

REVIEW

Allen Tate. *A study in Southern modernism and the religious imagination*. By Joseph Kuhn. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2009. Pp. 524.

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It is at least as true of the world of academia as of the world of poetry – to pastiche Randall Jarrell (1955: 160) – that hastily crafted but pretentious publications, texts derivative, incidental, confused and confusing, appear with much clamour day after day – “like the cries and truck sounds from the street” – and beyond acknowledging the fact there is nothing one wishes to say about them. Bluntly put, all-too-many academic titles proclaim flamboyant feats that end in pathetic self-defeat. Once in a while, however, one comes across a daisy, a work that not only immediately garners attention and commands respect, but is a pleasure to pick up and read. Granted, *Allen Tate: A study in Southern modernism and the religious imagination* does not announce its genre readily. Still, even though it is really a real whale rather than a real daisy of a book – “pp. 524” is no typo – it is not marred by Moby Dick’s daunting as well as formidable facelessness and unsubdividedness. The volume opens with a substantial introduction – it is, indeed, “A model of order” – and comprises of six clearly-marked sections: “Beginnings in New England”, “The two masters”, “A modernist metaphysical”, “The historical imagination”, “A modern Dante?”, and “The post-Tateians”; with further subdivision into consecutively numbered titled chapters, fourteen in all. The book closes with an afterward and a concise summary in Polish.

A rather strong caveat is in place here: the study under review deals with no paltry matters. Emblematically, by way of a preview, it takes up such fundamental, inherently complex or specialized issues as discontinuity of physical and spiritual realms, angelism and cosmology, divine self-definition, animistic understanding of religion, distinction between classical and romantic irony, between myth and history, between communion and communication, between religious and devotional discourse, neo-scholastic diagnosis of modernity, com-

parative synchronicity, participatory model of historicism, fourfold theory of interpretation. However, the author presents and handles this erudite material not only with impressive intellectual aplomb, compelling thrust and clarity of purpose, but also with a rare narrative wit, lightness of touch and a carefully balanced turn of phrase. Joseph Kuhn's work abounds in nuggets of original academic research, critical perspicuity and stylistic finesse.

When [Tate] was a fourteen year old boy he would stare at the desperate, asymmetrical daguerreotype of Poe and hope that he would one day resemble it. The hope came true in an unexpected way – not because Tate turned into the *poète maudit* that his adolescent self hoped, but because the mature Tate was to see Poe as an exemplary instance of the incoherent modern self. So true indeed did the hope become that to say that Tate was 'influenced' by Poe is to state the case too lightly: Poe was so hauntingly and pressingly close to Tate that he was like another William Wilson or a Montresor to Tate's Fortunato. For all of Tate's construction of a European Old South, when he sought in that historical period a writer who fulfilled the literary duty of "render[ing] the image of man as he is in his time" he found not a writer in the Latin tradition but rather one who "raised the black flag of the lower mind" and who formed his art out of the terror and emptiness of the new (p. 240).

As the author himself admits, Allen Tate occupies an uncertain place in the history of American poetry. In the first couple of decades following the end of World War II – during which time the stock of T. S. Eliot and the New Criticism stood probably at its highest – Tate benefited from his reputation as the "Eliot of the American South". At that time a number of important studies devoted to his work appeared, culminating in Radcliffe Squires's collection of critical evaluations *Allen Tate and his work* (1972). But since then scholarly interest has significantly tapered off. A number of influential contemporary critics and academics, such as Yale professor Langdon Hammer, for instance, have decided that Tate is no more than a minor regional poet. It must be acknowledged that Tate's way of writing does not enter easily into sympathy with the Continental theory that came to dominate American academic criticism in the late 1970s. And the immediate impression of his poetry – a dense, bristling verse in the vein of the high modernity of, for example, Hart Crane – is of no little difficulty and abstruseness, even a certain inaccessibility, one can safely say. However, many of the most important literary figures contemporary with Tate thought him anything but minor. T. S. Eliot, R. P. Blackmur, John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks, among others, esteemed Tate's work very highly indeed. Walker Percy, one of the most distinguished modern authors of the American South, claimed that along with William Faulkner Tate was the only great "cosmos-shaping" poet that the region had produced. Robert Lowell, for his part, praised Tate's grand style as an extraordinary mixture of "symbol, courtesy, and terror".

Joseph Kuhn writes out of a profound conviction that some way back into Allen Tate's poetry is needed today. What according to him endows Tate's writing with a special resonance and a broader, ongoing relevance, is that in an intriguing way it is "caught up" in history. This appreciation seems to be the key note of the study under review. However, "history" does not mean here the disseminating and non-objective processes found in recent theoretical speculation, but rather the history of Catholic or, more precisely, Augustinian understanding. It is an understanding in which time is perceived and experienced as constantly moving toward significance and definition, in a quasi-Heideggerian sense of it, one might want to add. Tate's whole instinct was to connect the immediate experience of the modernist American poet with what T. S. Eliot called "the mind of Europe", i.e., the classical-Christian scheme. This proposition is precisely what according to the author of the present work furnishes Tate's oeuvre with some ultimate framework of intelligibility.

Tate's need for the above connection gives rise to the twofoldness of Kuhn's approach; which is evident in the title and subtitle of the book. Each of them – the title and the subtitle – point in perceptibly different directions. On the one hand, this is a monograph on the work of the poet, novelist, critic and biographer Allen John Orley Tate (1899-1979). This is where, predictably enough, the author comes up with close analyses of such texts as the iconic poem "Ode to the Confederate Dead" (1927) and the novel *The Fathers* (1938/1960), both indispensable post-Civil War literary resources. As indicated by the subtitle, the scope of the study necessarily involves a commitment to a much larger, cosmopolitan field. It is both the politics and the aesthetics of Modernism as well as the dynamic of the classical-Christian scheme that circumscribe this field. Tate was by no means the first American author to invoke and actively engage the European Catholic discourse. In fact, Kuhn proposes to trace in some detail a sort of countercultural Catholic movement in American letters, the uncomfortable ("nasty") dose of orthodoxy, poised against the dominant Protestant ideology. It is a movement that began with the New England Brahmins such as Charles Eliot Norton (1827-1908) and runs through T. S. Eliot, the radical convert to a religion and tradition out of reason. Unsurprisingly, Eliot is a critical figure and essential point reference in the present study. It might be even argued that Tate's idea of the South was really a way of giving this movement a local habitation and a distinctive name. Hence the "cosmos" (in Percy's description) that Tate bequeathed to the South was markedly different from Faulkner's; in that it was more theologically grounded, put greater emphasis on classical order, and was less preoccupied with race. A pivotal term in Tate's writing is "order" and this term distributes itself on several levels in his world. As Kuhn brilliantly argues: "[It] begins as the classical insight into the intelligibility of the *nous* – the intuition into the singleness of being of Zeno and Parmenides that

Tate mentions in ‘Ode to the Confederate Dead’. But as it unfolds within a ‘history of order’ it extends through the model of the person, the household, the *polis*, and finally – after the Judaic ‘leap in being’ – with the Augustinian city of the believer ... For Tate, a work of literature has to stand in relation to this ‘history of order’: it has to submit itself to a grammar of intelligibility even as an occluded form. ‘[T]he myth of unity of being’, said Tate, ‘runs through all literature at all times ...’” (p. 476). In the last part of his study, Kuhn goes on to examine what he sees as the persistence of this model of the South after 1945, in a group of literati to whom he gives the name “the post-Tateians”: Richard M. Weaver (1910-1963), Walker Percy (1916-1990), and Lewis P. Simpson (1916-2005). Kuhn arrives at the conclusion that with the demise of this model a certain identifiable story about the South seems to run its course, or simply comes quietly to an end.

This book, then, is partly a critical study of American traditionalist modernism as a state of mind, particularly the modernism of the so-called Southern Renaissance. But the cosmopolitan scheme of Europe enters into Tate’s work not only as ‘idea’ but also as poetic form. Convincingly, Kuhn sees Tate as a modern Dantesque poet as far as the technique and the architectural sense of poetry are concerned. Underlying Tate’s poetry is a longing for ontological unity, and this emerges through his poetic insistence on medieval universals, in his understanding of the natural world as an analogue for the supernatural, as well as in his use of scholarly emblems. Yet, for all this reaching out to a lucid medievalism, there looms a darkened sense of contemporary secularism that overshadows Tate’s work. All things said, he is above all a poet of the abyss and his forefather in this regard is unmistakably Edgar Allan Poe (the subject of two of Tate’s most powerful essays: “Our cousin, Mr. Poe” [1949] and “The angelic imagination: Poe as God” [1953]). This sense of the abyss modifies Tate’s rather conspicuous Virgilianism and Danteism. Also, it lends it the more modern accents of an unquiet Symboliste poetry at large. The feeling for the modern abyss has a consequence for the Augustinian concept of history as well, one that provides a structure for Tate’s verse. Occasionally, this scheme of historical order in poetry tends to edge into something more broken and immanent. It is this ‘sunken’ history, so to say, that in some of Tate’s works gives rise to a peculiarly Southern version of the baroque. Particularly in the “Ode to the Confederate Dead”, the poet recognized how one result of the intrusion of the historical consciousness in poetry was the appearance of a modernist version of the baroque and of allegory.

This allegory depends on a lack of sensuous immediacy or the loss of the object to its baroque form; there is in addition a greater reliance upon nonrepresentational or intellectual elements. The concentrated tropes or what Tate called a “controlled

disorder of perception” are an index of this loss of direct perception since the substitutions of resemblance in metaphor are often not straightforwardly apparent and have to be extracted analytically ... The extra ‘intellectual’ elements in modern poetic allegory, such as might be found in the ‘analytic’ construction of Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead”, supply a supplementary meaning to the lyric that seems to take sustenance from the historicity of ‘knowledge’ and which can seem to go obscurely or awkwardly beyond the lyric impulse, imparting to it a frozen quality (p. 280-281).

The stricken, Medusan images have a peculiar power of desolation and of reaching into the desperate historical predicament of the post-bellum South. Kuhn ingeniously relates this quality of Tate’s verse to Walter Benjamin’s landmark study *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (first published as *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* in 1928, and made available in English in 1977). The analogy is very convincing indeed since the maverick German-Jewish intellectual trailblazer was very much concerned with the loss of the object to the baroque outline specifically in periods of historical decay. In this aspect of his analysis of Tate’s poetry, Kuhn admirably succeeds in opening up a new path in Southern literary studies by bringing to bear the work of Walter Benjamin and its relation of modernist verse to the fragments of an entire theological system. Tate called “Ode to the Confederate Dead” a baroque meditation on the ravages of time and in this poem “the residues of Confederate history are chipped, broken, and marble-like”. Kuhn believes that it is “as though a version of Benjamin’s history as ruin found in the Trauerspiel plays has now transposed to the American South” (p. 281). To offer one more direct insight into *Allen Tate. A study in Southern modernism and the religious imagination*, the following passage shows how usefully (as well as apparently effortlessly) the author incorporates into his analyses also more recent critical thought:

“Ode to the Confederate Dead” begins with an image of a central device of allegory: the image of writing. The headstones “yield their names to the element”; they gradually have their letters worn away by wind and rain. At “the very heart of the allegorical attitude”, Benjamin observes, is the notion that “every image is only a form of writing” ... This act of the exteriorization of meaning in the “writing” figure in Tate’s poem can perhaps be further explicated through Jacques Derrida’s account in *Speech and Phenomena*. In written script, says Derrida, meaning goes out from itself “into the world, space or nature” and, by this detour out of living speech into a dead exterior, gives evidence of “the process of death at work in signs” ... Significance alienates itself from itself via a temporal or historical delay and creates the whole problem of the puzzling split between memorialization and meaning that presents itself to the visitor to the graveyard (p. 284).

To students of the history of ideas, to aficionados of (Post-)Modernism, of the American South, and of Allen Tate in particular, the present study is a treat and

a gift. In a sense, one receives here both the volume and the value of at least two books for the price of one. As everybody knows, a blurb is just a blurb, but this time round (courtesy of Prof. Marek Wilczyński, University of Gdańsk) it can be taken at face value. *Allen Tate. A study in Southern modernism and the religious imagination* is “a true *opus magnum* ... an achievement of a very high academic order”. While many academic publications – and this is especially true of forced postdoctoral dissertations – are sadly self-consigned to unvisited limbos, storage vaults, dust and cobwebs, it is quite safe to predict that Joseph Kuhn’s book will be kept in a useful, meaningful circulation for years.

REFERENCES

- Jarrell, Randal
1955 *Poetry and the age*. New York: Vantage Books.