
THE FATHERS AND THE POWER OF LOVE: ALLEN TATE'S MODERN TRIUMPH OF LIFE

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In 1977 Louisiana State University Press issued a revised version of Allen Tate's *The Fathers* which with its new ending chronicled "what George Posey did after he rode away into the dark." Short but powerfully symbolic, Tate's revision of the novel's final paragraphs to encompass the postwar period has received much attention since its appearance. However, another, less obvious textual alteration that occurred between the first printing of the novel in 1938 and its reissue by Swallow in 1960, while virtually ignored by scholars, is perhaps equally important to an understanding of Tate's novel and work. This change, which occurs in the climactic section "The Abyss," involves a brief interaction between Lacy Buchan, the novel's young protagonist, and the Posey family's reclusive uncle, Mr. Jarman.

In this scene, Lacy awakens from a dream to confront a real nightmare in the hallway of the Posey home: his sister is near mad; his brother's fiancée is unconscious, the supposed victim of rape; and the family matriarch is dead of fright. Seeking the most available haven, Lacy retreats to the apartment of Mr. Jarman, where the aging recluse engages him in a one-sided conversation about lost friends and the march of time. "Time -- time! Our great enemy, sir," Jarman tells Lacy in the 1938 edition. "Have you read the *Triumph of Time* by Shelley?" (233). Mr. Jarman's misstatement of Shelley's title goes unchallenged here but is silently questioned by Lacy in the revised 1960 edition. By adding two short sentences to this section, Tate places new emphasis on Shelley's poem. Immediately after Jarman's question in this later version, Lacy asks, "Why had he got the title wrong? I suppose he couldn't let Life triumph!" (233). The speed and authority with which Lacy questions Jarman's misreading of the title belies the fact that, as he tells Jarman, he has not read *The Triumph of Life*. Given the thematic relevance of Tate's other literary allusions in the novel, I content that we should examine Shelley's work as essential to a complete reading of *The Fathers*.

Although Tate's essays reveal him as anti-Romantic and in many cases he declares his impatience with Shelley's less successful metaphoric flights, *The Fathers* bears striking thematic and symbolic resemblance to the poet's Dantean dream-vision, which lay unfinished upon his death in July 1822. In Shelley's poem a young man in a waking trance envisions the literal procession of Life before him. Riding in a chariot, Life tramples his victims without reserve. As Shelley's observer questions the vision, a wizened and wiser Rousseau appears to describe the triumphant procession and the degradation of Life's prisoners. Love, evil, the cyclical aspect of history and the necessity of confronting and accepting life's mysteries are explored in the course of the poem. As the commentator in *The Fathers*, Lacy explores similar themes. He ultimately accepts the necessary bond between love and evil. He realizes that in an endless cycle each generation must die so that another can be born. He resigns himself to the fact that attempting to answer life's major questions fosters self-awareness, but that the answers themselves must often remain mysteries.

Like Shelley's poem, *The Fathers* ultimately pivots on the universal themes of love and morality. In a revealing

letter to Donald Davidson, dated December 2, 1925, Tate perhaps unknowingly prefigures the thematic impact the former theme will have on *The Fathers* -- especially in regard to Shelley -- when he writes that "the secret of all morals, as Shelley (again) said, is love" (*Correspondence* 152). Balanced as its story is between the death of an outmoded code of existence and the birth of one based on selfish gain, *The Fathers* is, without question, a novel of morals. At least twice in the course of the story, Lacy comments on the moral qualities of his fellow characters. He cannot feel pity for the others nor can he justify their actions; rather, he indicates that, like Shelley's captive, both southern gentlemen and pre-carpetbagger are inherently evil. "[N]one of them was innately good," Lacy says. "They were all, I think, capable of great good, but that is not the same thing as being good" (219). In the world of Lacy Buchan, then, to be moral and thus "good" one must be able both to accept life and express love in its most traditional and selfless form.

Tate's philosophy is most clearly represented by the novel's triad comparison of Major Buchan, George Posey, and Lacy. As Shelley's prisoners are bound together by a defect in spirit of emotion, so are Major Buchan and George Posey united by their common failure to attempt self-knowledge and their lack of selflessness; thus they must remain "prisoners" of Life. Neither is capable of positive emotional involvement; neither admits the right of the other to adopt a different way of life. The major rigidly adheres to personal codes of honor; Posey, to whims. At various stages of the novel Lacy vacillates between loyalty to his father's customs and interest in the radically new ways of his brother-in-law. Eventually, however, he recognizes that both courses are seriously flawed because they are only partial modes of existence, half-lives.

In Major Buchan, Tate perceptively captures the selfish and arrogant stubbornness of those firmly entrenched in a particular system of beliefs. The major is a man in such firm control of his emotions that he becomes, in the works of Radcliffe Squires, "not quite alive. He is the continuation of a form of life rather than life" (144-45). The emotionless quality of his interaction with Lacy reveals his death-in-life existence. While wintering in John Semmes's Alexandria home, Major Buchan and Lacy maintain a polite but unemotional morning ritual. Major Buchan formally addresses his son: "God bless you, my son, in your labors of this day." And Lacy responds in kind: "God bless you, papa" (126). Moreover, the major stubbornly refuses to accept the changing of his world, a denial which can be understood but not excused. Major Buchan holds court in Semmes's parlor and chooses not to admit that the war threatens his family's estate and values. By denying reality, the major lives a half-life of sedentary intellectualism.

At the opposite end of the emotional spectrum, George Posey is capable of great feeling, yet, like the major, he is incapable of a full awareness of self. As Lacy describes him, Posey is merely a big child guided by impulsive actions: "Where there was nothing but direct action George Posey was a certain and powerful man" (270). Posey's behavior is rash, impetuous; his emotions, wild and perverted. Lacy believes that Posey loves his wife Susan but he is also aware that the emotion is dark-tinged, so much so that George "must have had a secret brutality for her when they were alone" (185). Indeed Susan confirms to Lacy that her husband is governed equally by virtue and violence (172). However, as emotional as Posey is for most of the novel, he also practices unexpected and inappropriate emotional restraint. He refers impassively to his daughter as "the child" (251), and greets the fact of his mother's death inanely, without feeling: "She's dead, ain't she?" (256). Like the major, George is without the refuge of love. Also like the major, he refuses to accept the manners of others.

Even on Buchan land, when the code calls for gentlemanly adherence to the rules of good behavior, Posey gives no quarter: he leaves Sarah Buchan's funeral and refuses to attend the burial. His behavior reveals that he can neither sympathize with the traditionalists' values nor compromise his own. "I can't even remember their names," he says of the Buchans' gathered relatives. "And by God they'll all starve to death, that's what they'll do. They do nothing

but die and marry and think about the honor of Virginia" (107). Thus, while the major refuses to accept the onset of time and change, Posey embraces it haphazardly, never stopping to rationalize his feelings or anticipate the result of his rash words and actions. Unable to bend emotionally, both Major Buchan and Posey must ultimately be broken by change. They fit perfectly into two of the three categories of prisoners Shelley identifies: "all those who had grown old in power/ Or misery, -- all who had their age subdued/ By action or by suffering" (lines 120-22). The major must watch as the South and its outdated values crumble; Posey must take his place in the cycle by assisting in the demise.

At times, Lacy reveals the emotional influence of the two older men. At his mother's funeral he refuses to cry although the need presses upon him. At other times he is governed by impetuosity. He rashly kisses Jane in the hallway of the Posey home (198) and loudly, rudely, tells Jarman of Jane Anne's death (235). Yet, like the observer in Shelley's poem, Lacy is capable of change. Ultimately, he provides insight where others fail. When Major Buchan expresses his belief that the secession of South Carolina does not affect Virginia, Lacy interrupts: "Oh, papa, but it does -- it does affect us" (141). This insight continues into adulthood, allowing the older Lacy to remember the emotional impact of his mother's funeral in the most complex and introspective terms.

Lacy's powers of self-awareness separate him from his father and George, and thus invest his report with the sensibility of someone who, like Shelley's dreamer, has witnessed Life's procession. Moreover, Lacy's acknowledgment of evil and his survival in its wake allow him to live more fully or, in the words of Radcliffe Squires, to "act in the world in a way neither Posey nor Major Buchan can" (145). By attempting to know himself or at least to acknowledge man's potentiality for evil actions, Lacy succeeds where the major and George fail. Despite the adherence of those two to personal codes, in the words of Shelley, "their lore/ Taught them not this, to know themselves" (211-212); thus, they are doomed. Like Shelley's captives, the major and his son-in-law become overwhelmed by what the poet calls the "mystery within" (213). They are caught in and destroyed by an internal darkness which Tate ultimately allows Lacy to embrace, even welcome, because he has the power to overcome it. On the evening of Semmes's wedding announcement, Lacy is in turmoil because he loves his brother's intended; the ensuing speech reveals Lacy's consciousness of the need to search for self-knowledge:

There are days when we consciously guide the flow of being towards the night. . . . But how many of us know that there are times when we passionately desire to hear the night? . . . To hear the night, and to crave its coming, one must have deep inside one's secret being a vast metaphor controlling all the rest: a belief in the innate evil of man's nature, and the need to face that evil. (218-19)

As Lacy continues, man alone is the "living image" of darkness and, in turn, evil. By confronting the night, Lacy acknowledges this evil and survives his encounter with it, something that Major Buchan and George Posey, as well as Shelley's captives, find impossible.

Had either the major or George been able to admit, express, or act upon love, then compromise with life's changes might have been possible. Unfortunately, love in its most original selfless form seems a foreign conception to both. Lacy, however, can both understand compromise and admit his capacity for love; thus, to the extent that any man can be so, he is "good." By freely admitting his capacity for love, Lacy becomes the fulcrum upon which Tate's love/morality theme is balanced. As we see with either ending, the novel ultimately turns on a question of love. Lacy must recognize that while his father has given him the strength of convictions, it is the impetuous Posey who has given him the abilities to confront the presence of evil in all things and to put action to his beliefs. Lacy sees Posey's value and thus is able to claim as he starts for war in the earlier edition of the novel: "I'll go back and finish

it. . . . It won't make any difference if I am killed. If I am killed it will be because I love him more than I love any man" (306). With this admission, Lacy embraces the role he must play in the forging of a new cycle in a new South, even if it means selflessly dying for the old one his brother-in-law has spurned.

In essence, Lacy recognizes and accepts his capacity for selfless love and for change. Without choice, Lacy is his father's son; without choice, he is her brother-in-law's friend. He is both Old South and New South. He is a part of the continuity of life and thus is the logical choice to present Tate's conviction that one must learn to accept life's continuous procession of changes. In his essay "Liberalism and Tradition," Tate writes that "the dominating structure of a great civilized tradition is certain absolutes . . . by which people live, and by which they must continue to live until in the slow crawl of history new references take their place" (203). In *The Fathers*, in a section which uses the processional symbolism of Shelley's poem, Tate has Lacy reach the same conclusion as he contemplates his mother's burial:

[T]he moment had come that all this waiting had been for, but it was lost in each new movement, each new step into our places in the melancholy procession. There was of course no one moment that it was all leading up to, and that piece of knowledge about life . . . has permitted me to survive the disasters that overwhelmed other and better men, and to tell their story. Not even death was an instant; it too became a part of the ceaseless flow. . . . (101)

At least twice more in the novel Lacy ponders such a "ceaseless flow" : when he considers the pioneers who died to establish their lives in the new world and when he looks at his own family cemetery at Pleasant Hill. There he again faces his own role in the unending procession of life:

I thought how many processions of how many slow feet had followed the path by the garden into the brick wall. I thought how many more would follow it, I among them, and then they would follow me, and among these there would be some who would drop out one day and be followed to the grave; then the processions would go on to the end of time. (281)

In this section, Lacy's understanding of the power of time and of man's inability to resist change tells us that he is more than familiar with the lessons learned by the dreamer in *The Triumph of Life*. Shelley's dreamer is told by Rousseau that challenging life is useless, as proven by the existence of the captives: "For in the battle Life and they did wage/ She remained conqueror" (239-240). Eventually, however, Dante reveals the secret to living harmoniously with Life, "How all things are transfigured except love" (476). The same holds true for Lacy Buchan. At the end of *The Fathers*, he has lost his home and his family, but he clings to the fact that he can love. Since Lacy knows he cannot avoid participating in the chaos, this is his only recourse if he expects to "survive" in a world where change reigns.

Despite its thematic similarities to Shelley's poem, Tate's novel cannot be reduced to the simple formula "love conquers all." As Shelley's dreamer discovers, not even love can stop the progression of life or one's expected role in the cycle of time. Love is the balm; it is not the cure. Perhaps, as Tate suggests, the only answer is self-awareness which leads to an acceptance of, or love for, others. At any rate, in *The Fathers*, Lacy Buchan must, like his father before him, take his place in the continuity of life, for in Shelley's words:

All things that in them wear
The form and character of mortal mould,
Rise as the sun their father rose, to bear

Their portion of the toil, which he of old
Took as his own and then imposed on them. . . . (16-20)

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