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LEONARD TATE: THE GENTLE POET FROM GRUNDY COUNTY

Dennis Loyd
Lipscomb University

Leonard Tate, long recognized as the unofficial poet laureate of Grundy County, Tennessee, best described the people of his region in "Mountain People" with lines that are direct, blunt, and accurate:

> We are mountain people.
> We are a boorish set, they tell us-
> Hard-bitten, coarse of feature and speech,
> Shallow and brawling as the mountain streams,
> With morale friable as our sandstone.
>
> All my life I have wanted to tell them:
> That we are mountain people,
> That mountain streams have pools of deep quietness,
> And that beneath the sandstone of our hills
> There is granite. (33)*

With such insight and keen powers of observation, this quiet mountain poet captured the spirit of the world of nature as well as the hearts of his own people in his many brief verses written over a span of five decades.

Possibly a poet whose personal life was marked by shyness and who preferred relative obscurity could have blossomed only in a place like Beersheba Springs in Grundy County. In the midst of this world of mountain beauty and promise, Leonard Leon Tate was born on April 19, 1912, on the same place where 77 years later he died on November 30, 1989. He was the youngest of five children born to William M. Tate and his second wife Martha Belle Smith Tate, the first librarian in Beersheba Springs. His formal education ended at Grundy County High School where he began writing poetry. Following graduation in 1932, he worked for the Civilian Conservation Corps in Sevierville, but after the United States entered World War II, Tate enlisted in the Air Force and served in North Africa. Many of his most effective poems came from his war experiences.

Following his military service, Tate returned to the world of peace and quiet at Beersheba Springs where he felt most at home. He supported himself by doing odd jobs for the summer people in that mountain resort. Two groups of people have always personified that community-the summer people, those whose homes were in Nashville, Chattanooga, or points farther away but who found their summer escape on the mountain, and the locals or the "mountain people," to use Tate's label, those who lived there year round. The locals provided essential services for the summer people, such as home repairs, yard work, gardening, caretaking of a house during the absence of the owner. Tate found employment in these ways and still had ample time to write his poetry, his way of escaping. Never gregarious but not reclusive either, he sought no public recognition nor honors. Though his poems were

widely published, he sent them to publications more inclined to accept occasional work from determined but not driven poets. His poems appeared in such publications as the *Southern Agriculturist*, *Poetry Digest Anthology of Verse*, *Century Anthology of Verse*, *Midland Poetry Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. Poetry was always an avocation for him, enabling him to express his own deep feelings without having to satisfy another's tastes or preferences. While no formal collection appeared in his lifetime, in 1980 he gathered over one hundred of his titles with an aim of possible publication. These works were in typed form and bound for family and friends under the title "Shadows in the Wind." A few years later, James Nicholson, former publisher of the *Grundy County Herald*, approached Tate with a plan to publish a volume of his verse. Tate's response continued his long-standing refusal to seek recognition or attention. In a letter dated January 26, 1987, nearly three years before his death, Tate declined Nicholson's offer to prepare an edition for publication and did so, in part, on the basis of his health:

> By this time you may have the opinion that I am indifferent, or unappreciative of your gracious letter and your work in re-typing some of the verses . . . . During these past several weeks I have thought much about your proposal to show the poems to others, and have been hoping I would feel well enough-in several ways-to participate in what this involvement would engender, now and later on. But I must tell you that I can not initiate anything-not even correspondence-at this time, nor in the very near future. This is regretted very much.

The tenor of the refusal suggests that Tate was reluctant to face the public at large with his work either from a sense of uncertainty over his talent or a determination to keep his own privacy.

Thus the shy and gentle poet kept his work to himself except for occasional pieces that escaped to the outside world through some periodical or some determined friend sharing his own private copy. Only after Tate's death in 1989 did two long-standing friends, both summer people on the mountain, prepare a volume to offer to the larger public. Dr. Benjamin Caldwell, a Nashville physician who had spoken at Tate's funeral, and Herschel Gower, long-time member of the English faculty at Vanderbilt University, co-edited the volume, *All the Lost Octobers and Other Poems*, published by the Beersheba Springs Historical Society in 1990. The book is dedicated to Tate's two surviving sisters, an action that would have pleased him greatly since in notes left for those planning his funeral and settling his affairs he directed that credit be given his two sisters for their loving support. His note specifies, "I request the minister conducting my services to tell all listeners that I want it known I could not have carried on during my last years without the loving care of my dear sisters Ruth and Clara Belle. Only God, besides myself, knows how very much they have done for me."

As unrecognized as he was for his work throughout most of his life, those who encountered his poetry often had high praise for it. Prominent members of the writing community recognized the strengths in his verse and urged wider awareness and appreciation. Among the scattered tributes collected by family members are remarks such as the following by Harry Harrison Kroll, Tennessee novelist and teacher, who said, "Leonard Tate is a perfectionist, and a powerful and beautiful poet. He is a shy, retiring soul, but his best poetry is as good as anything I have ever read." Similarly, Dr. Edwin Mims, long-time member of the Vanderbilt English faculty, said, "I read the poems with intense interest and delight. I have decided hopes that he will distinguish himself as a poet. He is intellectual as well as emotional. I am struck by his deep feeling and the maturity of his mind." More recently Nicholson, still wishing he had arranged publication of the poems in the 1980s, wrote of his verse, "Of course every line Leonard wrote was deeply felt and sincere-everything lyrical. Would he have been more at home in the time of Wordsworth than in that of the other mountain Tate?" That last reference is obviously to Fugitive poet and critic Allen Tate of nearby Sewanee.

Still the poetry more than the man attracts attention to Tate. His themes are those most often identified with nature poets: the seasons, the changes in the weather, the plant and animal life so plentiful in his environment. He also writes of his mother who must have been the single most important person in his life. According to family sources, his father was aloof and detached, perhaps never understanding Tate's devotion to the poetic. In the published volume, only one poem refers to his father, but several are obviously inspired by and in tribute to his mother. Most notable is "Mountain Mother" which honors his mother's heritage, her work, her influence, and her memory. The poem begins with the assertion, "My mother is a daughter of the hills," before going on to describe her years among the mountain people. Then addressing her in her later years, he says, "Dear sleeping mother, how I love you so! / My heart is wise and full of gentleness / Because of you, I ask no heritage / Except the world may know I am your son" (34). That tribute stands in stark contrast to the poem "Birth Mark" which addresses the reluctance of some family member, obviously his father, to accept Tate's poetic talent, which was his birthmark:

> Were I so lucky to have had a son
> Predestined to express himself in verse,
> My duty to him never could be done
> To help alleviate his natal curse.
>
> To fly, the swift must alternate his wings,
> Not synchronize them, as the other birds;
> So, too, the human maverick who sings,
> For each defies conventions of the herds.
>
> For were my son poetic, gay, or blind-
> No matter what the difference, by name-
> The Philistines would jeopardize his chance
> To speak convictions of his heart and mind;
> No wound hurts more when one is not to blame,
> No sin more deadly than intolerance. (56)

Without support and encouragement, the poet often retreats all the more into himself. Tate viewed his poetic talent as a curse from birth, a curse he could not escape. It sprang from nature's making him a "maverick" as he says in the poem. To live with that difference from other people is painful enough, but to live without the appreciation and acknowledgment of those closest to him was even more painful. His mother apparently never failed him, and because of her loyalty he was determined to do nothing to engender her disappointment in him. During his three years of military service when he flew nearly a thousand missions over Morocco, Algeria, Corsica, and southern France, he was reluctant to let his mother know the fears and uncertainties experienced by servicemen. In a poem written from Tunisia and apparently in response to one of her inquiries, he said,

> Your letter wants to know if soldiers weep . . .
> How can I answer so you understand?
> Surely the submarines that haunt the deep
> Gave us a fear we never knew on land,
> And here, where days are as so many years,
> Where we are ever pitted against death-
> This is no time to dim our sight with tears,
> Here words are but a wasting of the breath.

Yes, soldiers weep. And let me speak for all:
We shall not cry to give our heart release,
Nor when we hear them read the scroll of fame:
It will be after we, beyond the call
Of duty, have secured the lasting peace.
It will be when I hear you speak my name. (54)

One other poem influenced by his mother reminds the reader of the means of sending messages during the war; this one is called "V-Mail to God":

Forgive me when my letters say I'm well,
And take everything in easy strides;
And please, for Mother's sake, don't ever tell,
She wouldn't like it if she knew I lied.

I cannot take her face within my hands
Or smooth her hair, or kiss her tired eyes;
Nothing to send her from these foreign lands
But reassurance through my little lies.

Dear Master, it was she who told me first
Of You-that You could heal the blind and lame,
That You had pity for a soul accursed,
Your grace was all-sufficient for his shame.
So when I lie to shield her from the worst
Oh, please don't write it down against my name! (119)

The tenderness of his devotion to his mother rings through such poems with an intensity of emotion but always stopping short of sheer sentimentality. The reader must be impressed with the genuineness in his concerns and in his openness.

Tate enjoyed the sonnet form, writing many of his poems in that concise and structured manner, including one section of eighteen sonnets appearing under the title "The Unfound Door: Unrhymed Sonnets." The terseness and orderliness of the sonnet appear in these but without the deliberateness and predetermined rhyme scheme the ear has learned to anticipate. Beyond his interest in the sonnet, most of his other poems are done in a simple lyric form. Rhyme follows a fairly consistent pattern.

Among his numerous nature poems, Tate has preference for the fall of the year and especially for the month of October. This last observation is evident in the book's title poem, "All the Lost Octobers." In that verse and many of his other poems, a sadness deriving from the failure to recognize and to appreciate the beauty of the lost seasons haunts the speaker. Those times of brilliance blended with the sadness for their neglect pass by without proper respect for what is now gone.

One of the most intriguing parts of the collection must be the large number of poems devoted to some unnamed or otherwise unidentified love. According to family accounts, Tate fell in love with a young woman during the war.

While she apparently inspired many of these poems, there is no indication she is the lone inspiration. According to family members, "Jonquils," written in Algeria, is one of the poems with the young woman as the focus:

> We met them as we climbed the lovely hill:
> Children, with jonquils in their hands and hair;
> They smiled at us-the grass was green and still,
> For it was spring, with jonquils everywhere.
> Upon the hill we stopped; you took my hand,
> The wind made all the jonquils dance and sway;
> Something there was we did not understand-
> So much we felt, so little could we say.
>
> Sometimes I wake and find it still is true:
> My dream was but a dream, and it may be
> That all I left unsaid that day to you
> May not be spoken till eternity.
> Yet always in my heart, and in the air
> There will be spring, with jonquils everywhere. (63)

With no specific dates to identify the composition of these obviously very personal poems, the reader can only speculate as to the persona addressed. Since "Jonquils" indicates its place of composition, the date is narrowed down a bit. But others offer no such clues. Yet, several poems are filled with the same intense affection and emotion, some based on a lost love and some stressing the poet's own unfailing love. "The Day Was Autumn" begins with the lines "I thought of you today, for in my heart / The echo of your words will ever be, / Although you tore my universe apart / The day you took your love away from me" (80). As for his own constancy, he offers marked evidence in "When I Have Ceased to Love You":

> When I have ceased to love you, not again
> Will breath of lilacs through my open door
> Bring tears for vanished Aprils; nevermore
> Will mountains, seen through stripes of silver rain,
> Challenge my soul, in happiness or pain
> To greater heights; nor will I then explore
> Old depths of beauty I had known before
> The light went out in hand and heart and brain.
>
> So this you may remember, dear, and know;
> My slightest word or deed is but a token
> Reminding you, through days that come and go,
> Love does not fade, however cold and broken
> The heart may be, nor can it die, although
> All deeds be done, and every word be spoken. (81)

Religious allusions and themes appear in a number of his poems as well as some surprising references to modern social problems. In the poem "Precedent" Tate combines a tribute to Mary the mother of Jesus with his own comment on the legalization of abortion. The poem begins with this quatrain:

In olden times there was a gentle maid
Whose purity had never been betrayed;
She lived a pious life, and in her plan
Was faithful to a certain righteous man.

After telling in poetic lines the announcement by Gabriel and the acceptance of that message by Joseph, Tate concludes the poem:

There were no marriage counselors to see,
No wish with God's design to disagree,
And so she waited, till she felt the grip
Of labor pains while on a business trip.

It was ordained that no obstetric knife
Should break the precedent of right to life;
Where would we be, had Mary been a cynic,
With credit cards at some abortion clinic! (121)

One rather brief poem addresses space exploration and explains that God's will must be considered as man reaches out to the stars.

Select any star in the firmament-dim it, conceal it, or bind it,
Keep it obscure, commonplace as a granule of sand,
Assured that one day, if God wills, some earthling will find it
And land. (122)

For one who kept his own lawn, bemoaned any cut tree or wildflower, never owned a car much less learned to drive one, maintained the quiet life he was born to, Tate seems indeed the "anachronism" Caldwell calls him in his preface to the published poems. Perhaps it is no longer possible for such a man to live in the modern world and eschew all the demands of modernity. Tate explained his aversion to city life and its demands when he wrote "Thoughts from a City":

What is there here to wake the heart to sing?
Captive in concrete, city trees all stand
Waiting for earthquakes, and on every hand
Men against steel-their crying all day long.

Rumble and clang . . . the noises of the street . . .
Louder than any human cry is loud,
Till all identity within this crowd
Is lost among the surge of restless feet.

Yet some day, not too long distant, I will go
Upward to mountain heights-to lyric flow
Of lonely streams. Bareheaded, in the breeze,

Rest eyes, like tired birds, on greening trees;
Cooling my face against unfevered stone return,
O heart of mine, unto our own! (18)

That return to the mountain and its comforting assurance renewed him daily. He understood the misperceptions of mountain people that brought mockery and pity, but he also knew the depth of hearts in tune with the natural and real world. He heard the music and knew the peace of his environment. And he wanted so much to let others hear that music and share that peace, if only through his verbal depictions. As he explained in "Mountain People," he knew those on the mountain were often described as "boorish," "hard-bitten," "coarse," "shallow and brawling." But he wanted readers to know that like the mountain streams, his people knew "deep quietness" and strength like that of "granite." James Nicholson is absolutely correct when he says of Leonard Tate, "He was a very private individual-a mountain thrush who did his singing from a hidden place." An apt image for Tate, the thrush, for it reminds us that above all else this Grundy County singer was a gentle man and a gentle poet.

*_All the Lost Octobers and Other Poems_; all subsequent poems are also found in this collection. Only page numbers will be cited parenthetically.

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