lacedaemonians"?

Towards retirement . . .
 Sheer time! Stroke of the heart

 Yet I, hollow head, do see but little;
 Old man: no memory: aimless distractions.

 There is no civilization without death;
 There is now the wind for breath.

Or does modern man come to a more absolute kind of meaninglessness?

Poor bodies crowding round us! The white face
 Eyeless with eyesight only, the modern power--
 Huddled sublimities of time and space,
 They are the echoes of a raging tower

That reared its moment upon a gone land,
Pouring a long cold wrath into the mind--
Damned souls, running the way of sand
Into the destination of the wind!

The questions that the modern man senses in his encounters with history, for Tate, at this time and in these poems, have no gratifying answers. As strategy these questions

may flee into a world of symbolic meanings and, as in the conclusion of "Fragment of a Meditation," those symbols may have only a pretentious and confused relationship with the thoughts they pretend to inform:

With a noise, threatening, of wandering bees
Coming, angry with the air or their carouse,
The lamb through the sandpaper gates of life
(Made rougher by the bull's intenser strife)
Will leap, while the wild-eyed Pasiphae
By the inscrutable wrath of glory stung
Hears the Wise Men come swiftly from the sea.
The bull smoothly rolls his powerful tongue.

Tate's thoughts about history, being inconclusive, involved in more "personal" questions of mortality, are driven, at the decisive moments in these poems, where fused thinking ought to occur, into a welter of multiple meanings, adolescent irony, and abandonment of his more rational strategy. Symbolism becomes a device for inconclusive anger and romantic despair. To understand the personal problem seems to require of Tate another, more unified mode of argument such as he was capable of in "The Cross," or "The Mediterranean," or as he is in these lines from "The Ancestors":

Consider this, the secret indecision,
Not rudeness of time but the systaltic flood
Of ancient failure begging its new start:
.
There is no man on earth who can be free
Of this, the eldest in the latest crime.

And the questions of history remain:

Gentlemen, let's
Forget the past, its related errors, coarseness
Of parents, laxities, unrealities of principle.
Think of tomorrow. Make a firm postulate
Of simplicity in desire and act
Founded on the best hypotheses;
Desire to eat secretly, alone, lest

Ritual corrupt our charity,
 Lest darkness fall and time fall
 In a long night when learned arteries
 Mounting the ice and sum of barbarous time
 Shall yield, without essence, perfect accident.

We are the eyelids of defeated caves.

("The Meaning of Death")

What in history is there to support the private personality?
 How shall one view the nature of the past, the sense it gives
 one of life achieved with a tremendous fullness and unity of
 meaning? How can the private, modern personality relate to
 its own time, knowing what full relations have existed in
 the past? There was no disparity between Aenean action and
 Aenean nature, between means and ends. To have devoured the
 plates as prophesied was to achieve--simply by being--what
 one most thoroughly was. It was to seize the future because
 of the perfection of an active past. For the modern man to
 eat of the prophetic plates symbolizes only dilemma. Deter-
 mined by his past, but lacking tradition, he is not really
 at liberty to be what he may achieve. The nature of his past,
 its "pastness" for him, compromises the possibilities of his
 future. The wasteland extends behind and before him. Time
 rots on the vine in the land where he was born. Only sensa-
 tion, experience as effects, quantity, has meaning for him,
 and that is the antithesis of tradition, the fullness of past
 in present. Where, then, is the little dignity of a man?
 And to what will a man turn in such an age where any kind of
 heroism--moral, spiritual, physical--is virtually impossible,
 and if not impossible, is meaningless? These questions bring

Tate to the "Ode to the Confederate Dead," his best, his most ambitious poem in the essay-lyric strategy, but not, as I have said before, the good poem many have held it to be.

Contrasting slightly with most of the other poems I have been considering, "Ode to the Confederate Dead" (1926-36) depends upon the Websterian, baroque monologue device but avoids most direct argument. In place of rational argument plus figurative embellishment and rhetoric, the poet elects a more concrete, dramatic and evocative strategy. Thus, it can be said, that he attempts to write his poem more at the center of his intensive-extensive scale of meanings. And to this center he tries to draw all of the scale's subtle and radical potentials. In the end, his efforts--his ten years of work on this poem--are only partially successful.

Now Tate has stolen a march on anyone who has written and who chooses to write on this particular poem. In "Narcissus as Narcissus" (1938), as far as what the "Ode" is about, he has pretty well said the final word. He writes:

That poem is "about" solipsism, a philosophical doctrine which says that we create the world in the act of perceiving it; or about Narcissism, or any other ism that denotes the failure of the human personality to function objectively in nature and society . . . I should have trouble connecting solipsism and the Confederate dead in a rational argument; . . . Narcissism and the Confederate dead cannot be connected logically, or even historically; even were the connection an historical fact, they would not stand connected as art, for no one experiences raw history. The proof of the connection must lie, if anywhere, in the experienced conflict which is the poem itself. . . . All the tests of its success in style and versification would come in the end to a single test, an answer yes or no, to the question: Assuming that the Confederates and Narcissus are not yoked together by mere violence, has the poet convinced

the reader that, on the specific occasion of this poem, there is a necessary yet hitherto undetected relation between them? By necessary I mean dramatically relevant, a relation "discovered" in terms of the particular occasion, not historically argued or philosophically deduced. Should the question that I have just asked be answered yes, then this poem or any other with its specific problem could be said to have form: what was previously a merely felt quality of life has been raised to the level of experience--it has become specific, local, dramatic, "formal"--that is to say, in-formed."¹

This tells us what the poem is about in terms of its major elements. It also tells us what the basic strategic problem of the poem is, what the central device for solution of that problem is conceived to be, and what the main critical notions that stand behind the poem are. One can see, then, with a bit of concentration, why Tate has expended such extensive energy and ambition on this poem. In any number of respects, it brings together and sums up all that he had tried to do as a poet up until 1936. And much of what he does after that date has roots in it. Though not his best poem, it is perhaps the single most important poem for the student of Tate's poetry. Any consideration of Tate as a poet must include "another" examination of "Ode to the Confederate Dead."

As an example of the poet's craftsmanship, the "Ode" not only reveals a great deal about Tate's working methods, the rigorous thinking, calculation, technical zeal, and compromising he practices, but also stands as perhaps the most striking public demonstration we have had in recent times--if not in any time--of a poet's unwillingness to bring to

¹Allen Tate, Limits., pp. 250-53.

completion a difficult task. It would, of course, be both interesting and illuminating to go into a detailed examination of the numerous published versions of this poem and to try to come to an understanding of what Tate has to say about his efforts: ". . . the labor of revising the poem--a labor spread over ten years--fairly exposes the lack of confidence that I have felt and still feel about it."¹ Such an examination, however, would require extensive and minute demonstration and would necessarily be but a long part of a longer study on Tate's interesting and individual technical practices.

Briefly, from the day it was first written in 1926, and with each successive revision, the "Ode" has become better and better. As it stands now, the product of very revealing personal debates with himself, of advice taken from friends such as Hart Crane² and R. P. Warren, and of

¹Ibid., p. 252.

²Hart Crane, Letters, 1916-1932, pp. 282-83. "The obscurities bother me. Stanza I, OK; and I get along very well until I come to 'ambitious' Novembers in II. Why this special epithet--this particular designation for the whole season in relation to the headstones, in fact? As it is stressed so much one chafes against the stubborn dullness that blocks one's apprehension of your precise intention. The last six lines are particularly fine and The last--!"

"There is no doubt that you make the theme of the poem a living continuity with the exception of several places where, I admit, I find it difficult to follow you. The theme of chivalry--a tradition of excess (not literally excess, rather, active faith) which cannot be perpetuated in the fragmentary cosmos of today--'those desires which should be yours tomorrow' but which, you know, will not persist nor find a way into action . . . Your statement of this is beautiful, and the poem is a POEM with splendidly controlled rhythms and eloquence. But when you come to such lines as 'From the orient of the sublime economy/ Remember the setting sun' I suddenly feel the thread cut. Sublime economy misses

advice not taken from other friends such as Yvor Winters,¹ it is still a poem with problems. Tate was not ready to solve them to his complete satisfaction by 1936. As he says in the "Preface" to his Selected Poems (1937):

"Ode to the Confederate Dead," begun in December 1926, has been finished in November 1936. I have repeatedly asked other poets to help me with this poem, which I felt beyond my powers. In 1931 Mr. Robert Penn Warren contributed one line, in my opinion its best. The poem is still not what I should like it to be, yet for the first time I see in it no blemish of detail that I myself can hope to remove. Mr. Yvor Winters, with a vehemence that I respect, has insisted that the passage about the jaguar is very bad; it well may be; I hoped at one time that I might rewrite it. I shall never touch the poem again.²

Of course, it is a part of their human condition that most good artists such as Tate are never fully satisfied with their works. But, rather than tamper and fuss with one piece

its aim with me, I suddenly seem to see a little of Laforgue's mannerism too wittily on the scene. What is meant here?

"I fancy that you could go much better directly from Bull Run to 'You hear the shout,' etc. The next verse is superb. The last seven lines are the climax of the poem. The intensity of this 'meditation' gives the lie, of course, to all previous factual statements regarding the impermanency of your grief. . . . But you are, of course, speaking throughout less from a personal angle than a social viewpoint. Or are you? Both, of course. It was fatuous to have raised the point. . . .

"Then you go back to speculation in the next stanza. You go too far in the succeeding, I think. And it, again, is rather obscure--exactly what you mean. The capitalisation of sentiment, I take it. A good dig at certain people, but I think the sarcasm is over-bitter, marring the beauty of the poem as a whole. The fierce resignation at the last is beautiful, the irony will sell, if you get what I mean."

¹Yvor Winters, In Defense of Reason, op. cit., pp. 530-31.

²Allen Tate, "Preface," Selected Poems (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), p. viii.

for an entire lifetime, most men make new starts. The poet writes many poems, The painter creates many pictures. In a very real sense, all he does are variations on a theme and, to state a truism, the theme is himself. His perceptions, his subject-matters, his devices are limited. They are limited by and limit what his person holds to be important and possible. I have said that Tate's "Ode" is a bringing together and summing-up of what is important in his poetry up to and beyond 1936. It may be difficult to conceive how this may be true, how a summing-up may include things that come after it, but I think this will become clear in my later discussion of "Seasons of the Soul" and Tate's most recent poems. For this time, then, in what ways is it a summing-up?

First, it represents, as I have already indicated, the extent to which Tate has carried self-conscious craftsmanship. And if, in itself, it is not completely self-demonstrative on this count, the careful and revealing essay which supports it, "Narcissus as Narcissus," makes fairly clear the reaches of Tate's perceptions of poetic craft. Certainly the level of consciousness about what he is doing, what he is trying to do, each time he writes a poem is extremely high. This poet is no spontaneous, automatic fountain of expression, but a precisely organized creative will. If anything--though I do not really believe such to be possible--the critical faculties of this poet may be almost too nicely operative. It can be said that some of his poems,

such as "The Paradigm," may be better examples of critical principles than of poetry.

In a small measure this is true of the "Ode" itself. The wind-leaves refrain which was ". . . added to the poem in 1930, nearly five years after the first draft was written,"¹ is not so real nor meaningful as the critical perception which apparently justifies it. Tate says:

I felt that the danger of adding it was small because, implicit in the long strophes of meditation, the ironic commentary on the vanished heroes was already there, giving the poem such dramatic tension as it had in the earlier version. The refrain makes the commentary more explicit, more visibly dramatic, and renders quite plain as Hart Crane intimated, the subjective imagery throughout. But there was another reason for it, besides the increased visualization that it imparts to the dramatic conflict. It "times" the poem better, offers the reader frequent pauses in the development of the two themes, allows him occasions of assimilation; and on the whole--this was my hope and intention--the refrain makes the poem seem longer than it is and thus eases the concentration of imagery--without, I hope, sacrificing a possible effect of concentration.²

As I have said, this is all quite sound. But what it does not indicate is that the integrating power of the refrain is distinctly fortuitous. It is pure device, and an Eliotic one at that, for telling the reader he should perceive unity where only contiguity exists. Unable to make the kind of direct dramatic fusion he had attempted in the first versions of the poem, he resorts to symbolist evocation. True, the refrain does have a certain amount of dramatic integrity, but that is only half of the story. It disguises without really eliminating or solving what Tate knows to be the

¹Allen Tate, Limits., p. 256. ²Ibid.

basic structural problem of the poem: the yoking of the Confederates and Narcissus.

Second--to get back to ways in which the "Ode" is a summing-up--it brings together his most persistent subject-matters. There is in it the subject matter of poems such as "The Last Days of Alice," "Retroduction to American History," "Ditty," "The Subway," "The Idiot," and Number IX of "Sonnets of the Blood." These poems, too, are wholly or partially preoccupations with solipsism and disintegration of the modern, personal consciousness. There is in the "Ode" the subject matter of poems such as "Ode to Fear," "Ignis Fatuus," "Light," "Message from Abroad," "The Cross," "To the Romantic Traditionists," "The Wolves," and any number of others. These poems, too, bear the urgency of a fear of death and a desire to escape from meaningless dissolution of human life in forms of Naturalistic living. And there is in the "Ode" the subject matter of poems I have most recently discussed: "The Mediterranean," "Aeneas at Washington," "Causerie," "The Meaning of Death," "Fragment of a Meditation," and "To the Lacedemonians." Like these poems, the "Ode" demonstrates Tate's special preoccupation with history, the loss of tradition and breakdown of cultural values which give human life larger meaning.

And, last, the "Ode" represents a summing-up of problems in poetic strategy. In it are brought together, as a sort of "all-out" effort, the metaphysical and symbolist devices he has used--these here and those there--in many

other poems. In this respect, as well as in others, it might be said that its ambitiousness proves a handicap. The strategies do not cohere as they do, say, in "The Mediterranean." Rather literal symbols--the crab, the hound bitch, the jaguar, the serpent--are rammed into the argument of the poem. The reader is called upon to think "symbol" in each of these instances, and, though his "thinking" may provide him with a fairly proper cognition in each instance, still each demands a separate speculation which disrupts the texture of the poem as a whole. Of course, such an effect does not cancel out all the other things achieved by the poem. But it is indicative of how a freezing, an oversimplification, of strategic notions can be almost as harmful as no such notion at all. One could say about the "Ode" what Tate says about R. P. Blackmur in reviewing his

Jordan's Delight:

. . . Blackmur writes from two different points d'appui, the one abstract, the other immediate and dramatic. We have looked at the detail of two of his abstractly motivated poems, and the conclusion seems inevitable: that he takes the "idea" and then tries to reduce it to image, with the result that the images do not always materialize out of the ideas . . . this does not mean that the "idea" . . . , as a critical analysis of the function of poetry in relation to action, is unsound; it is rather that the idea is not available to Blackmur on the level of poetry. And this limitation witnesses again the difficulty of our age in writing philosophical poetry--a poetry springing from an apprehension, however profound, of ideas.¹

I believe that if one can think about the "Ode" in terms of a problem in strategy--and my previous efforts should

¹Allen Tate, Reason in Madness (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), pp. 178-79.

make this somewhat possible--he should be able to understand my judgments on it. In brief, the freezing of strategies takes place because, as Tate suspects, solipsism and the Confederates are in a way "yoked by violence." The tension of drama and evocation, the definition of a complex state of mind, is neither clear enough nor powerful enough to incorporate the "intellectual" significances of the various elements in the poem. To experience the poem in any immediate way is virtually impossible. Zeno and Parmenides and the blind crab and the basilisk-like angels of the graveyard stare at one as discrete units. Somehow made too conscious of their calculated incorporation, one cannot fully participate in their implied dramatic necessity. The poet is discovered to be juggling too many golden balls at the same time. The gymnastics are disturbing. One is faced by a partial failure of the symbolic imagination, which, as Tate says: ". . . conducts an action through analogy, of the human to the divine, of the natural to the supernatural, of the low to the high, of time to eternity."¹ Or, rather, one is brought face to face with one of the problems of what Tate calls the "angelic imagination . . . which tries to disintegrate or to circumvent the image in the illusory pursuit of essence."² In this instance drama is essence. And yet, when all is said, one must still admit that the "Ode to the Confederate Dead" does arrive fairly near to the condition of

¹Allen Tate, "The Forlorn Demon (Chicago: Regnery, 1953), p. 36.

²Ibid., p. 37.

"poetry of the center." It falls below his best poetry, but in "language action"--in rhythm, rhetoric, and sound--alone, if in nothing else, it ranks with "The Mediterranean" and "Seasons of the Soul" as one of the most beautiful poems Tate has written.

CHAPTER V

SENSIBILITY AND THE POET

In spite of all he has accomplished as a writer it is still difficult to say what in Tate is recognizably and only himself. As I have indicated, he is often a veritable sounding-board of other poetic voices. And, hearing in his verse the intonations of Robinson, Crane, Eliot, Stevens, Yeats, and earlier poets such as Arnold or Donne, one could easily be led to think of him as an eclectic writer whose own talent and imagination are not sufficiently powerful to integrate what he has learned from other writers. One might think him to be only a more subtle John Peale Bishop whose sensitivity to the methods, language, and vision of other poets was remarkable even if somewhat damning. But, then, one might with reason choose to say of Tate, on this matter, what he has said about his friend:

It has been said that Bishop has imitated all the chief modern poets. He has virtually conducted his poetical education in public. But the observation is double-edged. In our age of personal expression the poet gets credit for what is "his own": the art is not the thing, but rather the information conveyed about a unique personality. Applauding a poet only for what is uniquely his own, we lose thereby much that is good. If a poem in Yeats's manner appears in Bishop's book, and is as good as Yeats's, it is as good there as anywhere else.¹

¹Allen Tate, Limits., pp. 241-42.

Actually one would not have to appeal to such a half-embarrassed standard for "art" in considering Tate's "poetical education." After his period of apprenticeship, other poets--mainly Eliot and Yeats--can be seen fitfully reflected in his verse. But the Eliot that can be recognized in Tate's neo-Websterian poems such as "Causerie" and "Ode to the Confederate Dead" or the Yeats that can be suspected in poems such as "Winter Mask" and "Seasons of the Soul" are poets who are compatible to him in general sensibility. They are not merely language instructors for him in the way that E. A. Robinson was at an earlier date. True, Tate learns specific organizing techniques for poems from them and these ultimately involve some prescriptions about language. He uses them as models. But he uses them not so much derivatively in his mature verse as re-creatively in expressing the sensibility which is his own--a distinctly "modern" sensibility which he had cultivated under the pressure of ideas and other more general cultural forces which had shaped Yeats's and Eliot's sensibilities as well as his own.

Yeats, more than Eliot, provides him with a fresh insight into formal strategy and language during the 1940's. Yeats's "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," for which Tate has expressed great admiration,¹ and his later poems, especially those which use a loose trimeter or tetrameter line

¹Tate has said, "I would select this poem out of all others of our time as the most completely expressed: it has a perfect articulation and lucidity which cannot be found in any other modern poem in English." cf. Limits., p. 221.

such as "Easter, 1916" and "The Tower, III," constitute for Tate advice on a formal technique and comprehensive language tone. The following stanza from "Winter Mask" reflects certain of Yeats's qualities of language, his prescriptions:

Towards nightfall when the wind
Tries the eaves and casements
(A winter wind of the mind
Long gathering its will)
I lay the mind's contents
Bare, as upon a table,
And ask, in a time of war,
Whether there is still
To a mind frivolously dull
Anything worth living for.

Of course, one will not find exact parallels for this in Yeats, but the extended rhythm of qualified syntax played within short lines and the half-conversational-half-reflective tone of language are like the Yeats of "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory":

Now that we're almost settled in our house
I'll name the friends that cannot sup with us
Beside a fire of turf in the ancient tower,
And having talked to some late hour
Climb up the narrow winding stair to bed:¹

or the Yeats of "Easter, 1916":

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,

¹William Butler Yeats, Collected Poems (New York: Macmillan Co., 1949), p. 150.

Being certain that they and I
 But lived where motley is worn:
 All changed, changed utterly:
 A terrible beauty is born.¹

Yet, in the end, Tate's uses of Yeats are fairly superficial. For awhile he finds in him a way for relaxing language tone and for incorporating didactic statement into the argument of a poem without resorting to heightened rhetoric, such as was his manner in his neo-Websterian poems. Through the advice of Yeats he writes in a poem such as "Ode to our Young Pro-Consuls of the Air":

Marvelling day by day
 Upon the human kind
 What might I have done
 (A poet alone)
 To balk or slay
 Those enemies of mind?

I sought by night to foal
 Chimeras into men--
 Decadence of power
 That, at late hour,
 Untimed the soul
 To live the past again:

But the simple, direct language and tone of these lines, so like Yeats, proves inadequate to the normally tense and complex movement of Tate's mind. By the time Tate writes the opening lines of his "Seasons of the Soul," he has absorbed and converted Yeats to his own personal idiom:

Summer, this is our flesh,
 The body you let mature;
 If now while the body is fresh
 You take it, shall we give
 The heart, lest heart endure
 The mind's tattering
 Blow of greedy claws?

¹Ibid., p. 207.

Shall mind itself still live
 If like a hunting king
 It falls to the lion's jaws?

Tate's uses of Eliot, however, even as they were when he was a younger poet, are a different, more difficult matter. At various times during the twenties and thirties it seems that Tate virtually inhabits Eliot's vision of life and personal literary prescriptions, both as a poet and a critic. It seems as if Eliot's main structure of ideas, consisting of his notions about the loss of "tradition," the breakdown of spiritual values, and dissociation in modern culture and personal consciousness, is taken over by Tate almost in toto, though modified to serve his own immediate purposes. At the same time, however, one should remember that Eliot's central notions are no more totally his own than Tate's. Both men, admittedly, owe a major debt to T. E. Hulme. Further, the qualities of Tate's language, its "tensions," differ from Eliot's and have an integrity which can be attributed to none but his own excited will. The fact remains though, that much of the burden and manner of Tate's creative efforts during these years echoes that of the older, more celebrated poet. The evidence against Tate is seriously apparent. One cannot think that he was schooled in his neo-Websterianism nor his allusive associationism in poems such as "Seasons of the Soul" by Hulme. This would seem to contradict what I have said just a moment ago: that Eliot had come to be an instructive and parallel sensibility to his own, that he had become, for Tate, not a direct compositional influence but a larger

example of the proper, creatively successful, contemporary artistic sensibility. And what I am able to gather together in support of my assertion, certainly does not have the status of clear proof. It seems, for instance, that "Seasons of the Soul" reflects in Tate's exploration of the themes of personal isolation and spiritual debility in the modern world more advice from Eliot than can be easily overlooked. In the end, I cannot solve my hesitations about Tate's indebtedness as simply as he solves those that stand out against his friend, John Peale Bishop. Perhaps mine, like Tate's on Bishop, turns out to be a haggler's justification of what he has come to admire. My assertion that Tate is not simply an apostle of Eliot and a derivative poet in a poem such as "Seasons of the Soul" is based upon what I understand to be his particular "sensibility."

To give here a series of quotations which would indicate the various meanings Tate attaches to the word, "sensibility," would almost necessitate quoting a large portion of his criticism. Further, the analysis necessary for clarifying the many shades of meaning the word has in his usage would soon bury my discussion in niceties of argument about language that I do not, at this time, have the courage to face. But in keeping with a practice I have tried to adhere to at similar moments in this study, I will define the word as Tate's uses indicate proper, and, where it does not simply result in confusion rather than justifiable insight, I will try to use the word in discussion as he well might.

Certainly, the word "sensibility" is one of the key terms in Tate's critical vocabulary, and without it his criticism would take on a very different character. At least, his essays on Hart Crane and Emily Dickinson--to mention only two--would be different from what they are without this word and what it most centrally means for him. And this I would state to be as follows: sensibility consists of the demonstrated quality of relationships between the emotional and intellectual natures of a man, and especially as those relationships indicate a further connection with the specific culture (as a body of values and living assumptions) in which the man exists.

For Tate, the word carries very little or none of the meaning it had in the eighteenth century phrase, "a man of sensibility." It has, only when modified by the adjective "romantic," the meaning of exaggerated feeling or emotional irresponsibility it had for Jane Austen when she constructed it in partial opposition to "sense." It has, of course, most of its usual dictionary significance of capacity for, susceptibility and responsiveness to, sensation or feeling. But it bears a greater than usual amount of meaning of quickness, acuteness, and comprehensiveness of mental apprehension. Thus, if Tate speaks of a "limited sensibility" he refers to limitations in mental apprehension, or to limitations in unifying mental and emotional responsiveness. I would not say Tate is indebted to Eliot for this use and understanding of the word, but Eliot uses "sensibility" in a

similar fashion, and he serves as example here because his use is more explicit than Tate's: ". . . the true generalization is not something superposed upon an accumulation of perceptions; the perceptions do not, in a really appreciative mind, accumulate as a mass, but form themselves as a structure; and criticism is the statement in language of this structure; it is a development of sensibility."¹ Thus, also, when Tate speaks of ". . . the modern squirrel cage of our sensibility, the extreme introspection of our time,"² one can understand how the meaning of the word, for him, involves some indicated relation with objective culture. It is, then, the word which marks out, with its modifications, kinds of individual order.

What Tate's own sensibility is exactly, what Tate's particular kind of order is, proves to be fairly difficult to say, but it can be said. His poetry as a demonstration of interacting mental and emotional natures, especially as it demonstrates both the more intellectual order of which he is capable and the kinds of order of which he approves, further indicates just what "Tatian sensibility" is. In this light, then, what I have taken up in earlier discussions should provide an adequate background for considering Tate's sensibility as it is demonstrated in his poetry.

Tate's initial feelings for poetry, the emotional and rational attitudes which dominate his approaches to composition, are greatly determined by his training as a student in classical literature, Latin and Greek, and by his preference

¹T. S. Eliot, The Sacred Wood (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1934), p. 15.

²Allen Tate, Limits, p. 251.

for what can be called the "central lyric convention" of traditional English poetry. The convention itself has been created in the poetry of Wyatt, Sidney, Raleigh, Greene, Donne, Jonson, Marvell, Dryden, and--to be brief--in the work of a number of other poets, great and small. Hardy, Robinson, and Yeats are its latest major figures. As a realizable convention it was created and exists most clearly in the poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is to this convention that Tate most naturally aspires.

Tate approaches his art, then, through a tradition of orderly integration of thought and feeling, and, in spite of his more "modern" cultivation of a disorderly-orderliness, he never fully loses sight of it. His insight into the lyric convention, however, is somewhat distorted by his inescapable relations with the achievements of the nineteenth century English poets, and the French symbolistic poets. The "romantic" emphasis on sensory experience, the exploitation of emotion through imagery, supported by the symbolists and extended by them in their energetic quest for le nouveau, attenuates his effective contact with the poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He draws from the earlier poetry that which is more compatible with the later romantic tradition. He goes to Donne rather than Jonson for a model, and a blurring of insight occurs. But this blurring itself is indicative of something fundamental in what Tate tries to do in his poetry.

He is convinced that different times necessarily make

for different kinds of poetry. He adds his efforts to the modern confusion of "genres." Thus, in a way he seems to maintain a variety of Taine's argument for "race-place-time" determinism. But such a view Tate would most certainly disavow, and actually, in spite of momentary deterministic confusions such as arise in his criticism (cf. his essay on Crane) he dislikes even toleration of the notion. Efficacy of will in man, and especially in poets, is of major importance. His argument against Edna St. Vincent Millay, for instance, is that she "tries" to write contemporary poetry out of a complex of nineteenth century orientations to language. Her bad judgment results in bastard poetry. Tate knows, early in his career, that he must choose to be a modern. This he will become even though he may recognize that the contemporary models he will follow are secondary in achievement when compared with earlier writers. The contemporary has for him, unlike poets such as Yvor Winters or J. V. Cunningham, a vivacity he will not forego.

One can see this in his early poetry. And, though the contemporaneity is, later, not so inconsistent and dynamically ambitious, one can see it throughout his career. The kind of energy that lies behind this element in his sensibility appears in one of his earliest pieces of criticism:

An individualistic intellectualism is the mood of our age. There is no common-to-all truth; poetry has no longer back of it, ready for use momentarily, a harmonious firmament of stage properties and sentiments which it was the pious office of the poets to set up at the dictation of a mysterious afflatus--Heaven, Hell, Duty, Olympus, Immortality, as the providential array

of "themes": the Modern poet of this generation has had no experience of these things, he has seen nothing even vaguely resembling them. He is grown so astute that he will be happy only in the obscure byways of his own perceptive processes; a priori utterance never escapes him. Claude Monet said: "The chief character in a group portrait is light." So the Modern poet might tell you that his only possible themes are the manifold projections and tangents of his own perceptions. It is the age of the Sophist. . .

They are intellectualists. The external world is a permanent possibility of sign-posts upon which the poet may hang his attitudes, his sensibility. Not the world, but consciousness; hence, his difficult abstractness . . . the poet's vocabulary is prodigious, it embraces the entire range of consciousness. . . . Baudelaire's theory of Correspondences--that an idea out of one class of experience may be dressed up in the vocabulary of another--is at once the backbone of Modern poetic diction and the character which distinguishes it from both the English Tradition and free verse.¹

What Tate celebrates here is, of course, an excited and "big" program for Modern poetry, and one might say of it as Crane said of the young Tate, ". . . enthusiasm and brains, however undeveloped his style may be."² But such enthusiasm is just the sort of characteristic Crane admired him for, and the kind of characteristic that infects his "fugitive" poetry with its vaguely directed energy.

Modernist enthusiasm and "individualistic intellectualism" may be held responsible, in a way, for that element in Tate which led us to ponder his sensibility: his debt to Eliot. Now, every poet necessarily learns from other poets. What this means for poetry, most simply, is that the best poets reflect in their work a comprehensive awareness of past achievements in poetry at the same time that they avoid mere repetition of those achievements.

¹Allen Tate, The Fugitive, III, No. 2 (April, 1924), 35.

²Hart Crane, Letters, p. 104.

Different products, then, may be made with virtually the same tools. The point is that, with good poets, the tools, the devices of language, are only "virtually" the same, and not much more. But when, compared with those of his predecessors, a poet's devices begin to pass from that twilight where "virtually" and "really" are quite different into a darkness which tends to make them indistinguishable, we begin to have reservations about his achievement. Though for other reasons as well, we have such reservations about the poetry of Cowley. It is compromised by the shadow of Donne. We have similar reservations about Bishop's poetry, skillful though it may be, because the shadows of other poets insist upon something--themselves--that is not immediately, formally, relevant to the poems in which they appear. And we have reservations which are at once similar and very different about Eliot's poetry. He has worked to make the shadows of others appear immediately relevant, and I suppose even the most niggling of critics may some day learn how to convert their reservations into praise and really believe this is achievement and not merely a superficial device.

But the shadow of Eliot in Tate's poetry is different from the shadow of Shakespeare or Webster in Eliot. Our reservations about it are not likely to turn to praise. But then, too, our reservations are involved in a different kind of perspective. Pound and Eliot have taught a whole generation--now, a couple of generations--of poets to have a

slightly changed attitude from the recently traditional one toward the uses of past achievement in present composition. (I am not forgetting that in older literary traditions there was such a thing as common creative property, that writers were often much more alike than different. But I am also not forgetting that Horace and Virgil were really different and that Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate had much in common.) Unfortunately Pound and Eliot have encouraged the notion that virtually any shadowing, any echo, of other achievements necessarily adds a new level of complexity to a work; and, having also furthered the notion that almost any addition in complexity is necessarily good, they have tended to convert echoing from a detraction into an achievement. They certainly have not intended to encourage derivative writing, but their influence on recent poetic sensibility has been such that younger poets have permitted themselves more freedom in reflecting their education and undigested learning than a sound literary conscience would normally allow. Such reflection, then, becomes but a part of the younger poet's enthusiasm for what is distinctly Modern. He thinks in terms of an "individualistic intellectualism" but is all too likely to have a mushy literary conscience when it comes to demonstrating it.

I am not really saying that Tate has such a conscience. Nor would I say that this was one of Bishop's faults. But I would say that some of Tate's early poetry such as "Nuptials" (1922) is probably embarrassing to him now because of the careless conscience it reveals more than for any other reason.

In the end, I would say that Tate and Bishop are much alike in a certain quality of sensibility. There is in both of them a kind of eclecticism, a persistent dependence on specific literary learning as a means for extending the apparent scope of their more native compositional talents. They go readily to literature for active inspiration, and they get results. Bishop is less often than Tate capable of thoroughly integrating such inspiration in the process of writing. And at times he seems to be thoroughly aware of and simply unabashed by the fact that he is writing a poem "in the manner of" somebody else. This is, apparently, for him more than just a clear and useful exercise, a study technique. Tate's devices for accomplishing poems do not permit him to go this far. At least this is true of the mature Tate, though Crane's letters inform us that the younger Tate wrote poems--which he apparently tried to publish but which I have been unable to track down--poems that beat Gertrude Stein and e. e. cummings at their own games. But the devices of the mature poet do permit him the eclectic manners which range from reflecting some of Eliot's themes and techniques in his neo-Websterian verse or "Seasons of the Soul" to adopting key images in his "Seasons of the Soul" from Dante and St. Augustine. In neither of these instances, however, are we faced by a question simply of derivative writing. Imaginatively, dramatically, Tate always manages a redeeming amount of real integration of his learning from other writers.

In the neo-Websterian poems such as "Causerie" or

"Ode to the Confederate Dead," Eliot and a shadow of the Jacobean stage may hover somewhat disconcertingly over the play of language, but that play never becomes truly theirs. In a romantic fashion it celebrates the unique creator, Tate. Tate's poetry is, in the fullest sense, personal--more so, say, than Eliot's, or, for that matter, Ransom's or Stevens', or Pound's. And one of the reasons he is difficult to abide at times is that, like the romantics, he presses that personality upon us as an ultimate value. Tate does not hold to his themes directly, but so encrusts them in special figures and turns and plays of phrase that what he does is always as much a reflection of himself as unique personality as it is of his apparent, other, objectives. I am not saying that one must demand "impersonality" of a poem, nor would I go so far as to ask with Eliot for an appreciable separation between ". . . the man who suffers and the mind which creates." The achievement of impersonality is not a matter of device or conscientiousness of point of view. It exists principally in the poem's integrity as a separate and independent whole, unmodified by considerations of its maker or devices which call our attention to him as fabricator. What one really expects of a poem is not so much impersonality as personality perfected to the point where it is of the utmost objective importance, a condition which exists in a poem such as Bishop Henry King's "Exequy," or Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush." One can discover such a condition of personality in Tate's poetry only in poems such as "The Cross" and "The Mediterranean."

Eliot and Webster are but limited conventions which Tate exploits for his own personal ends. And if, in a distinct way, such exploitation results in Tate's building a sensibility remarkably similar to those of these two poets, his compositional ends are more caustically violent than Eliot's and, possibly, less morally confused than Webster's. These aspects of Tate's sensibility--the bitter violence and anger and moral determination--are of major importance in his poetry, and for these, in the kind they are, I know of no close parallel in English unless it be the Swinburne of the sonnets titled Dirae. In these qualities of sensibility Tate differs clearly from any of his obvious instructors.

A strong sense of verbal and emotional violence is, perhaps, about the first thing one comes to recognize in Tate's poetry. Symbolistic and surrealistic in some ways in its quality of negation and disturbed nihilism, violence is everywhere and in many states of integration and importance in his poetry. In its earliest appearance in poems such as "Horatian Epode to the Duchess of Malfi" or "Madness," Tate's violence is merely a kind of fashionable malady. It is a natural attendant of his cultivated ironic manner, and, like the irony, it is less honest, more a poetical affectation than it sometimes appears to be.

And let me add here a note of double significance. Tate does--but does not really need to--resort to this and other kinds of poetical affectation. Few poets in our time have a sheer verbal power to equal his. In the combination

of full sound and emotional urgency, in the creation of a special tonal level of seriousness, such as he creates in his best poems ("The Cross," "The Mediterranean," and "Seasons of the Soul"), he is highly individual and has lasting distinction. Yet, for some reason, he often feels the need to tamper with his native abilities, to decorate and to torture in a baroque-modern fashion the texture of his meaning until the weight of his virtuosity defeats him. Certainly this is true in poems like "Jubilo" and in his last poems, especially "The Maimed Man" (1952). It has been true in varying degrees throughout his career. To find a reason or reasons for this is probably impossible. But I would like to suggest that this particular characteristic of his poetry and sensibility is related to what I have spoken of as his eclectic manners, that his major weakness may well be thought of as a lack of cohesiveness in, or laziness of, imagination. Or, still more properly, it might be said that he is possessed of a richly exploratory but not a fully synthesizing imagination and that, in the end, he has more genius for analysis than metaphor.¹

This can be seen in the highly variable nature of his metaphors, his other figures of speech, and, generally, in

¹Although the problems of prose fiction and the terms in which it can be discussed are different from those of poetry, The Fathers (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1938), Tate's major adventure in fiction, constitutes an extended demonstration of his analytical powers and synthesizing weakness of imagination. There is in this novel much impressive writing, but on the whole it is a surprising concatenation of clichés and disjunctions in motive and meaning, in realization of character, action, and total structure.

his imagery. Of course one cannot say precisely what is most characteristic about his figures of speech or imagery. That he prefers metaphor to simile, for instance, is not, in his time, exceptional. That his imagery reflects the particular natural world with which he is most familiar, also, is not especially significant. There is little point in speaking of these things. But what is significant is that both his figures and imagery in general are so highly variable in nature and quality.

In his most successful poems, Tate's imagery is meaningfully concrete. It is highly realizable in sensory terms and bears most naturally and intimately its burden of rational significance (cf. discussion of "The Cross," p. 150).

"Emblems" (1931), one of Tate's poems on the theme of personal sense of tradition, is distinctive in this respect.

I quote the last two stanzas of part three:

In the hollows where the forefathers
Without beards, their faces bright and long,
Lay down at sunset by the cool river
In the tall willows amid birdsong;

And the long sleep by the cool river
They've slept full and long, till now the air
Waits twilit for their echo; the burning shiver
Of August strikes like a hawk the crouching hare.

But this level, this integration, of imagery and figurative meaning is more the exception than the rule.

As I have indicated in another context, Tate constantly works his subject-matter to give it a strong sense of concreteness. But too often this merely results in arbitrary image for its own sake ("Death of Little Boys") or a

half-realized melange of image and rational argument ("Shadow and Shade"). And, in its ill-digested form, the attempt at a sense of concreteness results in simply and only that--a "sense" of it. These stanzas, variations somewhat a la Stevens, from "The Eye" (1946) show how faith in "concrete" expression becomes one of Tate's false and easy indulgences:

I see the horses and the sad streets
Of my childhood in an agate eye
Roving, under the clean sheets,
Over a black hole in the sky.
.
I see the gray heroes and the graves
Of my childhood in the nuclear eye
Horizons spent in dun caves
Sucked down into the sinking sky.
.
I see the long field and the noon
Of my childhood in the carbolic eye
Dissolving pupil of the moon
Seared from the raveled hole of the sky.

Certainly this imagery, in quantity alone if in nothing else, pretends to be precise, yet it is hardly so. The faculty operating here is not a graphic imagination. This is rhetoric, verbal play, and the confused figures lean through a rational darkness toward abstraction, toward analysis which is supposed to relate to the statements in other stanzas of the poem with which these alternate. The last two stanzas of the poem become pure quasi-imagic statement, that is, the images stated are not concrete, but vehicles for abstraction which is alone significant and realizable:

I see the father and the cooling cup
Of my childhood in the swallowing sky
Down, down, until down is up
And there is nothing in the eye,

Shut shutter of the mineral man
 Who takes the fatherless dark to bed,
 The acid sky to the brain-pan;
 And calls the crows to peck his head.

And, in one of his latest poems, "The Maimed Man" (1952),
 this same tendency to overwork half-realized imagery reaches
 a pretentious extreme:

Didactic Laurel, loose your reasoning leaf
 Into my trembling hand; assert your blade
 Against the Morning Star, enlightening Thief
 Of that first Mother who returned the Maid.
 Beguiling myrtle, shake no more my ear
 With your green bough: because I am afraid
 Of him who says I have no need to fear,
 Return, Laurel! Dying sense has cast
 Shadow on shadow of a metal tear
 Around my rim of being.¹

Now, in one respect or another, the intellectual
 stringency which attempts to guide imaginative insight is
 the thing that causes the poet's confusions, his unrealized
 language. And underlying that intellectual drive there is
 one quality which dominates his artistic vision. This is
 essentially and usually emotional violence. Now "violence"
 is Tate's most distinctive "business" and in it he arrives
 at his best work, and because of it he is sadly limited and
 does some of his poorest work. To hold a reader largely by
 violence in means or matter, in vision, is often to throw
 away access to his better, more meaningful sensitivities. It
 is, in a sense, to throw away that part of the world of human
 sensitivity which, though most difficult to deal with, is
 most worthwhile. Tate would probably agree with this, but

¹Allen Tate, "The Maimed Man," Partisan Review, XIX,
 No. 3 (May-June, 1952), 265-67.

it is doubtful that he can agree with it in a creatively usable way. Violence, sudden and exaggerated emotion, unmotivated emotional emphasis, in language and imagery, is part of his sensibility from the beginning of his career as a poet.

Vivienne Koch, speaking more affably than I have of Tate's early career, points out what seems to her a paradox:

Allen Tate, beginning his career as a young poet in the early twenties, was affirming his allegiances with the classical past in the unsigned editorials of The Fugitive and, at the same time, betraying in every poem he was writing a frankly nihilistic temper which, in its alternating violence and absolution, was a romanticism of a more fiery brand than his critical writings might have endorsed.¹

But there is less paradox than indecision in this double condition. In fact, the indecision itself, the repeated appearance of a man divided against himself, is one of the permanent qualities of Tate's sensibility. It is a motivational part of his violence and anger.

During Tate's early years, as one may see in his poetry, the contradictions that Miss Koch speaks of are not deeply disturbing. But by the end of his days as a student and apprentice in poetry and criticism, about 1925, the internal disparities become a serious matter. Tate seems always to have been aware of himself in what might be considered a somewhat selfish, or at least graceless, fashion. He apparently gets caught in the toils of his own personality fairly early, and, like the not-too-hypothetical protagonist

¹Vivienne Koch, "The Poetry of Allen Tate," Modern American Poetry, ed. B. Rajan (New York: Roy Publishers, n.d.), pp. 112-12.

in "Ode to the Confederate Dead" becomes a victim of "Narcissism, the extreme introspection of our age." As a result, a large portion of his mature creative life--from about 1925 to 1950--becomes a period of torment, anger, perversity, and violence of spirit and imagination. The "individualistic intellectualism" which he celebrated as a young man brings him, by the road of heightened self-consciousness, to the very personal disorder, the dissociation of consciousness which he repeatedly castigates as the sickness of his age. His efforts to cultivate a Modern sensibility are quite successful. Poems such as "The Cross," "Shadow and Shade," "The Last Days of Alice," "Fragment of a Meditation," "Sonnets at Christmas," "More Sonnets at Christmas," "Sonnets of the Blood," "Seasons of the Soul," and many others demonstrate in violence of imagery, in thought and emotion, just how successful the cultivation is for him.

In a way, Tate's treatment of spiritual torment constitutes his version of Baudelaire's "Plonger au fond du gouffre . . . pour trouver du nouveau!" A modern vision of life seems to require emotional violence--a "mummy Christ" and voracious spiders--to image contradictions which other men have known in other times:

Again the native hour lets down the locks
 Uncombed and black, but gray the bobbing beard;
 Ten years ago His eyes, fierce shuttlecocks,
 Pierced the close net of what I failed: I feared
 The belly-cold, the grave-clout, that betrayed
 Me dithering in the drift of cordial seas;
 Ten years are time enough to be dismayed
 By mummy Christ, head crammed between his knees.

("More Sonnets at Christmas, I")

Not power nor the casual hand of God
 Shall keep us whole in our dissevering air.
 It is a stink upon this pleasant sod
 So foul, the hovering buzzard sees it fair;
 I ask you will it end before tonight
 And the moth tease again the windy flame,
 Or spiders, eating their loves, hide in the night
 At last, drowsy with self-devouring shame?
 Call it the house of Atreus where we live--
 Which one of us the Greek perplexed with crime
 Questions the future: bring that lucid sieve
 To strain the appointed particles of time!
 Whether by Corinth or by Thebes we go
 The way is brief, but the fixed doom, not so.

("Sonnets of the Blood, VIII")

The psychic tension, the central problem of our age, belongs to Tate, but it angers him that it should be so. His is not the scientific, pragmatic, quantitative view of life, but his intellectual scepticism, his intensive personal quest for an absolute order of human meaning, bring him to virtually the same spiritual and moral impasses of that view.

He has, one can see, reason for the anguish and despair this causes him. For, rationally, he is convinced that the major achievement of man--and especially of the creative artist--is the definition of spiritual-moral order in the midst of complex and humanly destructive Natural order. And, rationally, he is incapable of the belief necessary for achieving the spiritual order of a Christian, though that remains the order in whose terms his plight exists. As a result a convincing moral order which is central to his own "cultured" assumptions and to which he might aspire is essentially unavailable to him. Living in a Christian context, obsessed as he is by man's need for tradition, Tate's spiritual plight necessarily defines his moral plight. Outside

of dying, it seems he cannot cease to be what he is, what he has sought to be--a highly self-conscious, intellectual, modern man. But, since just what he is prohibits his achieving the order to which he aspires by virtue of what he is, his plight seems maddeningly unsolvable. He is caught in the squirrel cage of modern sensibility.

As a poet, as a poetical sensibility, it is somewhere in this cage of torment, more or less, that Tate pauses when he undertakes the writing of "Seasons of the Soul." This poem marks the peak of his creative powers and is, in spite of its flaws, his single greatest achievement. Tate's output in poetry from the time of this poem, 1944, to the present has been exceedingly small, and, in the main, radically different from what he seems to have labored toward in his career. In a very real sense, one might almost say that "Seasons of the Soul" marks the end of a poet's career.

CHAPTER VI

SENSIBILITY AND THE POET-CRITIC

What can one hope to discover in examining a poet's criticism that is not already clearly written or implicit in his poetry? Can one discover more than proof of what he has already inferred about the poet's intentions and critical principles? If one has been astute, perhaps there is nothing more to be discovered. Certainly, one ought to be able to see in the poet's handling of form, his uses of imagery and symbols, his subject-matters, and his manipulations of language all of his more important beliefs, assumptions, and critical insights. The poet reveals all of the more important aspects of his sensibility by exercising it. But it still remains that the poet-critic, especially the modern professional poet-professional critic, is a distinct animal. And it remains that by examining, even briefly, a piece of his criticism, one may better understand the theories and the sensibility that encourage the practice of two arts as well as see explicitly presented in the criticism what is often only vaguely implicit and may go unrecognized in the poetry. This much said, let us look at one of Tate's essays, his particularly interesting essay on Hart Crane.

That Tate maintains a fairly well-defined view of what constitutes a "good" or "successful" poem can be seen

in the main argument of his essay on his friend. In general, Tate's contention is that of the formalist critic: that Crane's most ambitious works such as "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" and The Bridge, in spite of consistently brilliant passages, are corrupted by his inability to organize, think through, and give them informing structure. Tate says,

In the summer of 1930 he [Crane] had written me that he feared his most ambitious work, The Bridge, was not quite perfectly "realized", that probably his soundest work was in the shorter pieces of White Buildings, but that his mind, being once committed to the larger undertaking, could never return to the lyrical and more limited form. He had an extraordinary insight into the foundations of his work, and I think this judgement of it will not be refuted.¹

Tate's essay becomes, indirectly, an explanation and analysis of Crane's insight into his own work.

For Tate, poetic structure is not a precisely explicit matter. That is, it is not merely a matter of the poet's committing himself to a specific meter and stanzaic structure, though this in itself does indicate something important about the informing structure of a poem. Poetic structure becomes an indication of moral intelligence which gets into a poem ". . . not as moral abstractions but as form, coherence of image and metaphor, control of tone and of rhythm, the union of these features."² Sound poetic form, a kind of morality, is a matter of fundamental coherence, and coherence in a poem is extremely important:

¹Allen Tate, Limits, p. 227.

²Ibid., p. 56.

The fifteen parts of The Bridge taken as one poem suffer from the lack of coherent structure, whether symbolic or narrative: the coherence of the work consists in the personal quality of the writing--in mood, feeling, and tone.¹

Such a judgment obviously implies that mood, feeling, and tone are, in themselves, organizing elements, compositional controls, which give a poem a quality of cohesiveness. They are not, however, enough to give a poem "real" structural coherence, for such ordering must be objective, not strictly personal. The successful poem must have some kind of "reasonably" meaningful structure. That is, total structure is a matter of some kind of logic, some generally accepted kind of organization as opposed to an arbitrary private organization which could be considered a-moral or immoral. Tate could give more terms for what he means by "coherent structure." Besides symbolic or narrative he could also write of logical, moral, allegorical, anagogical, associative, dramatic, structures or ". . . a general movement of action as potency which it is the purpose of the poem to actualize."²

What Tate always means most certainly is that in a particular structure there is always important meaning. This meaning resides in the created relationship of one thing to another and all things to the whole. In the better poem this relationship is made in such a fashion that, though it may not necessarily make possible a logical reduction of the

¹Ibid., pp. 229-30.

²Allen Tate, The Forlorn Demon, op. cit., p. 44.

poem's meaning, it does make possible the apprehension of meaning. The created relationship conforms to some cognitive process. And, within a single poem, it will be consistent. Style alone is not enough for attaining this kind of order and meaning:

. . . Crane has perfect mastery over the quality of his style; but the style lacks an objective pattern of ideas elaborate enough to carry it through an epic or heroic work. The single symbolic image, in which the whole poem centers, is at one time the actual Brooklyn Bridge; at another, it is any bridge or "connection"; at still another, it is a philosophical pun and becomes the basis for a series of analogies.¹

It seems that, for Tate, real structure in a poem consists in the poet's defining and sticking to his subject with a deep awareness of his own powers and limitations. He must be true to himself in such a way that he will not play his reader false. The act of writing a poem involves a complex commitment. In spite of his notions about "individualistic intellectualism," Tate holds the serious and mature writer responsible for what can be called an "ethics of creativity." This ethics is founded on the writer's understanding of and his acquiescing to the nature and function of human language. His understanding becomes synonymous with his sensibility. It is the creation of this kind of awareness in a poem which will keep it from going dead or sentimental. And it is this kind of understanding that makes real structure possible, for the real structure will inhere in the poet's honest definition of his particular understanding.

¹Allen Tate, Limits, p. 230.

Writing a good poem is a process of defining in it what it is about:

In "Cape Hatteras," the aeroplane and Walt Whitman are analogous "bridges" to some transcendental truth. Because the idea is variously metaphor, symbol, and analogy, it tends to make the poem static. The poet takes it up, only to be forced to put it down again when the poetic image of the moment is exhausted. The idea does not, in short, fill the poet's mind; it is the starting point for a series of short flights, or inventions connected only in analogy--which explains the merely personal passages, which are obscure, and the lapses into sentimentality.¹

Strangely enough, but, then perhaps not so strangely in the light of Tate's contradictions, this all sounds like an indictment of some of Tate's own poems--"Death of Little Boys," "Mother and Son," "Shadow and Shade," "The Maimed Man." It seems typical of Tate's critical-poetic sensibility that he can often see in others the weaknesses he cannot overcome in himself. For instance, his understanding in various places in his essays of the failings of the symbolist movement, principally, its cultivated derangement of order, is available to him as critical idea but not as something he can use to solve his own problems in poetic strategy. His essay on Crane is filled with vaguely troubling moments, for one senses at times that what Tate is writing may often be as much a defense and indictment of himself as it is of Crane. The definition of sentimentality that follows immediately after the last quoted passage casts a full light on some of his own obscurities: "For poetic sentimentality is emotion undisciplined by the structure of events or ideas of which it

¹Ibid., p. 230.

is ostensibly a part. The idea is not objective and articulate in itself; it lags after the poet's vision; it appears and disappears; . . ." I say the light of something like this indicates dissociated thought, but Tate obviously does not look at and judge his own poems in these terms. His problems are different from Crane's.

I am sure Tate would not say, and we are not likely to say of him, that his own lack is one of "educated" understanding. What Crane lacked was just such an understanding. What he needed and was virtually incapable of was subject-matter that he thoroughly understood, something he could hang onto with more than just metaphorical hooks. As Tate says:

. . . he knew little of the history of his country. It was not merely a defect of education, but a defect, in the spiritual sense, of the modern mind. Crane lacked the sort of indispensable understanding of his country that a New England farmer has who has never been out of his township. The Bridge attempts to include all American life, but it covers the ground with seven-league boots and, like a sightseer, sees nothing. With reference to its leading symbol, it has no subject-matter.¹

Again, one might pause on these words, especially the phrases ". . . defect, in the spiritual sense, of the modern mind." They do relate to Tate, but let us postpone consideration of them for a moment.

In Tate's mind, poetic structure is closely bound up in the nature of a poet's consciousness about his subject-matter. They are inter-related in such a way that a failure of one almost amounts to an indictment of the other. In the successful poem, he says:

¹Ibid., p. 235.

. . . we are given . . . the complete articulation of the ideas down to the slightest detail, and we are given it objectively apart from anything that the poet is going to say about it. When the poet extends his perception, there is a further extension of the groundwork ready to meet it and discipline it, and to compel the sensibility of the poet to stick to the subject. It is a game of chess; neither side can move without consulting the other.¹

The "groundwork" that Tate is talking about here is intellectual: ideas, philosophy, an organized vision of life.

Crane's poetry is lacking in such a groundwork, and, therefore, necessarily it is flawed in structure.

But what Crane's poetry does possess, and what Tate places a high evaluation on, is its original play of imaginative insight, the working of a limited but intense sensibility. This is to be seen most distinctly in Crane's ". . . instinctive mastery of the fused metaphor of symbolism."² Such a mastery of metaphor is, as Tate says, "instinctive." That is, it is essentially founded on emotional sensitivity. And, therefore, exploitation of it as a poetic device is likely to be simply an exploitation of the poet's emotional resources. Now, such exploitation in itself is not necessarily bad, but, as things go in poetry it usually turns out to be damaging: It was for Crane, and, to a certain extent, it has been for Tate. In Tate's case it has been different, perhaps, because he does not have Crane's natural gift for metaphor, because his gift is more for intellectual analysis. Therefore, though like Crane he tries to extend the sensory and emotional aspects of anything with which he deals, he is not so completely dependent upon those aspects of his

¹Ibid., pp. 230-31.

²Ibid., p. 225.

sensibility. His real dependence is upon a groundwork of thought that exists outside of his poems.

Crane's mastery of the fused metaphor is a direct outgrowth of his thoroughly sensuous style, of his complete willingness to lean upon the emotional and evocative qualities of his style and especially at any moment when he has difficulties with his subject-matter. Paradoxically his major achievement as a "neo-symbolist" is, thus, married to his major limitation. And Tate's high evaluation of Crane's metaphorical and sensuously verbal achievement does not, in any way, prevent him from seeing this. He sees Crane's ready submission to the verbal and intuitive qualities of style as a sign of internal disintegration and of the surrender of poetry to disorder. He says: "Crane's difficulty is that of modern poets generally: they play the game with half of the men, the men of sensibility, and because sensibility can make any move, the significance of all moves is obscure. If we subtract from Crane's idea its periphery of sensation, we have left only the dead abstraction, . . ."¹

In coming to final terms with Crane's major efforts, Tate views the "periphery of sensation," the writing from sensation rather than conceptualization, as the basis of his lasting achievement. The achievement is stylistic. The poetry is, at times, great ("The River," "Praise for an Urn"), but its greatness is of a lesser order. Major achievement in poetry is possible only when a genius for

¹Ibid., p. 231.

style is integrated with a genius for structure. And, in light of his notions about structure, it is thus apparent that, for Tate, major achievement requires a comprehensively organized sensibility. What Tate requires of a good poem, and a good poet, is fairly clear. It is what he finds in Yeats's "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory": complete expression, ". . . a perfect articulation and lucidity . . . the material to be symbolized replaces the symbol, and contains its own meaning."¹ And this brings us back again to one of Tate's most central assertions, a notion which is inescapable in his understanding of order.

Tate expresses a belief that Crane's failure as a poet lies outside his poetry in his age, and ". . . reveals our defects in their extremity."² Crane and his work become moral lessons in life and poetry. Every poem that Crane wrote ". . . is a thrust of . . . sensibility into the world: his defect lay in his inability to face out the moral criticism implicit in his failure to impose his will upon experience."³ Obviously, the poet orders his experience by various kinds of acts of will. It is typical of the romantic personality, however, that it fails to recognize the limitations of the human will. Thus, it lives either within the illusion of will's boundless efficacy or within the ironic self-pity of its frustration. Unable to come to satisfactory terms with the immanent limitations of any and all human conditions

¹Ibid., p. 221.

²Ibid., p. 235.

³Ibid., p. 228.

and activities, the romantic cannot, in the end, even hope to succeed in anything he undertakes to be or do. But such imperfection itself, such a condition of human life, Tate sees as the most serious defect of our age. Crane stands as an exemplum of the disorder of our age, an age of "quantity," "scientific truth--pragmatic fact," which must deny the values of "quality," "insight," and "moral understanding." How could Crane have escaped the ravages of such an age, his ultimate suicide? How could he have succeeded in making great poems in a "literary situation" already corrupted by his age? The answer for Tate lies in moral insight and willingness to understand the nature of human existence.

Tate knew Crane as a close friend and disputant for a period of ten years, and had a better chance than the critic usually has for obtaining an understanding of his subject. Tate would be the first to admit the importance of this knowledge to his discussion. Understanding of literature is not, for him, divorcible from other kinds of knowledge. As he says in another context:

I have brought together these scattered memories of my first reading of a serious writer because in discussing any writer, or in coming to terms with him, we must avoid the trap of mere abstract evaluation, and try to reproduce the actual conditions of our relations to him. It would be difficult for me to take Poe up, "study" him, and proceed to a critical judgement. One may give these affairs the look of method, and thus deceive everybody but oneself.¹

The real background, then, to Tate's considerations

¹Allen Tate, The Forlorn Demon, p. 81.

of Crane is at hand from moment to moment in his essay. Tate was a witness to Crane's serious personal disorder, his homosexuality, his fantastic bouts of alcoholism, and his general, pervasive irresponsibility to and for himself. He is, as a critic, the witness of both a human and a literary situation that seem to make the writing of major poetry impossible. He reflects this when he says, Crane ". . . is the blameless victim of a world whose impurity violates the moment of intensity, which would otherwise be enduring and perfect. He is betrayed, not by a defect of his own nature, but by the external world; he asks of nature, perfection--requiring only of himself, intensity. The persistent, and persistently defeated, pursuit of a natural absolute places Crane at the center of his age."¹ The breakdown of personality, as Crane demonstrates it, is symptomatic of the ills of an age. Cultivation of intensity, substitution of sensation for reason, lead to the creation of a Narcissistic frame of reference. This brings about a state of culture completely lacking in integration . . . the Modern American culture which, as someone has said, consists of a nest full of one-hundred-sixty million china eggs. Thus, the disintegration of Hart Crane as a personality, the failings of his most ambitious poetry, the recent history of the Platonic-scientific will, the errors of romanticism and symbolism, and the dissociation of modern consciousness and culture, all come together with many other more stylistic considerations to make up a literary, critical

¹Allen Tate, Limits, p. 234.

essay. And this kind of inter-relatedness of things is typical of Tate's criticism.

What is slightly atypical in Tate's essay on Crane, something for which he really cannot be blamed, is the impurity of his critical situation. That is, his personal relationship with Crane places some extra burden on him. What results is an emphasis, unusual in Tate's criticism, on considerations of the writer as personality. In a more objective critical situation, one in which he may be professionally but not personally involved, Tate avoids generalizations on the poet's life as a means for getting at problems in his poetry. He is extremely wary of the "genetic fallacy," and usually does not pass up an opportunity to castigate those who are not. But on occasion, and especially in this essay on Crane, by indulging in his favorite argument about the culture-art relationship, he gets himself involved in a more subtle but none-the-less real form of the genetic fallacy.

As a rule, however, Tate generalizes about the context of a poetry only in order to establish the kind of historical perspective which is essential for a just appreciation of the work under scrutiny. Having done this, he usually proceeds to fairly close analysis of poetic structure, then to form. His discussion of distinctive elements in a poem is usually attended by a reminder that a poem must be experienced as an inviolable whole:

. . . if the poem is a real creation, it is a kind of knowledge that we did not possess before. It is not knowledge "about" something else; the poem is the fullness of that knowledge. We know the particular poem,

not what it says that we can restate. In a manner of speaking, the poem is its own knower, neither poet nor reader knowing anything that the poem says apart from the words of the poem.¹

Tate's real concern as a critic of poetry is with poems and not with ideas or poets.

One can say that because of his highly-principled belief in the nature of criticism, his friendly or inimical relations with writers do not influence his criticism on them as writers. His friendship with John Peale Bishop may lead him to underplay his reservations about Bishop's poetry, but it does not keep him from stating them. His friendship with Crane, and his obvious regrets about him, do not prevent him from being a rather hard critic, do not dissuade him from naming the chaos which broke down the poetry and destroyed Crane as a poet and a man. He is not disloyal to Crane. He simply believes that criticism must be honest at all times. Kindness must care for itself. He can never be accused of really sacrificing a subject's poetry to his own categories and ideas--though sometimes his own categories and ideas may get too much play in an individual essay. When he has done, the poetry remains for the reader to discover or, more properly, to re-discover in the light of another's serious considerations.

If, in critical tone there is anything in the essays that might be pointed to with some hesitation, it is the rather uncompromising air of seriousness, the undeviating attention to "important" matters at hand. It is always as

¹Ibid., p. 250.

if, for the moment, this were the world and this idea or these thoughts were the sum total of meaningful life. Such seriousness, of course, is true not only of Tate. It is a manner all of the "new critics" have practiced, one their work has taught us to respect (though some despair of it). It is a manner that grows out of a real love for the art of poetry. There is no sham in it. The same manner, the same sort of seriousness, pervades Tate's poetry--even such flip pieces as "Two Conceits for the Eye to Sing." Tate's consciousness does seem to be unified.

But we should know by now that, in spite of its occasional unified appearance, the sensibility of Allen Tate is not quietly coherent, that it lives on internal conflicts. Now, the unified consciousness is, figuratively, what may be called a one-track condition of mind. Many problems may arise to complicate its being, but they all move at tangents to the one track, impinge upon the central consciousness giving it richness and a natural complexity. The dissociated or divided consciousness, on the other hand, is a multiple-track condition of mind. No one defined order of meaning holds sway for long or to the exclusion of other simultaneous, seemingly valid orders. In this condition complexity always prevails, ever threatening to become or actually becoming confusion. These two kinds of consciousness, so prominent in recent critical concern, seem to mark simply the difference between an "absolute" and a "relative" state of mind or being. Yet, this is not wholly accurate. What the two

mark are the differences in a mind's varying manners of inhabiting the relations between its own thoughts and feelings. The two terms indicate two different degrees in the organization of sensibility. The Tatian sensibility is capable of inhabiting both degrees of organization at different times. It is "unified," though tortured by tangents, in "The Cross" or "Seasons of the Soul." It is "unified" in most of the criticism, and revels in complexity. It is divided and confused in poems such as "Shadow and Shade" or "Mother and Son," and, in general quality, it tends more often toward a divided than toward a unified condition. To know this, is to know much about Tate's poetry. As Henry James says (and I mean pretty much the same by "sensibility" that he means by "taste"): "The 'taste' of the poet is, at bottom and so far as the poet in him prevails over everything else, his active sense of life: in accordance with which truth to keep one's hand on is to hold the silver clue to the whole labyrinth of his consciousness."¹

In conclusion, then, Tate's judgment of Crane's poetry rests on a complex conception of the nature and use of structure. And his analysis of Crane's structural insufficiencies involves relating them to their living context, to Crane--but not simply to Crane as a man, rather to Crane as an accretion of symptoms of our time. He says:

¹Henry James, "Preface to The Golden Bowl," The Art of the Novel, ed. R. P. Blackmur (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 340. I am indebted to F. R. Leavis' essay on James in The Great Tradition (p. 128) for revisiting this statement by James. My use, however, differs from Leavis'.

Rimbaud achieved 'disorder' out of implicit order, after a deliberate cultivation of 'derangement', but in our age the disintegration of our intellectual systems is accomplished. With Crane the disorder is original and fundamental. That is the special quality of his mind that belongs peculiarly to our own time.¹

There is hardly an essay in which Tate does not make some reference to contemporary disorder. Dislocation of life and considerations of life, dislocation of reason and passion, of thought and action, of meaning and expression, of belief and its functions, of politics and experience--all of these in the framework of a war between science and culture (Quantity and Quality) constitute his major critical preoccupation coincident with his concern for literature specifically. In his essay on Crane the pattern of this kind of thought looms behind the discussion, and it is appeal to various aspects of this pattern that forms the basis of Tate's judgments.

In the end, nothing in Tate fails to touch on these large concerns. He is obsessed by problems of order. "Objective," "structure," "consistency," "coherence," "form," "unity"--all terms that are central to his judgments are synonyms and synecdoches for order. The unmistakable and thoroughly normal identification of order with "good" and of disorder with "bad" defines the structure of his thought as ethical-moral and, eventually, didactic. Certainly, this is apparent in Tate's essays, and one need only read one inch below the adventurous surface of his poetry to see it there as well. The problems of religious belief that bring Tate to his greatest poetry are a part of this larger concern

¹Allen Tate, Limits, pp. 225-26.

with order. Again, by looking at one of his poems we can see just what his concern, just what his complex sensibility brings him to. It may not be pretty in an immediate way. It is certainly not simple. Let us look, then, at his cultivated modern multiple-awareness in "Seasons of the Soul."

CHAPTER VII

"SEASONS OF THE SOUL"

Allen Tate's puzzling "Seasons of the Soul" calls for a venture into certain difficult critical areas. But, since the more one works on Tate's poetry in general the more one is exposed to confusions, there is no reason to shy at this instance. This poem is often referred to in one limited context or another, and usually elicits a hesitant opinion that it is one of the major poems of our time. I have been "teased to thought" by what has been said about the poem, but at the same time I have been troubled by the notion that the poem is greatly admired yet, apparently, only "somewhat" understood. But I too have admired it even as I suspected my admiration and understanding. One is faced by certain literal-minded questions: "Does the poem transcend the condemnations of its initial obscurities?" "Is it, as it seems to be, a victory of technique?" "Is it a piece of derivative writing in many respects?" "Is it a major achievement or an ambitious catch-all and a failure?"

I have long felt that I understood and "experienced" the poem in a general way. But one may founder on its particulars, and, often, in struggling with them, lose the poem and only come to somewhere in the middle of a re-reading of The Divine Comedy or The Confessions of St. Augustine. It is

difficult to distinguish at times what the true importance and sense is intended to be in apparently crucial passages in Tate's poem. One may very well write this kind of difficulty off to the symbolist strategy of the poem, to its quality of condensed multiple statement. But, in spite of what one may give to strategy, if what seem to be key phrases cannot be "appreciated," or if no substantial clue is given as to what is dramatically or otherwise central at a given instant, may not the poem consist merely of parts and remain discrete in its parts--brilliant though they may be--in the final experience and analysis of that experience?

Treatments of "Seasons of the Soul" such as those of Cleanth Brooks,¹ Vivienne Koch,² and Alwyn Berland³ have been cursory and unsatisfactory, because, among other things, they have apparently felt it unnecessary to consider its obscurities, its initial qualities of disjunction. Such qualities may be dismissed by the sensitive reader in his recognition of a symbolist imagination at work, but in so doing much of what the poem is may be lost or, for the more literal-minded reader, too much of it may be written off as inexpressible in any terms but its own. It is possible that, reasonably speaking, a poem such as this does not permit

¹Cleanth Brooks, "Allen Tate," Poetry, LXVI, No. 6 (June, 1944), 324-29.

²Vivienne Koch, "The Poetry of Allen Tate," op. cit., pp. 28-32.

³Alwyn Berland, "Violence in the Poetry of Allen Tate," Accent, XI, No. 3 (Summer, 1951), 165-71.

close analysis. A valid paraphrase of Tate's "Seasons" appears to be, if not impossible, at least forbiddingly difficult. But it is possible to indicate how one may come to be assured of experiencing the poem sensitively and of understanding how its elements are intended to cohere. To call what I attempt, then, a record of growing comprehension, rather than an absolute rendering of meanings in the poem, seems to be nearer to the truth. Mine is a mitigated "heresy of paraphrase."

As I have already indicated, Tate's major objective concern as a writer has been with modern man, the decay or loss of traditions and the disintegration of personal sensibility. He has emphasized the personal, spiritual dislocation which has resulted from, and in a way occasioned such loss. He has discovered to himself the troubling possibility that the informing Christian tradition of the past is beyond reclamation for the modern, sophisticated mind. He has struggled to maintain a view of the dignity of man--his moral and ethical grandeur--and he has despaired in the predominance of chaos and insistent transience.

I do not wish to imply that Tate's poetry is a clear, simple, biographical record. Yet I have said that it is an intensely "personal" kind of poetry. The best art usually transcends in enigmatical ways what one may consider its creator to have been and to have been becoming at the time of a particular creative act. That Tate, at the time when he was writing "Seasons of the Soul," was becoming the

"organized Christian" of his present converted state,¹ there is no doubt. But a valid treatment of the poem must avoid such recognition even though conversion may be viewed as an answer to the problem he poses in it. The poem antedates and can make no just claims upon Tate's present being. Its integrity must renounce any dependence upon what he has become. At the time when he wrote the poem his preoccupation with loss of faith, degrees of personal waste, and mundane haecceitas might have been taken as a sign of what was to come for him personally, but it did not necessitate what has come about. Had he been as deeply romantic as some of his philosophic predispositions and poetic modes might have led one to believe, he, like his friend Hart Crane, might have elected suicide as the inevitable solution for his plight. Tate has said of Crane: "Suicide was the sole act of will left to him short of profound alteration of his character. I think the evidence of this is the locked-in sensibility, the insulated egoism of his poetry."² In sensibility, as I have said, there are real similarities between the two, but Tate's hardy skepticism and skill in living-out his problems were sadly lacking in Crane. That Tate has elected new faith and affirmed the traditional offices of salvation as a solution for some of his problems, enforces by reflection that which in his past pronounced him to be Hulme's type of the

¹Tate became a convert to Roman Catholicism sometime in 1950-51.

²Allen Tate, Limits, p. 228.

spiritual classicist. And, not to be too sanguine, the election of a religious authority as the end to a search for personal order shows Tate still following the journey of the "properly" modern sensibility. The example of Eliot or of Auden and many others was there before him--though, perhaps more pertinently, so was the militant Catholic conscience of Mrs. Tate, Caroline Gordon.

Be this as it may, when Tate wrote "Seasons of the Soul" his genuine and absorbing personal concerns had a large part in determining what the poem was to be. These concerns are alive in his critical perceptions and in other poems of the same period. In his recurring treatment of a few similar experiences one can describe a theme responsible for much of the vitality in his thought: Nature, as a symbol interchangeable with symbols of death, impresses the idea and pitiless affective force of mortality on the intelligent man of modern sensibility. Such a man can hardly avoid being victimized (solipsistically) by his intelligence (as not uncommonly in the post-medieval Christian context of pragmatic "truth"). He can believe in nothing but a Narcissistic reality, that internal world he creates in his unpremeditated acts of being in an unresolvably dualistic universe. In the end, spiritual despair becomes a "natural" condition.

I set this forth as orientation for a complex experience and not as a reduction of poetic meaning. Justification for "trying-out" such material from the poems is to be found, as usual with Tate, in moments of insight scattered

throughout his essays. In the essay on Emily Dickinson, he refers us to that New England poet's ingrained awareness of Nature, and, in so doing gives us a hint as to what may be an attitude toward and use of Nature in his own poetry:

The general symbol of Nature, for her, is Death. . . . ideas, in her poetry, are momentarily assailed by the disintegrating force of Nature (appearing as Death) which, while constantly breaking them down, constantly redefines them. The values are purified by the triumphant withdrawal from Nature, by their power to recover from Nature. The poet attains to mastery over experience by facing its utmost implications. . . . We are shown our roots in Nature by examining our differences with Nature; we are renewed by Nature without being delivered into her hands.¹

Now, Tate uses this perception as experience in his poetry, realizing intensely its human implications and poetic possibilities. For him, it is a portion of Emily Dickinson's "perfect literary situation." It becomes a part of his.

But at times the penetration of Tate's angry sensibility has shown him to be more aware and, consonantly, perhaps more deeply Christian, in his recognition of "the disintegrating force of Nature" than was Miss Dickinson with all her working Puritan inheritance. He has absorbed the lesson of Hart Crane and the whole tradition of pantheistic immersion. Nature has the power to destroy integrity and consciousness for small reward--at most, for a vague apotheosis. The individual who, like Rimbaud or Crane, cultivates sensory experience--and its derangement--retreats from human life and its burdens of rational cognition (" . . . facing its utmost implications. . . "). He surrenders human

¹Ibid., pp. 203-04.

individuality and real values in pursuit of himself. Apotheosis, the quest of a personal absolute, is the abnegation and not the solution of ultimate human problems. Yet one can get himself confounded in troubling such central metaphysical meanings.

Tate knows this much. Thus, he constructs rational tensions which have kept him, much like a good Puritan, from being delivered into Nature's hands. But, unlike Emily Dickinson, and that good Puritan, he does not enjoy an automatic spiritual renewal as a result of his restraints. On the contrary, his insight seems only to heighten for him a sense of the dissociation and perversity in human existence. Torment is the first reward for intellectual sensitivity and seriousness. Emily Dickinson's intuitive intelligence is the natural effect of a traditional life, and though it did not preserve her from spiritual anguish it did preserve her from real spiritual despair. Yet, somehow, for Tate, opposed to mysterious faith but desiring it, his insight and experience is hopeful in spite of all the agony it entails.

Tate's essay, "Narcissus as Narcissus," gives his view of a problem related to these present considerations, that of the solipsistic sensibility. To repeat my earlier reference, Tate tells us that his poem is about ". . . solipsism or Narcissism; . . . the failure of the human personality to function objectively in nature and society." He continues: "Society appears to offer limited fields for the exercise of the whole man, who wastes his energy piecemeal over separate

functions that ought to come under a unity of being." As he perceives it, modern society produces ". . . the remarkable self-consciousness of our age" which leads to ". . . Narcissism, preoccupation with self."¹

These considerations are central to Tate's "literary situation." Certainly, his is one replete with possibilities, possibilities which he largely realizes in an inter-animating group of poems: "Ode to the Confederate Dead," "The Cross," "Seasons of the Soul," and "Winter Mask."

In "Ode to the Confederate Dead," Tate meditates on the ravages of time. I say "Tate," secure in the thought that we may consider the protagonist here a Confederate soldier, any man, myself as dramatic cooperator, Tate, or all simultaneously. Tate comments on this language of point of view: "(To those who may identify the man at the gate with the author of the poem I would say: He differs from the author in not accepting a "practical solution," for the author's personal dilemma is perhaps not quite so exclusive as that of the meditating man.)"² But this does not eliminate the obvious. For the purposes of continuity and to avoid the polite deviousness I have so far tried to exercise in respect to this matter, I will speak of these poems as products of Tate's experience. As J. V. Cunningham has said, "A man is distinct from his experience or he could not speak of it, yet he is his experience or it would not be his . . . to say one

¹Ibid., pp. 250-51.

²Ibid., p. 255.

thing is another (A is A) is to affirm that they are different and yet that their identity is valid and constructible."¹

In the opening of Tate's poem, *Autumn*, the "ambitious" destroyer in this "fierce" moment in time, turns the poet's thoughts inward, all the world a reflection of his chipped-angel mortality. He knows that his sentient nature gives him insights which he cannot thoroughly comprehend. He knows also that this half-knowledge is insufficient and that interaction of a sub-rational self with the Natural world leads away from understanding toward inability to cope with the experience of passage and decay. And self-conscious speculation, "the patient curse/ That stones the eyes . . ." is self-destruction. He becomes locked in himself. He can turn nowhere outside of himself for an answer. He faces deep private need and a foregone conclusion that one can try only not to think. For him, unable to live with any immediacy in a fragmentary world, a real solution is impossible. He is cut off from the world of which he is still very much a part.

Throughout the important "Ode," then, the solipsistic mind views the image of Nature as malignant or indifferent. There is no escaping Nature's energy, no way one may deal sensitively with its depredations. Dramatization of the relationship between personal solipsism and impersonal Nature becomes the agency of a central, informing insight. What a

¹J. V. Cunningham, The Quest of the Opal (Denver: Alan Swallow, Publisher, 1950), n.p.

man can know and what solace he can derive from his pre-occupation, is transformed in the tensions of Tate's poems into a puzzling of mortality. Thus, implicit in the poem there is the pressing desire for a core of absolute meaning, a desire for something in which to believe.

The obscurities of "Seasons of the Soul" can be partially resolved by approaching it with all of these somewhat extended considerations in mind. Again, to restate them in their new relevance, reality (Nature and Death), the double world that is every man's orientation, is unavoidably confounding. The poet, as man living in such a reality, is able to fashion understanding only out of himself. But self contradicts self. It seems that what he learns is only that he suffers.

In strategy, the poem is developed about an organized symbol which is a composition of numerous lesser symbolic designations. The total effect is that of an atomic fission, the result of a chain reaction, each step of which can be theoretically isolated and analyzed but each of which has significance only because it contributes to a larger part. Initially, the complex symbol exists in the meaning of the title which is both literal and figurative. As for the dedication to John Peale Bishop--I have been able to find in it no clear significance. One may, however, reflect that in a way Bishop's work and experience as a living mind paralleled Tate's. His poems and prose are filled with similar pre-occupations and come to similar perceptions: how similar we will see in a moment.

Our next directive in the poem is clearly marked by a titling of the four seasons in an individual but meaningful sequence: "Summer," "Autumn," "Winter," "Spring." A more traditional ordering would begin with Winter, or possibly Spring. Further, in an early version of the poem in the Kenyon Review (VI, No. 1), the four sections were titled "Fire," "Air," "Water," and "Earth." The construction intended, apparently, was that of hierarchical correspondences. The elimination of these earlier titles in the present version amounts to an improvement, for the relationship indicated by them is an academic sort of imposition on the structure of the poem. It was, in a sense, a factitious and forced device for drawing the poem together. Tate resigns himself to reducing his program for analytical inclusiveness.

The total symbol, dramatized in multiple terms of the four seasons, draws to itself in the working poem a complex range of associations with transience, mortality, and spiritual debility. As Cleanth Brooks has pointed out, a major structural device, one which constitutes a leitmotif and bridge between the separate sections, is violence in various forms: Summer, the violence of war; Autumn, the break with tradition; Winter, love become mere sexuality, animality; Spring, torture in the dream of salvation. But the figures of the seasons have other significance which, in some ways, may seem difficult to reconcile with this interpretation. As a matter of fact, it is obvious that at least two sets of notions do exist in the poem, dramatically relevant, fused.

In general, and "formally" more important, Summer is treated as the season of growth and approach to maturity, the season of unconcern and immediacy; Autumn is treated as the season for harvest of summer fruit, the time of apparent maturity when the soul begins to question as it anticipates the winter; Winter is treated as the season of old age and torpor, of spiritual inanition, close to death; and Spring is treated as the season of death and rebirth, the time when re-awakening hastens death and dissolution, the time of the phoenix. The seasons (Nature) impress themselves upon the poet's mind as advancing states of human mortality (one begins to die when one begins to live) which he tries to understand through the offices of experiential knowledge.

The epigraph to the poem, drawn from Canto XIII of Dante's Inferno, seems to forecast the treatment of an experience involving suicide:

Allor porsi la mano un poco avante,
e colsi un ramicel da un gran pruno;
e il tronco suo gridò: "Perchè mi schiante?"

Then I stretched out my hand a little way,
And broke a puny twig from a great thorn;
And the trunk cried out: "Why dost thou rend me?"

Actually, these lines refer us to those sections of the Inferno from which Tate has drawn a large portion of significant imagery and to which he consequently alludes. In using this material, he plays upon that "perfectly ordered world" of Dante, which, for Tate, was a world in which great poetry was written, not least of all, because it was possible.

The implicit contrast is important to a general understanding of Tate's poem.

The poem itself begins with an address to summer in which the poet questions the confused relationship of human life and Nature. He poses the problem of a mind which sees youthful surrender to a life of the senses as a possible preventive, a pre-conscious release from the torments of intellection. The strategy of language tension is, in a sense, metaphysical, logical; but idea is so couched in figures that its nonlogical force is very strong:

If now while the body is fresh
You take it, shall we give
The heart, lest heart endure
The mind's tattering
Blow of greedy claws?

But what is the danger, the cost, if heart should happen to survive the ravages of mind? One would think survival desirable. I cannot see the relevance of the question asked here in the direction which the poem takes. What Tate seems to mean is--that one might live a life of sensory immersion and therein escape, by forestalling, the destructive power of maturing mind which must renounce naive and happy illusions. But, then, he says, to what end? "Shall mind itself still live/ If like a hunting king/ It falls to the lion's jaws?" Is Tate's lion here equatable with one of its traditional significances as Lust? Can a mind really live if it is essentially destroyed by that (Lust?) for which it seeks? The whole being--body, heart, mind--dies, anyway, in the end.

Moment by moment, figure by figure, it will become

more readily apparent that what the mind hunts is a justified way to give the soul security amid the ravages of mind and Nature. This is the obsessive and powerful dramatic problem in the poem. Treated more explicitly in "The Cross," it is the plight "For those, once seeing, turning back:" who find that

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;

The poet, instructed by romantic sensibility, which is conceived to be synonymous with the summer season, says elsewhere, in "Winter Mask":

I go to the sylvan door
 Where nature has been bought
 In rational proration
 As a thing worth living for.

He repeats there the same question and comment that lies at the heart of meaning in the first stanza of "Seasons of the Soul": "Should the buyer have been beware/ It is an uneven trade." I shall have occasion to refer to "Winter Mask" again later on. For now, I believe that it should be considered as exceptionally closely related--even for Tate--to "Seasons of the Soul." It can be so considered, of course, only "for the reader's reasons," but verbal tension, stanzaic, metrical, rhythmic, and symbolic structures, as well as meaning content, indicate that "Winter Mask" may well have been a version of that section now titled "Winter," or that it may once have constituted the fifth section of a five part

poem and, that, if such were the case, being redundant, it was wisely set apart. Of course this is only conjecture, but that there is a very enlightening relationship between the two poems, there can be no doubt.

To return to "Summer"--the poet asks his formative question, but confounded by the argument for complete death which Nature gives, he sees that only rationalization and irrationality ("Unless by sleight or fast/ It seize or deny its day") can give the awakening soul any sense of security in corrosive reality. A life of expediency, making "the eye secure," is a necessity. The secure eye, one that can judge its perceptions as well as extend and refine them, is sanity in a world that knows no permanence, that knows only that

The hot wind dries and draws
With circular delay
The flesh, ash from the ember,
Into the summer's jaws.

In the third stanza, the poet refers to the fall of France to Nazi vigor; sequentially, the fall is related to personal debility, "When war's usurping claws/ Shall take the heart escheat--." The implication seems to be that internal decay, manifested by inability to act with any real assertive sense of right, placed France in a state of escheatage. When no true inheritor of the blood remains, possession of lands or of soul revert to an external irresistible power. Thus, Tate speaks of war as a natural agency in society, one with which rational man cannot cope. When reason abdicates, Nature exercises her consuming right, "Green field in burning season/ To stain the weevil's jaws."

The weevil figure, a distinctly Southern symbol--the cotton culture's great Natural enemy--forms a direct link to the following stanza.

Place has become the South. The poet, continuing his reflections, recognizes that even the summer, deludingly quiet and without perceptible beginning or end, dies in time. It blends into a universe, "Blue, empty, and tall/ Without tail or head," which unconcernedly equates man and animal. In that universe there is no recourse to the dead, "Who cannot lift their jaws." Out of their everlasting experience, they cannot direct him to an intelligible rest.

He then thinks back to a time when the season, and the child--both most natural and without self-consciousness--were incapable of foresight: "Could neither guess the night?" Obviously, neither could guess, or be conscious in terms of its own end. But, unlike the summer that "had no reason," the poet cannot, in retrospect, watch Nature succumb to itself without deriving from his complex perception the simple horror of "time's engaging jaws." Even the agencies of time and --so it seems--things as imponderable as a primal cause are subject to relentless death. For a moment Tate's strategy becomes very obvious. This stanza, the fifth, is heavily weighted with paradox, ambiguity, and capricious word-play. Yet--and this pertains to many moments in this poem--none of these "quite" overthrows comprehensibility. They do, however, expand the margin of irrelevancy to a disturbing degree. In this instance I refer to

The summer <u>had no reason</u> ;	(double meaning)
Then like a <u>primal cause</u>	□ (double paradox)
It <u>had its timeless day</u>	□ (paradox)
Before it <u>kept the season</u>	(double meaning)
Of time's <u>engaging jaws</u> .	(word play)

These thoughts now bring to his mind a vision of "Two men of our summer world" who were able to penetrate mortality, and "Descended winding hell" to question those who might be able to give him, if he could but make the descent, some answer to the problem which youthful sensibility created. The sixth stanza is a free adaptation of a moment in Canto XII of the Inferno. Virgil and Dante are confronted by the centaurs who guard the banks of Phlegethon, the river of blood. (In the following section of the poem, it is from his own "river of blood" that the poet hopes for meaning.) Dante's description of Chiron's gesture is borrowed as Tate's final image:

Chiron prese uno strale, e con la cocca
fece la barba indietro alle mascelle.

Chiron took an arrow, and with its notch
Parted his beard back upon his jaws.

Tate's use of the image seems more like an embellishment fixed upon the idea of descent into hell (which he will undertake in the Autumn section of his poem) than meaning in itself. At this particular point in Canto XII, Virgil asks Chiron to provide Dante with a centaur who will carry him, because he is mortal, across the river of embroiled souls. The figure, in Tate's poem, seems to indicate that some agency is now necessary for his further progress toward knowledge. It also serves as an introduction to the drama of descent which follows.

At the beginning of the Autumn season, the poet's path to potential understanding is blocked, even as Chiron's threatening gesture blocked the path of Virgil and Dante. He knows the need of questioning which is heightened by the new season ("I was no longer young"). He undertakes his own figurative descent to examine those who have departed from his life:

It had an autumn smell
And that is how I knew
That I was down a well:

The well as an entrance to the underworld is a traditional symbol in Western literature.¹ Descent is also latent in qualities of the season; the odors and sensations are charnel, acrid:

The air was like fine sand
In a butcher's stall
Or pumice to the tongue:

That the poet is mature now and ready to question is presented dramatically: "And when I raised my hand." The gesture seems so obvious (Think of the student) it is almost meaningless. It rises like a fragment in a dream. In fact, the short-hand drama that fills this entire section of the poem is, in form, imitative of a dream. As in a dream, the subconscious commands the dreamer to accept trivialities as

¹The well is one of the favorite symbols for Celtic writers and is to be found in the use here indicated from the Celtic myths (Oisín) and Giraldus Cambrensis to W. B. Yeats. For a beautiful usage cf. Henry Vaughan's "Friends Departed":
"He that hath found some fledged bird's nest may know
At first sight if the bird be flown;
But what fair well or grove he sings in now,
That is to him unknown."

significant, so in this section the poet presents seemingly meaningless details in a manner that "wishes" upon the reader unaccountable awareness of significance. But one can, disturbingly, raise the question: "Whose dream?"

Now, though I am unable to clarify their true relationship with exact comparative dates, one of Bishop's last poems and this part of Tate's "Seasons" are suddenly, strikingly similar. This is Bishop's poem:

THE DREAM

And once again I was within that house
Where light collided with the gloom
And chilled on faces, as though the dawn
Were backward and the stars had gone;
For the long hall was populous
With pale expatriates from the tomb.

The house, deserted, had become a lair,
And all along that hall the dead slid
And tried the doors, one after one,
With hands no longer blest by bone,
They scanned me with a single stare
Because of what that one door hid.

I saw my mother, who had love
Still in her eyes, that did not own
Least light, for they had forfeited
Reflection, having reached the dead.
She spoke: and I was conscious of
An unspoken corruption.

Her speech prevented me from following
Angrily after those famished forms
Who only sought what I had sought
And found. I had been brought,
In the dread time of love's responding,
Undreaming into my young love's arms.

I saw what they were seeking in the gust
That drove them on from door to door
In the long deception of the hall.
They looked: from doors, nothing at all
Looked back at them. Yet though no lust
Awaited them, they must try once more.

I saw the shame that I condemned
 Since it was sought by sightless eyes.
 I knew what crime would be revealed
 If the one door to the dead should yield,
 But dreamed that door had been condemned
 And in the dream had no surprise.

That none could ever force a look
 At incest dangling from a beam
 And by a cord all blood attached.
 For from the dark I knew there watched
 Young eyes too quick with love to mock
 The dead in that death-haunted dream.¹

I don't think we can, more than troublingly, take up the matter of who is indebted to whom here. Tate's Autumn season is like Bishop's "Dream" or Bishop's "Dream" is like Tate's Autumn season. In each, the deserted house, the doors to death, the shades, the mother, sightless eyes, etc., point up the similarities in visions. Considering Bishop's usual practice of borrowing someone else's sensibility for an occasional poem, I would tend to believe that Tate's is the more original composition of the two, certainly it is by far the better of the two as poetry. The dates of the two compositions are vaguely approximate, "sometime" about 1944. In spite of what I may believe, Bishop's poem constitutes a disturbing note in any discussion of Tate's "Seasons." And while I am on this matter, so does Eliot's "Waste Land."

In an earlier chapter I made a claim to write off the similarities between much of Tate's mature poetry and Eliot's to the deep similarities in their sensibilities. Yet in "Seasons of the Soul," Tate's machinery--the uses of

¹John Peale Bishop, The Collected Poems (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), pp. 130-31.

Dante and St. Augustine in allusions--and the appurtenances to his central theme--sexual and spiritual debility and violence--are much like the machinery and thematic developments in Eliot's "Waste Land." Like the similarities of Tate's poem to Bishop's, its similarities to Eliot's, create the reader's hesitations about the questionable matter of derivativeness in Tate's effort. But like all hesitations of this sort, the final product to which they momentarily attach may go far toward eliminating them. Certainly, Eliot's work itself has received much dispensation in this very matter because his results have been considered so eminently and individually re-creative. And Tate's work is not less worthy than his. In fact, in the instance of "Seasons of the Soul," I would say that it is more worthy. My hesitations become but a part of my method in considering this matter, as Eliot would approve:

. . . we should be none the worse for articulating what passes in our minds when we read a book and feel an emotion about it, for criticizing our own minds in their work of criticism. One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavor to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without his prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.¹

The true test, then, lies in the poet's uses of his predecessors, in his improvement upon their effects or his

¹T. S. Eliot, The Sacred Wood, op. cit., p. 48.

mishandling of them, in which, of course, he pronounces judgment upon himself. That Tate's use of Eliot in his "Seasons" is worthy and leads us to what is "most individual" in his work, his poem alone can best say. Let us return, then, to Tate's Autumn season.

The second stanza of the Autumn section progresses in the dream mode which was instituted by the final lines of the first: "And when I raised my hand/ I stood in the empty hall." Note that place is "the hall," unaccountably specific. The poet now finds himself standing in the absolutely barren hall: "No rug on the bare floor/ Nor any carved detail." Like the dome of Dante's hell, "The round ceiling was high." Here the poet sees through the weird, tactile ". . . gray light like shale/ Thin, crumbling, and dry," potentials to solution, doors "Through which a shade might slide/ To the cold and empty hall."

These are the many doors to death, a commonplace figure but a useful one, with which Tate is familiar in its numberless recurrent forms all the way from Jacobean drama to Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass. Alwyn Berland has dealt sufficiently with the Tate-Webster similarities, has shown that elements not only of sense and poetic manner but also of vision are held in common by these poets. In The Duchess of Malfi we may see Tate's doors:

I know that death hath ten thousand several doors
For men to make their exits: and tis found
They go on such strange geometrical hinges,
You may open them both ways:¹

¹John Webster, The Duchess of Malfi, in Webster and Tourneur (London: Vizetelly and Co., 1888), Act IV, ii, p. 210.

Tate dramatizes such a metaphor into his vision. But his doors do not "open both ways." Our age has lost this sweet geometry. Ours is more like Alice's world.

In the third stanza, at the margin of understanding, the poet weakens: "I will leave this house." He hopes to return to the full society of men where he may have companionship, "Where men fear together." With precision and a sense of insecurity or dread (" . . . tiptoe lest I fall,"), he begins the interminable walk, ". . . years down/ Towards the front door," that most important door. He is the departing guest who suffers in the ritual of departure and who senses he may be able to return to society unaffected by his experience. But "The door was false--no key/ Or lock, and I was caught." He cannot leave this house, metaphor of life in death, which encloses and isolates him. There is a deep terror in all this, "For miles of running brought/ Me back where I began." The house has no exits leading back to the "community." The Modern intellectual man is cut off.

The dream process becomes more specific again and reveals to him a father-figure which, passing through the figment room, offers him a tantalizing glimpse of the after-life, "A door open a slit." But the figure, now designated as his "father in a gray shawl," moves without giving him any satisfaction, "Gave me an unseeing glint/ And entered another room!" The idea of isolation contained in the action is intensified in various images and small dramas of non-communication in this and the following stanza. The central image is again borrowed from Dante:

As in a moonlit street
 Men meeting are too shy
 To check their hurried feet
 But raise their eyes and squint
 As through a needle's eye
 Into the faceless gloom,--
 My father in a gray shawl
 Gave me an unseeing glint
 And entered another room!
 I stood in the empty hall

Experience shared by parents and child should, it seems, contain some answers. The situation takes on relevance to the whole poem through its limited referents.

By the end of the Autumn season's wandering, the poet's "vision froze/ Him in the empty hall." Growth of mind isolates him from those who could and can exist without an occasional descent into the inferno of serious intellection. The figurative language throughout this section is not in Tate's best manner, but it does have a certain tense coherence, does have a quality of dramatic unity. In this season, even as St. Augustine lamented in his Confessions, the poet might be imagined to say, "My elders, yea my very parents, who yet wished me no ill, mocked my stripes, my then great and grievous ill."¹ And, like St. Augustine, his mind condemns him: "Let him be worse wounded, for he is not yet healed."²

In the season of Winter which he now enters, his soul is troubled by its debility--its loss of faith. He is caught in a vicious circle of fine intention and tormenting end.

¹Saint Augustine, The Confessions, trans. Edward B. Pusey (New York: Random House, 1949), p. 12.

²Ibid., p. 14.

As he says in "Winter Mask":

If I am meek and dull
 And a poor sacrifice
 Of perverse will to cull
 The act from the attempt,
 Just look into damned eyes
 And give the returning glare;
 For the damned like it, the more
 Damnation is exempt
 From what would save its heir
 With a thing worth living for.

This dormant season is the old age of life, which, though the poet may not have experienced it, he can prefigure on the basis of its beginnings. In such a time, having lost faith, man loses his will to act and perishes without hope of grace. (Cf. "The Cross") In the first stanza a radical shift in tone from the Autumn section takes place. The poet forms a half-prayer to a pagan goddess who becomes the incarnation of love and death. His invocation reflects in language that of Lucretius, who ordered his own world in a troubled time, in his De Natura Rerum. I quote from Dryden's translation:

Parent of Rome! by gods and men beloved,
 Benignant Venus! thou, the sail-clad main
 And fruitful earth, as round the seasons roll,
 With life who swellest, for by thee all love,
 And, living, hail the cheerful light of day:--

 O goddess! led, and trained to every grace.
 Then, O, vouchsafe thy favour, power divine!
 Quell too, the fury of the hostile world,
 And lull to peace, that all the strain may hear.
 For peace is thine: on thy soft bosom he,
 The warlike field who sways, almighty Mars,
 Struck by triumphant love's eternal wound,
 Reclines full frequent: with uplifted gaze
 On thee he feeds his longing, lingering eyes,

And all his soul hangs quivering from thy lips.
 O! while thine arms in fond embraces clasp
 His panting members, sovereign of the heart!
 Ope thy bland voice, and intercede for Rome.¹

Throughout Tate's third season elements of meaning and emotive construction reflect Lucretius. Tate's Venus configuration is a multifaceted blending of experience in classical Latin literature and human passion. The sexual symbolism is quite similar to that found in the erotic celebration of Venus as it appears in Tate's rendition of the Pervigilium Veneris. It is unblushing and bold, but, unlike the simple quality it possesses in the classical poem, the symbolism in Tate's develops a piercing overtone of viciousness and despairing animality (the shark tearing the wound of love). Tate pleads with Venus in the first stanza to "Return into the sea/ . . . Leave the burnt earth." In that element, most natural primal cause and matrix of life for the modern scientific mind, love, untrammelled by its Christian usages, may be reborn and offer a new way of life and new faith. For him,

. . . the drying God above,
 Hanged in his windy steeple,
 No longer bears for us
 The living wound of love.

And in the following stanza, he seems to be calling upon Venus to offer those who have lost faith the bitter restitution of sheer animality:

All the sea-gods are dead.
 You, Venus, come home
 To your salt maidenhead,

¹John Dryden, "The Beginning of the First Book of Lucretius," The Works of John Dryden, Vol. XII, ed. Sir Walter Scott; rev. George Saintsbury (Edinburgh: Wm. Patterson, 1885), pp. 329-331.

The tossed anonymous sea
 Under shuddering foam--
 Shade for lovers, where
 A shark swift as your dove
 Shall pace our company
 All night to nudge and tear
 The livid wound of love.

Yet he seems to be saying that without faith love is meaningless, mere physical desire, destructive, "The livid wound of love." The entire season of winter is filled with a kind of psychotic violence, sudden and exaggerated emotion, the mouthings of one severely tormented.

The play upon "living" and "livid" wounds of love in this season results in a rather morbid confusion of connotations. Divine and erotic love wheel about in antagonistic union. This is demonstrative of his plight, not an original one, as Tate himself has realized. He has said, "This 'Horrid relationship' between the heavenly and earthly Aphrodites had been in effect the great theme of St. Augustine, and before him of Lucretius; and it was to inform dramatically The Divine Comedy."¹ He was speaking here of Keats, and the theme that was basic to so much of his greatest work. However this was and is not only theme but also experience. Here, in the season of winter, it is similar to the experience of that St. Augustine who said, "I who wept for Dido slain, and 'seeking by the sword a stroke and wound extreme', myself seeking the while a worst extreme, the extremest of thy creatures, having forsaken Thee, earth passing into earth."² Throughout the poem, Tate senses in his torment

¹Allen Tate, Limits, p. 182.

²Saint Augustine, The Confessions, op. cit., p. 16.

the error of its proffered romantic solution: ". . . to die at the greatest intensity of love is to achieve that intensity without diminution."¹ The awareness informs his own drama of "loves." And meanings, in the form of metaphorical literary relationships, begin to coalesce into a massive background of Christian vision.

But then the winter sea. There is a note here of the Anglo-Saxon "Sea-Farer." One cannot call it a definite allusion, but Tate is not like that "sea-conceited scop" who refused to believe that "earthly weal is everlasting" although he had spent a winter as a careworn exile "on the ice cold sea, cut off from kinsmen, hung round with ice-cicles where the hail flew in showers." Nor is he like that other, more modern scop, his friend Howard Baker, whose "Ode to the Sea" he justly admires. This poet could resolve vision of the sea and natural mortality into a sense of dedicated calm:

Sibilant, whispering Sea, beyond the steep
And thorny reach of doubt, your peace hangs deep;
In its abundant room
One views the ways of doom
And, viewing, may withhold the part of fear.
O steady in your variance, appear
Unceasing in my eye.
And let me now descry
My course, for I return to inland ground
Burdened, yet to the nascent future bound!²

In Tate's winter there is only inanition and lifeless cold which he cannot endure stoically. Again, the Dantean

¹Allen Tate, Limits, p. 183.

²Howard Baker, A Letter from the Country and Other Poems (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1941), p. 28.

reflection moves in the "hollow rind" and "Bodies that wheel and drop" in the frenzy of cold. All these are reminders of sterility. The theme of isolation that appeared in the season of Autumn is reinforced.

In the fourth stanza, beyond the drag of reason which fetters his ability to act, he is empty and caged. Mind becomes an animal:

In the center of his cage
The pacing animal
Surveys the jungle cove
And slicks his slithering wiles
To turn the venereal awl
In the livid wound of love.

Tate's animal is well done, but it overrides and distorts its own meaning. Descriptively, it is "overwrought," especially the last turn of the figure, "slicks his slithering wiles": details should not protrude from the texture of meaning like pointing fingers. This fault is in evidence elsewhere in the poem, but is more strikingly apparent in this section where the major effect is achieved through a play of violent sensibility, through rife imagery.

In the next stanza, again "Beyond the undertow," he drives himself in his debility ("Headless, unageing oak/ That gives the leaf no more.") to where something yet "Resists the winter's flow--." Symbol of that something is the "rigid madrepora," a brittle, oak-tree-like coral, unbeginning, unending, always becoming. Then like Dante in the forest of suicides, beyond the tow of Phlegethon, he strives for understanding by a willful act. He tears a branch from a madrepora, which, deep in the living sea, is one of the

living dead, himself and not himself, one of the spiritual suicides. This is the action indicated in the epigraph to the poem. The wounded one speaks in Dante's tongue:

"We are the men who died
Of self-inflicted woe,
Lovers whose stratagem
Led to their suicide."

The poet is brought to an awareness of his own guilt: "I touched my sanguine hair." (The word, "sanguine," is loaded, for in this context it bears almost all of its meanings and possible connotations, and all are pertinent.) He is the man who, in the "Winter Mask," asks

Why it is man hates
His own salvation,
Prefers the way to hell,
And finds his last safety
In the self-made curse that bore
Him towards damnation:

He too has fashioned by stratagem in reason and imagination his own suicide. His soul is maimed, and this is sin, and for this he must suffer.

The season of winter over, he is caught up by "irritable spring," season of death and rebirth. Tate's use of the adjective "irritable" recalls Eliot's "depraved May" and all that goes with it. Beyond this, I think one should bear in mind the ancient Greek sense of the spring season, time of the goat which was a symbol for fertility and death. Tate now invokes spring: "infuse/ Into the burning breast/ Your combustible juice." Even though he knows that it will only mark a hastening of death, he calls for such re-awakening "To comfort this unease."

Then he recalls again his youth, the Attic summer, when there were no vague questionings, "All space but no time, . . ." He seems to be thinking of the years of childhood as a time of irrevocable faith ("Reaching for the sun"), when one could look upon death with equanimity ("Where even death could please/ Us with an ancient pun--"), not merely because one's youth placed it at a meaningless distance, but because one was taught as a Christian child that there was a hereafter better than life as one knew it. And life itself was good. Therefore, one might even long for that state of better existence: "All dying for the hand/ Of the mother of silences." (I try to ignore the somewhat irrelevant punning in this passage. It is little more than clever.) The only real link he has, as a skeptic, with the untrammelled tradition is that period of childhood when he accepted freely and naturally the Christian faith of his parents.

Then, by means of reverie similar to that which he used in the "Summer" section, the poet again returns to war. This time, interrogating it and forcing himself to reach a judgment of its meaning, he decides--even as he implied in the "Ode to the Confederate Dead": "Its light is at the flood." Death in active, heroic guise is meaningful. But he knows that eventually life, being death's counterpart, forces each man alone out of this world: "Platonic cave/ Of vertiginous chance!" The scheme itself is out of joint. It is vain to hope that Sisyphus, freed of his burden, will

ever succeed in covering the mouth of mortality's cave. Every man is a slave to illusion which reveals life but which prohibits the revelation of reality. Absolute death should thus be peace in the end.

He calls upon spring, Nature, spirit of intercession, to return to grace, "Your sons who have gone down/ Into the burning cave:" (Dante and Virgil returned at the time of the vernal equinox.) In this context, Tate refers to those who have entered "the burning cave" of their own serious and concerted rational understanding. In that rarefied atmosphere they have endangered the soul's life and reason itself for the sake of knowledge. Vivienne Koch, to whom I am indebted for this valuable directive, has discovered in "Come mother, and lean/ At the window with your son," an allusion to a passage in St. Augustine's Confessions.

She says:

The figure of the mother here appears to refer to Saint Monica as she appears in Book IX, Chapter X, of St. Augustine's Confessions, in which he recounts "A Conversation He Had With His Mother Concerning the Kingdom of Heaven". Mother and son stand alone "leaning in a certain window, from which the garden of the house we occupied at Oastia could be seen"; and they catalogue a set of earthly conditions, which, could they be "silenced" would enable them to arrive at an apprehension of the "hereafter". Soon after this talk (see Chapter X), Monica dies and leaves Augustine with a living wound too, "from having that most sweet and dear habit of living together suddenly broken off". Thus the Mother of Silences is a particular mother (St. Monica), the Virgin, the Mystery and, through Augustine's unmentioned wound, she also is identified with the principle of Love.¹

This is all pertinent enough, but I think that Miss Koch's

¹Vivienne Koch, "The Poetry of Allen Tate," op. cit., pp. 31-32.

reading of the poem in light of the relevant passage in Augustine, though it seizes a point, does so too simply. Most important, the living experience set forth in Augustine is informing in a larger sense which abstraction does not readily reveal. Beyond this, Miss Koch's explication makes no attempt to account for the three lines which immediately follow the image:

And gaze through its light frame
These fifteen centuries
Upon the shirking scene
Where men, blind, go lame:

These lines, coming closer to poetry of statement than any other passage in the poem, bear a great weight of significance for the whole poem. I believe, then, that we must take a more expansive look at The Confessions.

As I have previously indicated by what may have seemed to be forced inserts, states of mind parallel to those of the dramatic center in Tate's poem run throughout Augustine's spiritual hegira. In a sense, the whole work is pertinent to Tate's poem. But Monica, an extremely important factor in Augustine's conversion to Catholic Christianity, a prime mover in his spiritual life, makes Tate's fastening upon her greatest moment of dramatic reality and efficaciousness in The Confessions significant in a way that only quotation can indicate. I quote from Pusey's translation. The italics are mine:

The day now approaching whereon she was to depart this life . . . , it came to pass, . . . that she and I stood alone, leaning in a certain window, which looked into the garden of the house where we now lay, at Ostia; where removed from the din of men, we were recruiting

from the fatigues of a long journey, for the voyage.
We were discoursing then together, alone, very sweetly;
and forgetting those things which are behind, and reach-
ing forth unto those things which are before, we were
inquiring between ourselves in the presence of the Truth,
 which Thou art, . . . And when our discourse was brought
 to that point, that the very highest delight of the
 earthly sense, in the very purest light, was, in respect
 of the sweetness of that life, not only not worth compari-
 son, but not even of mention; we . . . , did by degrees
 pass through all things bodily, . . . we were soaring
 higher yet, by inward musing, and discourse, and admir-
 ing of Thy works; and we came to our own minds, and went
beyond them, that we might arrive at the region of never-
falling plenty, . . . We were saying then: if to any the
tumult of the flesh were hushed, hushed the images of
earth, and waters, and air, hushed also the pole of
heaven, yea the very soul be hushed to herself, and by
not thinking on self surmount self, hushed all dreams
and imaginary revelations, every tongue and every sign,
and whatsoever exists only in transition, . . . and He
alone speak, not by them . . . nor in the dark riddle of
similitude, . . . were not this, Enter into thy Master's
Joy?¹

Now, in Tate's poem a spiritual impasse, involving experien-
 tially so much of what one finds in Augustine, has been
 reached. The poet calls upon one with whom he could hold
 such sweet discourse, for, though he has lived the experience
 he still cannot accept its conclusions. The margin of spiri-
 tual perversity and intellectual deviation that co-exists
 with these benign resolutions has brought him to a blank
 wall, and the wall has moved to encompass him.

The allusion, then, is not merely to Monica as a flat
 symbol, but to a central spiritual experience. But what is
 the intended significance of the lines that complete the
 Monica image?

Come, mother, and lean
 At the window with your son
 And gaze through its light frame

¹ Saint Augustine, The Confessions, op. cit., pp. 186-88.

These fifteen centuries
 Upon the shirking scene
 Where men, blind, go lame:

Is one to look forward from the past or backward from the present? There is some possibility of both views, if one allows to Monica the freedom from time and the ambivalence that the symbolic strategy encourages. Looking back from the present might bring one to that long spectacle of destruction of the Roman Empire. This would stand well as a parallel to the fall of France as a result of internal decay. It would also stand as an example of death brought about by re-awakening--if one takes the pagan thesis, which Orosius belabored, that the Empire was sped to destruction by the softening influence of Christianity. A skeptic might use such a reference. And, for poetic purposes, it is not a matter of whether the assertion be true or not. In addition, in such an allusion there resides the possible indication of self-inflicted living death in which, even for ostensibly fine reasons, men lose their will to act and waste their preserving substance.

The second interpretation is perhaps a more obvious one. It is more consistent with Tate's Spenglerian view of history. Looking forward from the past, one can see what might be taken as the spectacle of a slowly disintegrating Christian tradition. Intellectual blindness, moral and ethical degeneration, in that view, may well be seen as producing the spiritual "crippledom" of our time, the irrevocable concomitant of becoming the scientific twentieth century.

In a sense the experience of the poem is complete at this point. The soul's condition is set. The final stanza objectifies its plight. The poet calls upon the portentous figure to speak and save the day. Obviously, she does speak in time, but not to the poet of this poem. He asks for a revelation, for there is none in the reason and sensibility that brought him to this pass. He asks, confessing "That we conceal our fear," huddled together "as sheep foregather/ Upon their crooked knees." Knowing that we are already dying without the arrogance that might substitute for faith or the faith that might serve in place of knowledge, he calls for a revelation even if it is only that the most Natural "kindness" is simply that death is death, Mother of Silences.

It takes ten years for the Lady of Sorrows (Mother of Silences) to appear in a clearly recognizable dramatic answer. In the spring of 1953, in The Sewanee Review, she makes her appearance as incarnate center to bring to a foreshadowed poetic conclusion the torment that, in the poet's life, had been stilled a few years earlier. In "The Buried Lake," having invoked the Lady to come, Tate

. . . knew that nature could no more refine
What it has given in a looking-glass
And holds there, when the living body's line

Has moved wherever it must move--wild grass
Inching the earth; and the quicksilver art
Throws back the invisible but lightning mass

To inhabit the room: for I have seen it part
The enchanted air--the air close up above
And under you, light Lucy, light of heart--

Light choir upon my shoulder, speaking Dove!
 The dream is over and the dark expired.
 I thought that you had sung enduring love.¹

The "Mother of Silences" becomes the "Lady of Light" who banishes the spiritual darkness, intercedes to show the way to divine love. In this moment, I think we can say that the tortuous drama with which we have been concerned has come to a quiet close. Yet, what of "Seasons of the Soul" itself?

I have come to believe that "Seasons of the Soul" is Tate's greatest poem. I am afraid, though, that I cannot speak very confidently in justifying my evaluation. This is not so paradoxical as it seems. I am not certain that what the poem demands is just. Technically it is both brilliant and beautiful even though at times it is marred in the texture of music and meaning by kinds of sophisticated perversity. Intended as internal comment, such play one may be willing to grant to a novice for a time, but, in an age which has practiced irony to a point of imaginative paralysis, one must at least begin to deny it to mature poets. Beyond this, other matters tend to keep it in the limbo of being almost as much problem as poem. It appeals to dramatic plot at the same time that it repudiates essential causal connections and implies their irrelevance. It attempts to arrive at important planes of conceptual meaning through situation metaphors without making those metaphors independent of highly ramified contexts external to the poem. It is a

¹Allen Tate, "The Buried Lake," The Sewanee Review, LXI, No. 2 (April-June, 1953), 179-80.

masterful catch-all of literary echoes. As a result, the margin of irrelevancy for the poem tends to extend almost uncontrollably. And, in emotive and symbolic configuration it claims extensible meaning at the same time that it renounces the logical sense which informs that meaning. The poem becomes a function of its functions, the offering to a poetic strategy. What does more than any other specific thing to save it as experience, or knowledge, is the commentary of Tate's other poems and his prose writings. That it should need such commentary, will, perhaps, be the controlling factor in one's final evaluation of it as a poem.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BEGINNING OF A CAREER

In an earlier chapter I said that, in a sense, "Seasons of the Soul" marks the end of a poet's career. Now, this is a serious charge, by implication, to lay at the door of a poet who is still very much alive and writing. It will take some arguing to give the charge any substantial meaning. This, then, is my argument.

"Seasons of the Soul," in strategy, and in almost any other poetic device or quality that one might relevantly consider, brings to a lasting and successful moment all that Tate had apparently been working toward in the first twenty-odd years of his career as a poet. And after its writing or the writing of The Winter Sea (1944), of which it is the finest poem, Tate's poetical voice almost disappears until the 1950's. In 1946 he does publish "The Eye," a poem remarkable for its qualities of violence and undigested figurative expression. His collected poems, published in 1948, show little of the habit of revision which Tate's earlier books would lead one to expect. Tate becomes strangely silent.

True, he sustains his wide and respectable reputation as a critic and man of letters. He even acquires a kind of academic respectability. He writes a few essays

with a distinctly scholarly flavor: "Longinus and the 'New Criticism'," "Johnson on the Metaphysical Poets," "The Symbolic Imagination: The Mirrors of Dante." He becomes a professor of Literature at the University of Minnesota. And, it is possible that all the complications of "living successfully" which these achievements indicate, are partly responsible for the silence of the poet. It is possible, that, for a time, Tate's critical sensibility and the cold light of reason so completely take over his mind that poetry becomes impossible. Perhaps, like the Valery of those silent twenty years or the elderly Ransom, he comes to renounce poetry. Or perhaps, like the Yvor Winters of years similar to his own, for Tate, it simply seems as if the Aonian springs have dried up and Thespia lies waste. But, then, this would not seem quite proper in a man for whom that calculating word "strategy," rather than that romantic-Platonic word "inspiration," indicates the relation of a poet to his utterances. The question, if there really is one, of Tate's later years as a poet is both more simple and more complex than all of these reflections and hesitations. Again, one had best look to the poetry of these years for the answer, or answers.

The spiritual problems that provided Tate with his most serious, complex, and widely significant opportunities for poems ("The Cross," "Sonnets At Christmas," "Sonnets of the Blood," etc.) reached a moment of intensity beyond which, apparently, the poet could not, creatively, go without the

most extreme difficulty. Before that moment the tortured but deeply moving eloquence of "Seasons of the Soul" was possible:

Goddess sea-born and bright,
Return into the sea
Where eddying twilight
Gathers upon your people--
Cold goddess, hear our plea!
Leave the burnt earth, Venus,
For the drying God above,
Hanged in his windy steeple,
No longer bears for us
The living wound of love.

After that moment of spiritual torment, only a kind of blatant, overly-complex and incoherent verbal patter was possible: I have already referred to some of this in "The Eye." "Two Conceits for the Eye to Sing, if Possible" (1950) is even more telling:

Sing a song of Bethlehem
Star of all the Idmen
Everybody's Jesus
Now if never then
Sing Phoenix and the Turtle
Defunctive in the sense
King Jesus eat by Turtle-dove
In mutual flame, from hence¹

I must admit that this is rather incomprehensible to me, both in what it purports to mean or be--other than generally blasphemous--and in that Tate would write it down or, having disturbedly done so, that he would publish it. The level to which he has fallen here is perhaps indicated by his resort to nursery rhymes for his frame of reference. This reduces one of his typical strategic devices to an absurdity. Add to this his allusion to or stealing from himself,

¹Allen Tate, Two Conceits for the Eye to Sing, n.p.

and not only this but from one of his previously worst passages (cf. ". . . every son-of-a-bitch is Christ," in "Retroduction to American History,") and one must begin to feel that he is in the presence of a poet's talents and poetry itself reduced to a final absurdity.

I would say, then, that the virtual silence of the years between The Winter Sea (1944) and Two Conceits (1950) is largely explained by the nature of the difference between the kinds of poetry Tate was able to, or chose to, write. The spiritual no-man's land is, for Tate, a wasteland, a no-land for poetry. But his emergence from that no-man's land by virtue of his conversion to Roman Catholicism sometime in 1951 seems to bring him again to a land in which poetry may live.

However, though it can again live, it apparently can do so only with some difficulty. The old resources are not so readily at hand as they once were. The spirit, decided, is fairly whole, but the language is unwilling. Thus, what appears to be the first poem to come out of the new ordering of sensibility, "The Maimed Man," has all the effortful appearance of the work both of a poet who is beginning to write and of a poet who is trying to revive a Muse that is sadly out of practice. But this is not wholly accurate. In fact, it may be quite wrong in the sense that "The Maimed Man" (1952), along with "The Swimmers" (1953) and "The Buried Lake" (1953), Tate's latest efforts at original composition, may well be the work of an extremely ambitious craftsman trying to create a poetry which is, for him, new.

Still, "The Maimed Man" creaks and groans like a great structure of overburdened stage machinery. Half-realized figurative language clutters the opening, the invocation to the poet's Muse:

Didactic Laurel, loose your reasoning leaf
 Into my trembling hand; assert your blade
 Against the Morning Star, enlightening Thief
 Of that first Mother who returned the Maid.

Then, following twelve more lines of similar expostulation, the poet struggles to describe concretely and emphatically in terms of subjective effect the central image of his poem. Knowledge that this is a ". . . scarecrow, man all coat and stem," is delayed till a later moment in the poem, in order to achieve an effect of dramatic "immediacy." The language of description varies from the enigmatic to the bald:

I saw a young man there, headless, whose hand
 Hung limp; it dangled at his hidden feet
 I could not see how, in the fading band
 Of low light; nor did I feel alarm
 But felt, under my eyelids, grains of sand.
 As, from their childhood, all men speak the charm
 And secret double of night in wakeful day,
 I thought that he could never do me harm
 And gazed in stupor at the rusty play
 Of light where once had stood a human head.
 I thought what civil greeting I might say;
 And could I leave the astonished oath unsaid
 That stuck to my palate in a gagging lump?
 Who could have told if he were live or dead?
 Retreating sideways to a ragged clump
 Of buckberry bushes in the vacant lot,
 I looked more closely at the purple stump--
 At the heart, three buttons down below the clot,
 Then down to where, the rigid shanks depending,
 Blue grass instead of feet grew in the slot.

The poet tries to visualize clearly, directly, through the quality of childhood encounter in a Dantean manner, and obviously his intention is much more serious than that of simply retelling an experience out of childhood. He is

trying to make emblems and analogies that have expansive, living, significance and he pumps into them the "organically" vacillating view-points of man or boy in order to achieve some spirit of vivacity and truth:

What could save
 One's manly honor with the football coach--
 My modest hybris, were I known his slave?

 What a question! Whence the question came
 I am still questing in the poor boy's curse,
 Witching for water in a waste of shame.

Then, back to his Muse the poet flies to invoke the spirit of what he is doing and intends to do, and to excuse his manner for doing this:

Thence, flow! conceit and motion to rehearse
 Pastoral terrors of youth still in the man,
 Torsions of sleep, in emblematic verse
 Rattling like dice unless the verse shall scan
 All chance away;

After equating the scarecrow with his one image in a distorted looking glass, the poet does break down his verse to a verbal rattle:

My secret was his father, I his tomb.
 (By I I mean iambs willed and neat;
 I mean by I God's image made uncouth;
 By eye I mean the busy, lurked, discrete
 Mandible world sharp as a broken tooth.)

This brings the poet to his conclusion and to the only really respectable writing in the poem. Again, we see clearly the outlining of an ambitious program:

And then rose in the man a small half-hell
 Where love disordered, shade of pompous youth,
 Clutched shades forbearing in a family well;
 Where the sleek senses of a simple child
 Came back to rack spirit that could not tell
 Natural time: the eyes, recauled, enisled
 In the dreamt cave by shadowy womb of beam,
 Had played swimmer of night--the moist and mild!

Now take him, Virgin Muse, up to the deeper stream:
 As a lost bee returning to the hive,
 Cell after honeyed cell of sounding dream--
 Swimmer of noonday, lean for the perfect dive
 To the dead Mother's face, whose subtle down
 You had not seen take amber light alive.¹

In this program for poetry, the Muse is and will be honestly, even Medievally, Christian. Tate plans a long serious, Dantean-in-type, autobiographical work. The terza rima of The Divine Comedy provides the explicit order, the proper "morality of technique" for a new spiritual pilgrimage.

We are promised the symbolism, the emblematic ingeniousness, the extended rhetoric of large visual similes, and the allegory of an older tradition of imagination. We are promised a modern Catholic medievalism, an attempt to reincarnate the symbolic imagination of a vision of life that conversion has made possible for the poet. Like Donne, his spiritual decision made, Tate begins a new poetical career.

"The Maimed Man," "The Swimmers," and "The Buried Lake" are, as yet, the only three Cantos we have of Tate's Moderna Commedia. But they are enough to let us know what his intention is. If they, in themselves are not enough, as usual with Tate, we have but to go to his criticism of this time for support as to just what he seems to be doing. I would say, in fact, that one should not, if he is interested in Tate's poetry, plunge into these last poems without first availing himself of the preparation that is at hand for him

¹Allen Tate, "The Maimed Man," Partisan Review, op. cit., pp. 265-67.

in Tate's nicely Catholic-conscious essay "The Symbolic Imagination: The Mirrors of Dante" (1951).

There is little doubt that Tate's literary guide in these poems, as in "Seasons of the Soul," is Dante. He is guide, model, and source for the revitalized Tate. As a result, much of what Tate has to say, or points to others as saying, about Dante has an explanatory bearing on his poems. For instance, Tate's cultivation of events and imagery and language out of his early life, the use of specifically autobiographical material as a backbone for these poems is more than just "similar" to what can be found in Dante. Here is Tate quoting Charles Williams:

"It was, however high the phrases, the common thing from which Dante always started, as it was certainly the greatest and most common to which he came. His images were the natural inevitable images--the girl in the street, the people he knew, the language he learned as a child. In them the great diagrams were perceived; from them the great myths open; by them he understands the final end."¹

Certainly, "The Maimed Man" shows Tate attempting to arrive at a rejuvenated vision for his poetry in such a source. "The Swimmers" goes to a similar source in presenting Tate's recollection from childhood of a lynching. As in Dante, the material is presented in dramatic narrative touched by "common" language, and--much more successfully than in "The Maimed Man"--in vivid visual imagery:

--Along the creek the road was winding; we
Felt the quicksilver sky. I see again
The five companions of that Odyssey:

¹Allen Tate, The Forlorn Demon, p. 38.

Bill Eaton, Charlie Watson, "Nigger" Layne
The Doctor's son, Harry Duesler who played
The flute; Tate, with water on his brain.

Dog-days: the dusty leaves were rain delayed
Hung low on poison-oak and scuppernong,
For we were following the active shade

Of water, that bells and bickers all night long.
"No more'n a mile," Layne said. All five stood still,
Listening, I heard what seemed at first a song;

Peering, I heard the hooves come down the hill.
The posse passed, twelve horse; the leader's face
Was worn as limestone on an ancient sill.¹

And the same source is grasped at, though complicated by a
too-ready searching for ulterior significance, in "The Buried
Lake." Again the advice in style and tone comes from Dante:

In childhood once I tried to catch each flake
And hold it to abort a world of snow . . .

--The night was tepid. I had kept opaque,
Down deeper than the canyons undersea,
The sullen spectrum of a buried lake

Nobody saw; not even seen by me.
(I pray you, Goddess, mirror my mind there, styled
To spring its waters to my memory.)

I fumbled all night long, an aging child
Gone like a squirrel to a hollow bole
To play lead soldier, Tiny Tim, and, mild

In death, the Babes with autumn leaves for stole--²

All three of the poems, somewhat insensitively carry this
strategy to an extreme of colloquial banality. Dante's uses
of the colloquial are much more sensitive, usually have a
realizable dramatic propriety. But in Tate's later work

¹Allen Tate, "The Swimmers," The Hudson Review, V,
No. 4 (Winter, 1953), 471.

²Allen Tate, "The Buried Lake," The Sewanee Review,
op. cit., 176.

finely wrought language tensions will suddenly collapse in lines like those about the football coach in "The Maimed Man" or in lines such as these from "The Buried Lake":

Sputtering gas-jet, ceiling without span
Where thinning air lay on my cheek like tin;
Yet I exulted in my secret plan:

I laid my top hat to one side; my chin
Was ready; I unsnapped the reeking case;
I had come there to play my violin.

Throughout these poems, then, Tate can be seen exploring a source for imagery and language which he had largely come to neglect in his earlier career. In "Seasons of the Soul" that career reached its peak in a country rich with literary sources. Tate effects the change from this with a large purpose, in an effort to achieve the qualities of a symbolic imagination which will be capable of sustaining the complex meanings of his spiritual history. This large purpose one can see as being supported by the following conscientious paragraph:

This is the simple secret of Dante, but it is a secret which is not necessarily available to the Christian poet today. The Catholic faith has not changed since Dante's time. But the Catholic sensibility, as we see it in modern Catholic poetry, from Thompson to Lowell, has become angelic, and is not distinguishable (doctrinal differences aside) from poetry by Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and atheists. I take it that more than doctrine, even if the doctrine be true, is necessary for a great poetry of action. Catholic poets have lost, along with their heretical friends, the power to start with the "common thing": they have lost the gift for concrete experience. The abstraction of the modern mind has obscured their way into the natural order. Nature offers to the symbolic poet clearly denotable objects in depth and in the round, which yield the analogies to the higher synthesis. The modern poet rejects the higher synthesis, or tosses it in a vacuum of

abstraction. If he looks at nature he spreads the clear visual image in a complex of metaphor, from one katachresis to another through Aristotle's permutations of genus and species. He cannot sustain the prolonged analogy, the second and superior kind of figure that Aristotle doubtless had in mind when he spoke of metaphor as the key to the resemblances of things, and the mark of genius.¹

Tate's large purpose in his last poems is to write a poetry which returns ". . . to the order of temporal sequence--to action. His purpose is to show men experiencing whatever they may be capable of, with as much meaning as he may be able to see in it; but the action comes first."² Thus, for the first time since his early and quite unsuccessful attempt to imitate Robinson's narrative manner in "Cul-De-Sac" (1922), he makes a concerted attack on direct narrative as a strategy for a poem.

And in "The Swimmers" he succeeds in writing a consecutive, coherent narrative which has some of the further property of prolonged analogy to which he also aspires. The analogy is not really sustained as far as I can see, but then there may be many extremely fine theological plays in it which escape me. In general, though, some elements for a fitful kind of analogical extension of action are apparent in Tate's narrative of a lynching. Somehow "That dead nigger there" becomes equatable with Christ. The ". . . eleven same/ Jesus-Christers unmembered and unmade" and "The melancholy sheriff" represent the community which hangs the Negro,

¹Allen Tate, The Forlorn Demon, pp. 38-39.

²Ibid., p. 36.

and they also hint at being the twelve apostles. Numbers, at any rate, seem to play for analogical significance. And sudden statements such as "I rose again" take on a darting relation with the drama of the crucifixion and resurrection. At the end of the poem, numbers again figure, and the final moment reaches out for analogical Christian reference:

There were three figures in the dying sun
Whose light were company where three was crowd.

My breath crackled the dead air like a shotgun
As, sheriff and the stranger disappearing,
The faceless head lay still. I could not run

Or walk, but stood. Alone in the public clearing
This private thing was owned by all the town,
Though never claimed by us within my hearing.

"The Buried Lake" works for some of the same sort of narrative-analogy ordering of imagination. But it is neither so direct and successful in narrative ordering and visual imagination nor so evocative in its analogical potentials. The narrative gets highly complicated and lost in internal action, in symbolic action within dreams, and in double entendre about Tate's spiritual adventures:

No, no! her quick hand said in a soft surd.
She locked the fiddle up and was not there.
The death of youth I mourned without a word.

And could I go where air was not dead air?
My friend Jack Locke, scholar and gentleman,
Gazed down upon me with a friendly stare,

Flicking his nose as if about to scan
My verse; he plucked from his mustache one hair,
Which he let fall like gravel in a pan

And went as mist upon the browning air
Away from the durable lake, the blind hotel,
Leaving me guilted on a moving stair

Upwards, down which regularly I fell
 Tail backwards, till I caught the music room
 Empty, like a gaol without a cell.

The analogical play is by no means sustained. After a moment of invocation to "Lady of Light" at the beginning of the poem, analogy does not really figure dramatically till some sixty lines later. Then, beyond the dream fantasy which purports to dramatize important states of mind, we come upon "A stately woman, who in sorrow shone." We have come to a dramatization of Tate's conversion:

I rose; she moved, she glided towards the hall;
 I blocked her way but then would set her free.
 "My love", I said.--"I'm back to give you all,"

She said, "my love."

The play of meanings and the dramatic intensity, presented in some of Tate's best recent writing, moves evenly through the last sixty lines to the eloquent close of the poem. In these lines the stately woman is a complex figure of divine, interceding love. She reflects the Lucy of Dante's Purgatorio, and like Dante's Beatrice combines earthly and divine love in the image of light which she is. He struggles against her power, but her light (like the light which so fascinates Tate in Dante) brings him to understanding:

Yet how bitter, harsh, and vexed the bold trance
 Of light--how I resented Lucy's play!
 Better stay dead, better not try the lance

In the living bowl: alive we have one way
 For all time in the twin darks where light dies
 To live: forget that you lost the day

Yet finding it refound in Lucy-guise
 As I, refinding where our shadows meet
 Took from the burnished umbrage mirroring eyes

Like blue Kentucky on a golden sheet
 Spread out for all my stupor. Lady-Coming,
 Lady-not-Going, come Lady come: I greet

You in the sockets of your eyes--humming
 Miles of lightning where (small pastoral scene)
 The fretting pipe is lucent and becoming.

Finally, as if, in a moment of insight, he had experienced a truly revitalizing love, both human and divine, which makes possible the full integration of his poetic powers, Tate writes out the ending of his poem. In six stanzas that again arrive at the level of distinction he had not achieved for about ten years, since the writing of "Seasons of the Soul," Tate relaxes into spiritual peace that has about it only one last small note of doubt, enough to promise future poems:

I thought of ways to keep this image green--
 Until the leaf unfold the formal cherry--
 In an off season, when the eye is lean

And waits for swelling of the wild strawberry,
 Cape jasmine, eclogue of the eglantine,
 And the sad tuberose that will then be merry;

And knew that nature could no more refine
 What it has given in a looking-glass
 And holds there, when the living body's line

Has moved wherever it must move--wild grass
 Inching the earth; and the quicksilver art
 Throws back the invisible but lightning mass

To inhabit the room: for I have seen it part
 The enchanted air--the air close up above
 And under you, light Lucy, light of heart--

Light choir upon my shoulder, speaking Dove!
 The dream is over and the dark expired.
 I thought that you had sung enduring love.

With these lines, then, Tate's new career pauses mid-stride. Further conjecture on his poetry remains possible, but explicit discussion and analysis must cease.

CONCLUSION

I began this study saying that the poetry of Allen Tate is considered to be difficult and obscure. What I have written does not go very far toward eliminating such notions; nor is it very likely that further discussions in a manner similar to my own, though from different points of view, will be able to accomplish more than different confrontations of these notions and the critical and poetical problems they imply. In spite of what we have learned in the process of reviving metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century, in spite of what we have come to believe profitably possible in poetry under the instruction of nineteenth century French poetry, and in spite of the kind of dubious maturity of appreciation we have come to as a result of the critical battles waged over the poetry of T. S. Eliot, the fundamental problem of the limits of justifiable obscurity in poetry remains with us. Certainly, this problem has been the guiding force behind most of what I have had to say about the poetry of Allen Tate.

From the beginning of his career as a member of the "fugitive school" of poets of Nashville, Tennessee, Tate's work has been ambitious, uneven, complex, and difficult. In this he was much like his fellow fugitives, of

whom John Crowe Ransom was, at least in part, speaking when he wrote: "These [poets] are preeminently concerned with the problem of stating their own minds, and not the mind of the hypothetical Wonder-Child; and from a trifling generation they will have to bear the charge of being wilful and obscure. So they are; but may it not be a sin on the nobler side?"¹ This statement which begs as much as it admits may well be seen as fundamental in the rationale of the kind of poetry Tate has invariably written. It renounces at the same time that it preserves with slight transformation the central emphasis of the romantic doctrine for poetry: the exploration and expression of the unique personality of the poet.

As I indicated in my summary to the first part of this study, Tate's poetry during the years of his apprenticeship (1920 to about 1926) is compromised by the excesses of personality as style. He conceives his poetry in the terms of surface peculiarities in language and of particular, violent, and highly self-conscious vision. The poets who can be seen as his models, his masters, make their greatest impression on his work at the level of fairly superficial language manipulations. Hart Crane, E. A. Robinson, and T. S. Eliot appear and disappear as direct influences on the language and emotional tone of most of his early poems. At the instigation of what is conceived to be especially "modern"

¹John Crowe Ransom, "Mixed Modes," The Fugitive, IV, No. 1 (March, 1925), 29.

in temperament and, most clearly, as a part of his "impertinent campaign in Eliot's behalf," Tate cultivates the vagaries and violence of ironic insight. Irony becomes, and remains permanently fixed, the central quality and device of his style. And the irony itself is essentially romantic in quality, a portion of the claims for attention to the unique personality which, more often than not, turns out to be the real subject in a poem.

Tate comes of age as a poet in the later "twenties." He obviously recognizes that the act of composition must be approached primarily as a problem in total form--which is "meaning and nothing but meaning"--rather than a problem in verbal manipulation. Further, he works through and gets out of his system the more unintegrated marks of influences which tend to make his poems into exercises in borrowed sensibility rather than formal constructions of his own. It still remains true, however, that he never fully eradicates, even in some of his best and latest poems, the influences of T. S. Eliot's devices and artistic sensibility. Most of Tate's best poetry actively engages in an exploration of the particular kind of modern sensibility which he has both been heir to and elected to cultivate. No matter what artistic guise he may lend it--Alice or the Confederate veteran--the sensibility Tate concerns himself with must ultimately be recognized as his own. Like Eliot, he does not succeed in working his way out of certain problems in the romantic perspective. "Death of Little Boys," often

held to be one of his most obscure yet memorable poems, stands in Tate's collected works as a prime example of his losing struggle with romantic emphases and techniques.

Yet, as is typical of the complexity--or frequent confusion--in the critical doctrines which implicitly forward and defend the kind of poetry he writes or wishes to write, Tate rejects the more liberal romantic doctrine of "personality" as the focal point of meaning in poetry and human life. In the tradition of T. E. Hulme and T. S. Eliot, he speaks for an aesthetic and human vision based upon the more classical notion of the limited, "fallen," nature of man. But, if the creative aesthetics of the absolutist are fundamental in his beliefs as they are stated in his criticism, they are constantly overthrown in his poetry by the invasion of romantic poetic techniques. As the conscious practitioner of metaphysical and symbolist strategies for writing poems, he gets himself embroiled in notions about the functions and limits of language and its devices which keep him struggling with fallacies of the romantic perspective. In what he has to say about the swamps of personality in poems such as "Ode to the Confederate Dead," "The Mediterranean," and "Seasons of the Soul," Tate's vision is in accord with much of Eliot's and Hulme's--tradition-centered and anti-romantic. His moral insight and his essentially absolutist vision of human existence preserve him from the fatal errors in understanding such as those which eventually destroyed his friend, Hart Crane. But in his techniques for expressing

this vision, Tate is still, more often than not, romantic. The ways in which he exploits metaphor and symbol, the manner in which he often forces ironic attitudes into his poems, his clearly verbal caprices, his exaggerated faith in the virtues of concretion in language, and his conscious use at any instant of language which is more inclusive than exclusive in meaning, show Tate to be the willing victim of an ambitiousness in achievement which no amount of critical justification can make unromantic.

However, as I have often tried to demonstrate in the preceding chapters, the difficulties created by Tate's strategies for achieving poems can be greatly reduced by a careful willingness on the part of the reader to go along with his efforts until what he says, what he hints at, and what he promises have been given their due. This necessitates a kind of reading which recent criticism, with its emphasis on the poem as a non-contingent unit, has tried to avoid. A poem by Tate must be known, with few exceptions, in the context of his other poems. Even Cleanth Brooks, one of the most careful explicators of individual poems, in reviewing Tate's difficult book, The Winter Sea (1944), adopts this view: ". . . any poem by a serious poet becomes a commentary on the rest of his work and, perhaps, achieves its ultimate richness for the reader only in so far as it receives the commentary of the rest of his work . . . lacking commentary [the reader] may feel that the poems are needlessly obscure."¹

¹Cleanth Brooks, "Allen Tate," Poetry, LXVI, No. 6 (June, 1945), 324.

To reduce such a feeling of obscurity, to illuminate and explain Tate's poetry and his techniques for writing poems, I have brought together from instant to instant as much of his work as I could control. I have traced his development as it is recorded in his poetry from his first published poem to his last; and I have discussed the "modern" artistic pitfalls he has been unable to avoid.

I have given Tate's poetry the kind of reading which Brooks recommends, the kind which the poet most obviously asks us to give him. One's rewards, in spite of Tate's frequent inability to overcome the natural indolence of complex materials, seldom fall below the proportions of one's efforts. Poems such as "Shadow and Shade," "Ode to the Confederate Dead," or "Mother and Son" are lastingly impressive even if they fail to achieve the rich excellence at which they aim. And in poems such as "The Mediterranean," "Ignis Fatuus," "The Cross," "The Last Days of Alice," and "Seasons of the Soul" the rewards derivable from the quality of Tate's human insight and the felicities of his writing are far greater than the cost one may have exacted of himself in time and effort. This cannot be said of many contemporary poets. In truth, such praise belongs to but few poets in any age. It does belong to Allen Tate.

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