
**ANGUISH IN A SECOND MARRIAGE:
THE CAROLINE GORDON-ALLEN TATE LETTERS**

Eleanor H. Beiswenger
Austin Peay State University

During the twenty-one-year first marriage of Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate, all who knew them believed they represented a unique combination of talents and personalities. They were a compelling pair to many writers and artists, whether the Tates were in France, New York, at Benfoly in Clarksville, Tennessee, or in Princeton. When that marriage suddenly ended in late 1945, therefore, the overwhelming response was disbelief.

The ink was barely dry on the divorce papers in early 1946, however, when Gordon and Tate decided to remarry. Apparently Gordon's flight from the marriage, on discovering her husband's most recent extramarital affair, had a devastating effect on Tate, and he convinced Gordon they belonged together. During the weeks intervening between her departure and their remarriage, he had discovered a new freedom to voice his feelings which had been impossible earlier. Thus, the new beginning they faced looked very promising for them. Nevertheless, just beneath the surface lurked the three-headed dragon which had destroyed their first marriage -- Tate's infidelity, Gordon's responding anger, and their mutual excessive indulgence in alcohol -- and it soon reared its head to threaten the successful reconciliation. During the thirteen-year second marriage, Gordon's concerted efforts to eliminate her husband's infidelity by enlisting the aid of religious authority and Jungian analysis ultimately proved to be futile.

Nevertheless, as they prepared to remarry, Gordon was optimistic when she wrote Tate in the spring of 1946 (letter undated) that they complemented each other almost mathematically. ¹ she observed that their friends perceived them in this special way as well. She predicted their new openness would not only permit a new beginning, but also a new fulfillment not realized by other lovers in long-term relationships.

In their new intensity of feelings, Gordon and Tate poured out their longing for each other in letters written during frequent separations: Tate on lecture and poetry-reading tours, and Gordon on lecture and teaching assignments at a variety of university campuses around the country. The letters they exchanged several times a week indicated a unique and crucial interdependence between the two. Beyond this, they regularly cabled and telephoned each other for instant communication of news.

Between 1946 and 1952 the Tates lived together without separation except when Gordon stayed with their mutual friend, Sue Jenkins, near Patterson, New York, where Gordon concentrated on her writing, or when Tate participated in summer writers' conferences held at various universities. Their relationship inevitably experienced periodic strains from the demanding schedules each maintained in teaching and writing. Beyond this, they maintained personal and professional interaction with other writers. Despite these difficulties, their commitment to each other was further strengthened and reinforced when Gordon was baptized a Roman Catholic in 1947 and Tate followed in 1950. Six years into their second marriage, in 1952, he went abroad twice in what began a series of overseas literary tours. In her 1952 letter (otherwise undated but possibly May 9th, according to her context)

written a few hours after his departure, Gordon focused on the beneficial support she and Tate derived from religion and emphasized that her prayers would benefit both of them during their separation.

Tate's correspondence to his wife reflected the same degree of affection and dedication. Their letters typically began with the words "my darling," "sweetheart," or "dearest," and they closed with "all my love" or "I miss you so much." Even after their fundamentally unresolved problems became more pronounced in their communications, they continued to declare their mutual dedication and commitment with these affectionate words and phrases.

Beyond their endearments and frequent communications, however, the letters reveal the depth of concern the Tates began to feel about the quality of their marriage. The problems from their first marriage had resurfaced by 1952: Gordon's violent reactions to Tate's new involvement with other women frightened Tate, producing his old defensive, self-protective reaction. At the same time, their letters began to contain frequent references to the problem of excessive drinking that each acknowledged and its potential damage in their lives.

The combination of infidelity, anger, and alcohol now posed a serious threat to the stability of the Tates' second marriage and led to their decision to begin Jungian analysis during the winter of 1953-54. Tate had obtained a Fulbright fellowship in Italy, and Gordon accompanied him. Dr. Dora Bernhard, an Austrian therapist in Rome, whom they referred to as La Dottoressa or La Dott., became almost a third party in the Tate marriage. They arranged sessions or corresponded with her regularly between 1953 and 1956. Beginning about this same time Gordon and Tate located "spiritual advisors" in the United States, and for the duration of the second marriage their letters exchanged reports of pertinent advice and suggestion they had received.

Jungian analysis was especially appealing to the Tates, I believe, because of their classical training and knowledge of myth. They enthusiastically and optimistically offered analyses of their own dreams and pounced on each other's dreams, offering interpretations and insights they declared could help them toward individual improvement and mutual understanding. One breakthrough Tate believed he experienced concerned the "Magna Mater" principle. With La Dottoressa's help, Tate recognized his deep-seated fears in childhood of his mother's displeasure; he concluded that he had transferred these reactions to Gordon and that her displeasure led him to turn to other women who showed their admiration and uncritical acceptance of him. Many of their subsequent letters refer to the "Magna Mater" syndrome. In an undated 1955 letter, during the waning period of the second marriage, Gordon reminded Tate that, although he frequently said he felt menaced by any feminine reproach, he sought the strength in particular to withstand *her* anger when it occurred. She claimed that her anger was an expression of her own fear and that these mutual feelings were fundamental to their difficulties. She added that Tate's problems had much to do with his inability to accept those qualities which are uniquely feminine in one woman (herself) and that this prevented creative inspiration from coming freely to him.

Long before Gordon voiced these statements, however, both writers acknowledged difficulties. Subsequent to Tate's tenured appointment at the University of Minnesota in 1951, their social round of academic cocktail parties in Minneapolis began to trigger charges of Tate's indiscretions and Gordon's tantrums. This tension level between them diminished somewhat when they began to live separately in 1955, at Tate's insistence, and were together only on periodic weekends or during holidays. Gordon took teaching jobs in Seattle, Washington; Lawrence Kansas; and then finally settled in Princeton, New Jersey, while she commuted to teach at Columbia, the New School, and City College in New York.

By late summer 1956, Gordon and Tate were struggling against such serious difficulties that they could not be together without painful reactive feelings immediately surfacing. Tate suddenly disappeared from Gordon's

Princeton home on August 30th after they had had a conciliatory talk. He sent her a special delivery letter which declared his intention to regain his composure apart from her. He admitted that he could not face her to tell her of his plans but that he had become convinced he could no longer live with the fear of her reproaches and disapproval. He believed that neither of them could change the established pattern of her anger and his responding flight. Tate claimed this pattern was proof of a very deep love, but he believed that their understanding of the problem was not strong enough to prevent recurrences.

We can only guess at Gordon's reaction to this letter, which must have been expressed in a phone call that night or the following day. Tate wrote in response long after midnight that he had now become convinced they should continue to live apart, she in Princeton and he in Minneapolis, and that this arrangement would insure his fidelity and a life of restraint.

While Gordon registered frustration over their separation, her desire for the survival of her marriage is demonstrated in two noteworthy ways. Throughout the second marriage, Gordon's letters reveal she had a genuine concern for her husband's health (he had chronic problems with his teeth and eyes, periodic gastrointestinal disturbances or ulcerative conditions, and a traumatic procedure for a small facial cancer). She was also supportive concerning his chronic problems with "writer's block" and with the ups and downs in his professional career.

She typically ranked his intellect and creative ability as far beyond hers. On January 11, 1957, Gordon admitted that, aside from her intuitive ability, she had learned all she knew as a writer from him. She asserted that this was appropriate; man was to be the leader and woman was to be the follower. This attitude was apparently another attempt to convince Tate that he should assume the stronger role in their relationship in other ways as well.

Despite her almost worshipful attitude toward Tate's intellect and professional guidance in her career, Gordon nevertheless began from the early 1950s to include in her letters detailed accounts of the marital infidelities of their mutual friends and acquaintances, directing biting and caustic comments toward the errant male. She barely masked her intent to induce guilt in Tate with indirect applications to his own behavior.

Another characteristic which appeared in Gordon's letters from the same period was a frequent apology for the anger she had expressed in telephone calls just prior to her letter-writing. She hoped he recognized that she was overextended in her work assignment, living in a strange and alien environment far from people she cared about. Not until Gordon settled in Princeton and had her own garden (an extremely crucial ingredient in her life) did her tone of personal isolation begin to subside.

Beginning with the period of their religious conversions, another preoccupation for both Gordon and Tate appeared in their letters. They became avid readers of religious philosophy and history, and they regularly recommended material to each other which offered insights or solutions to patterns of thought or behavior in themselves or each other. Often these references seem to have been exchanged objectively and generously with well-intentioned motivations. On occasions, however, their references and quotations included rationalizations which applied to themselves but contained pointed and barbed application for the spouse.

Their difficulty in part stemmed from the fact that they were intelligent, articulate, creative people. Because Gordon and Tate genuinely respected and admired these abilities in each other, they considered each other's arguments and analyses with great seriousness and pondered their application to the matter under discussion. Yet, interestingly, they often came to different conclusions in their own minds about where the problems lay, and their rationalizations served to protect each one's insecurity and defensiveness. At the same time, until late 1958 both

partners seemed convinced that they must find solutions to their marital problems within the marriage, even if it meant periodic or nearly permanent separation. Many of their letters evoke our compassion and empathy as they appealed to each other for trust, forgiveness, understanding, and acceptance.

By late 1957, nevertheless, the letters indicate that both Gordon and Tate had begun to recognize certain insolubles in their marital problems. The recurring pain each had received from the other made each new difficulty more towering. Gordon attempted to refrain from lashing out vehemently, but Tate nonetheless felt her displeasure and criticism and reacted typically with retreat.

When Gordon learned that Tate had decided to accept a speaking engagement in Florida instead of visiting her in Princeton during his spring break from Minnesota classes, she first reacted typically in a letter dated only as "Wednesday." Then she thoughtfully analyzed their situation, concluding they should never again attempt reconciliation based on admission of anger and guilt and the expectation that the past could be forgiven and forgotten. She said they must find a way to break the cycle of behavior which trapped both of them.

Though the Tates commented reassuringly on time spent together in Princeton and Nashville in late 1957 and early 1958, they arrived at the final crisis in their relationship during 1958-59 when Tate anticipated a sabbatical year and received a Fulbright offer to teach at Oxford. He asked Gordon to accompany him, but her response was entirely negative in a letter headed "St. Paul of the Cross, 1958": her teaching commitments had been made and she feared problems of reinstatement on her return; the expense would be greater than their income; she wished to study with the Carmelite religious order; she thought geographical stability would better contribute to their spiritual state than constantly moving about, and, finally, she was certain Tate could make better progress with his poetry if he were to work at home during his sabbatical instead of teaching abroad.

Initially, Tate accepted her arguments and declined the Fulbright invitation in early May. However, as he concluded a summer term of teaching at Harvard, he wrote on August 19th, indicating that he saw a different reason for Gordon's dismissal of the proposal. He now believed he should go to Oxford, both for financial reasons and for reasons concerning their relationship. He expressed concern that he was the one required to adjust his life socially because Gordon felt unable to see certain people. He denied her apparent claim that these friends took his side against her or that his private life was even discussed when he was with them. He hoped she would not carry out any of the threats made by telephone if he accepted the Fulbright. Tate even referred to the possibility of their living together in Minneapolis after his return if they could co-exist charitably. In the meantime, he urged that they ponder and pray over this idea.

On August 26 Tate wrote that on his return from England he could not anticipate sharing life with Gordon unless he felt fully able to dedicate himself to a true Christian marriage. He attempted to explain this by distinguishing between the deep supernatural commitment he had made to her and the need for its moral counterpart, which he believed was not yet realized.

Tate's decision to accept the Fulbright met with silence on Gordon's part. In urging her to write, Tate's letters from England in early October 1958 were similar to those from Ogden, Utah, in July 1946 except that their tone reflected more than loneliness. He pleaded on October 23rd for her letters, saying her support was essential. He felt her silence was a continuing disapproval, and he became somewhat frantic without her interest and sympathy. He needed to know how she felt about him.

By late November, however, the idea of divorce had been raised, and from that time until the legal action occurred

in August 1959, the Tates' communications were by turns curt, anguished, apologetic, and recriminatory. The final blow to Gordon was Tate's decision to marry Isabella Gardner as soon as the divorce was granted. Interestingly, however, this action did not sever their correspondence, letters between Gordon and Tate continued for another eighteen years, until Tate's death in 1979.

One remarkable phenomenon must be noted concerning their creative work during the period between 1946 and 1949, when the lives of Gordon and Tate experienced such personal upheaval. They collaborated and produced the anthology *House of Fiction* in 1950, and Gordon's novel appeared in 1951. Volumes of Tate's poetry appeared in 1947, 1948, and 1950. Despite their mutual anguish over their disintegrating relationship, Gordon's second divorce had become final and their lives went in different directions, each continued to write and publish: Gordon's anthology, *How to Read a Novel*, and a collection of Tate's poems in 1960; a second collection of Gordon's stories, *Old Red and Other Stories*, in 1963; her final novel, *The Glory of Hera*, in 1971; and Tate's volumes of poetry in 1966, 1971, and 1977. At the same time, Gordon and Tate continued to follow each other's progress and to communicate their interest. Tate avidly read and praised her final novel, *The Glory of Hera*, in 1971, and Gordon lauded his receipt of the National Medal for Literature in 1976.

The interest that each had in the professional accomplishments of the other never waned, nor did they waver in their shared commitment to their daughter and her family. The ties that had bound Gordon and Tate were thus extraordinarily strong and complex. Their letters, which immortalize a period of over thirty years, reflect this compelling relationship between two gifted Southern writers.

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This web page is maintained by

Dr. Harold D. Tallant, Department of History, Georgetown College

400 East College Street, Georgetown, KY 40324, (502) 863-8075

E-mail: htallant@georgetowncollege.edu

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This web page is maintained by

Dr. Harold D. Tallant, Department of History, Georgetown College
400 East College Street, Georgetown, KY 40324, (502) 863-8075

E-mail: htallant@georgetowncollege.edu