The South Carolina REVIEW

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DECEMBER, NINETEEN HUNDRED SEVENTY-ONE

THE FURMAN UNIVERSITY BULLETIN

Greenville, S. C.
(Inaugurated January 1912)

The South Carolina Review

Volume 4, Number 1 December, 1971

Contents

Frank Durham

1913 - 1971

When we thought about founding this *Review*, we went at once to the only man of letters in the state who had the experience to help us make it succeed. For more than twenty-five years he had been active in The Poetry Society of South Carolina. He had written the definitive biography of DuBose Heyward, one of the founders of this society. He was at work on a study of Julia Peterkin, one of the other leading writers in the state in this century, and he knew the regional traditions. He was a writer of poems and stories himself, and he was on intimate terms with nearly every contemporary writer and literary scholar in the two Carolinas. He knew most of the journalists, editors, librarians, and historians around the state, and he had recently returned to his alma mater, the University of South Carolina, to help with the rebuilding of graduate studies in English there. One of his first and fondest specialties was the modern drama, in which he taught courses and in which he had gained first-hand theatrical experience at various stages of his career, having acted at Chapel Hill as a student and later at the famous Dock Street Theater in Charleston. For a while he had even directed The Town Theater in Columbia and the Little Theater in Macon. During the S. C. Tricentennial he had been thrilled to see Heyward's and George Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess* finally come to Charleston, Porgy's birthplace. Besides his professional qualifications, he had been our colleague at one time and had remained a good friend. When his fatal illness set in last spring, he laughed it off, sprinkling such good-natured but ominous phrases throughout his editorial correspondence as "On to Victory!" and "The doctor has put me on some explosive looking new capsules – red and green and monumental – but the jolly old back still aches – and aches."

With Frank Durham's death in October, the state has lost one of its finest wits and most versatile men of letters. We have lost a co-editor. And many of us have lost a friend.

there.

Ah I work on till dawn
and greet the fishermen
when they go out

and speak when they return,
pausing from my task only to let
the kingfishers pick the emptiness
off my mouth

and find me enough space
for the next hour.

D. C. Berry

Mushrooms

Even here they are soft,
nudging out a chestnut's bark
halfway up the trunk, like boils
under fur our dog once spread.

The tree
did not guard its pulp;
soft spores like April winds
nuzzled its stature and stuck.
I left my mind once
open to spores. I've learned wet seasons
encourage growth.

Sonia Gernes

Katherine Anne Porter As A Southern Writer

ELMO HOWELL

I

Although Katherine Anne Porter is one of the best writers the South has produced, she stands apart from the main body of writers of her generation in that her Southernness is incidental if not extraneous to her purpose. One almost feels, in the few stories where one is conscious of her origin, that she achieves her end not because of but in spite of her Southern background. She never exploits it for sensational effect, as many of the post-Faulknerians have done; nor does she, like Faulkner and Eudora Welty, for example, manage to use her home material to project her vision of experience. Faulkner and Miss Welty cannot be dissociated from Mississippi; they would not have been quite the same if they had been born in any other state. But Miss Porter writes with equal facility about any number of places – New York, New Orleans, Mexico, Germany, a ship on a slow voyage from Vera Cruz to Bremerhaven and occasionally about South Texas, where she seems in some respects most alien, most out of touch, even in those stories where she is recounting her own family history.

And yet Miss Porter is not one of those writers, Poe, for example, for whom regional classification is gratuitous. She is Southern, one feels, in her basic view of experience, not easily specified by speech or manner or the attitudes she adapts professionally to her art. The accent of her birth has long been lost in an international life, where her country is only a segment of the larger civilization of the West. She began writing fiction in the early twenties, reflecting the attitudes of the "lost" generation who moved in and out of Gertrude Stein's studio in Paris, where Miss Porter also made an appearance. In a sense she was one of them, at the same time that she held herself apart, aloof, with an air of weary patronage. They had rejected the old loyalties and discovered that honor is only a word, she said. "For them, nothing worked except sex and alcohol and pulling apart their lamentable Midwestern upbringings and scattering the pieces."[1] Meanwhile, she was doing little to shore up the remnants of her own past and was in every visible way as culturally awash as Miss Stein herself, though she found no pleasure in dissolution. One senses the

[1]Katherine Anne Porter, *The Days Before* (New York, 1952), p. 44.

difference in a homespun wisdom that tempers the zeal of the reformer and makes young moral rebels like Jenny Brown in *Ship of Fools* aware and proud of the disapproving folks back home who provide a fillip under her feet."[2] With her healthy sense of sin – she has been working for her pleasure and, in spite of her rejection, "put a certain solid ground since the twenties on the life of Cotton Mather – and her belief in man's boundless capacity for mischief, she has little time for the humanitarians and the special pleaders. But she comes closest to an obvious identification with the main body of Southern letters in the concreteness of her fiction, which is invariably grounded in the sensory world and the dramatic situation. *Ship of Fools* is not a Southern novel, but from the American experience only a Southerner would have written it.

Thus Miss Porter, as a Southern writer, is an anomaly, reaching out for implication beyond the homey regional scene where after all she felt most at home. William Faulkner stayed at home in Mississippi, supremely confident that Yoknapatawpha encompassed the whole range of experience, much to the chagrin of academicians who felt that wider contact with his peers would have enlarged his vision. Miss Porter's work, slight though it is, is commensurate with Faulkner's in surface rendering, but it fails in a concentration of power. Heart and mind stand apart and often seem to pull in opposite directions. What could a village or farm in South Texas have to do with the question of values in the Western world? Consequently, she got away early, liberated herself, and joined the other émigrés on the West Bank. Her infatuation did not last long, but her own disorientation was complete. She was never to come home again, artistically, except in a few nostalgic flights, when she shows what might have been done with her native materials if her genius had been fully integrated.

II

The short novel *Old Mortality* is Miss Porter's most extended treatment of her home material. It is one of the several Miranda sketches and stories in which the author clearly draws on the experience of three generations of her family, going back to ante-bellum Kentucky, before the widowed grandmother moved her family of nine children and the Negroes who were ex-slaves to Louisiana and eventually to South Texas. The grandmother, Sophia Jane, is the central figure. A product of the

[2]Katherine Anne Porter, *Ship of Fools* (Boston, 1962), p. 186.

old order, she rules her clan with a rod of iron, overshadowing the husband she loved who bungled affairs in land investments and then got himself killed in the war, as well as her own sons who rely on her strength and sense of direction. She is a matriarch, and a towering symbol in the eyes of the girl Miranda.

Old Mortality takes Miranda from childhood to young womanhood with varying reactions to her family background. At first, as the little girl visiting the attic with her grandmother to explore the trunks loaded with the relics from the past, she is dumb with awe and veneration. The story is about her beautiful Aunt Amy, her father's sister whom she never saw, dead mysteriously after only a few months of married life with the man she did not love. Amy, whom the beaux swarmed about and was the occasion of a settlement of honor, is Miss Porter's version of Scarlett O'Hara, who died before the glory faded. She wore "some mysterious crown of enchantment that attracted and held the heart," not only of her own generation but of the little girl Miranda, who sits beside her weeping grandmother as they sort out the relics of the past.[3]

Several years later, Miranda has a rude shock when she meets, for the first time, her Aunt Amy's husband, Uncle Gabriel, not the fine heroic gentleman she expected but a broken character and faintly disreputable from gambling and drink. In the last part of the novel, she herself is a woman and married, still holding tenuously to the legend of her past of which the radiant Amy is symbol, when she accidentally meets Cousin Eva Parrington on a train taking both them home to Texas to attend Gabriel's funeral. Eva is a homely spinster cousin of her father's generation who spent her life teaching and fighting for woman suffrage and other advanced causes. She has a streak of malice and tells Miranda that Amy was not the innocent belle she imagined but "a bad, wild girl," and that she killed herself with "the drug they gave her to keep her quiet." Moreover, those members of the family who worshiped Amy ruined her own — Cousin Eva's — girlhood by bedeviling her about her looks and foolish reserve. It was all done in the best of humor, of course, no harm meant — "that was the hellish thing about it" — but she could never forgive them. "Ah, the family, the

[3]Katherine Anne Porter, *Collected Stories* (New York, 1965), p. 176. (Subsequent references to this work will appear in parentheses in the text.)

whole hideous institution should be wiped from the face of the earth. *It is the root of all human wrongs.*" (p. 217)

Thus Miranda is forced to a new assessment of the values which she had always taken for granted, and it is at this point that Miss Porter hits an uncertain note. Miranda refuses to accept Eva's judgment at face value. "This is no more true than what was told before, it's every bit as romantic." Moreover, when they arrive in Texas, she notes that Eva drops her cynical manner and devolves into old attitudes, moving with other members of the family in the familiar ritual. But the seeds of doubt have been planted, and the story ends on a note of rejection. "I can't live in their world any longer," Miranda says. She will turn to herself alone, away from the myth of family, and at least know her own mind and heart. (p. 221)

Old Mortality suggests that the basic problem in Miss Porter's use of her Southern background was what to do with it, how to adjust it to the larger view she adopted after she left home. The ending is unsatisfactory. Miranda must be saved by having her turn from provincial interest in traditional values to the more fashionable concern with isolation and identity. It is unimaginable, says William L. Nance, that she should remain in such a family, characterized, he says, by "coldness, mendacity, scorn for its men on the part of its women, close moral surveillance, a strict code of decorum, and innumerable relatives who are predominantly selfish, provincial, and censorious."[4] Ray B. West says that *Old Mortality* is an initiation story and that Miranda is a child anywhere, "seeking definition of herself through her past and present."[5] And yet Miss Porter says a good deal more. The part of the story that remains in the memory is not Miranda's rejection — nor indeed Miranda herself — but the rich panoply of a family's corporate life in a particular place and time.

When Mr. West points out that Miranda is not just a Southern child, "in Southern history, reflected through the sensibility of a Southern author," he puts a finger, inadvertently, on the main weakness in Miss Porter's Southern fiction. The problem she faced and did not resolve was to make her setting contingent on theme and not a distraction from it. At the conclusion of *Old Mortality*, she picks up the current

[4]William L. Nance, *Katherine Anne Porter and the Art of Rejection* (Chapel Hill, 1964), pp. 125-126.
[5]Ray B. West, Jr., *Katherine Anne Porter* (Minneapolis, 1963), p. 20.

interest in the isolation of the individual in modern life; but the narrative has been so vivid, the scene so rich, the sense of history so evocative, that the reader feels let down when he is asked to withdraw into the private consciousness of a character he has not paid much attention to all along. Miranda is never so interesting as Amy or Eva or Eva's mother, for example, Cousin Mollington Parrington, still a "noted charmer" in her fifties who made naughty jokes about her homely daughter who was born, she said, when she was still fifteen, though everybody knew she was past twenty-one. "Everybody said I was like a little girl with her doll." (p. 178) The book is filled with intriguing characters; Miranda is a mere appendage to satisfy the intellectual requirements of a theme. William Faulkner faced the same problem in his character Quentin Compson, who stands like Miranda in judgment on his past; but Faulkner succeeds where Miss Porter fails, for he centers the interest in Quentin and makes his personal tragedy inseparable from that of the South. In Faulkner, theme and setting are so fused that each augments and projects the other.

Whatever Miranda thought about her family – and her rejection is after all equivocal, "in her hopefulness, her ignorance" – Miss Porter is emotionally involved with her Southern background, as much as Faulkner or Miss Welty, a fact which she makes clear in her incidental writing if not in her fiction. She is aware of the riches that lay around her in what she calls "the native land of my heart."

> This summer country of my childhood, this space and memory is filled with landscapes shimmering in light and color, moving with sounds and shapes I hardly ever describe or put in my stories in so many words; they form only the living background of what I am trying to tell, so familiar to my characters they would hardly notice them; the sound of mourning doves in the live-oaks, the childish voices of parrots chattering on every back porch in the little town, the hoverings of buzzards in the high blue air – all the life of that soft blackland farming country, full of fruits and flowers and birds, with good hunting and fishing . . . . The colors and tastes all had their smells, as the sounds have now their echoes: the bitter whiff of air over a sprawl of animal skeleton after the buzzards were gone; the smells and flavors of roses and melons, and peach bloom and ripe peaches, of cape jessamine in hedges blooming like popcorn, and the sickly sweetness of chinaberry florets; of honeysuckle in great swags on a trellised gallery; heavy tomatoes dead ripe and warm with the midday sun, eaten there, at the vine; the

> delicious milky green corn, and savory hot corn bread eaten with still-warm sweet milk; and the clinging brackish smell of the muddy little ponds where we caught, and boiled crawfish – in a discarded lard can – and ate them, then and there, we children, in the company of an old Negro who had once been my grandparents' slave, as I have told in another story. He was by our time only a servant, and a cantankerous old cuss very sure of his place in the household.[6]

In "Portrait: Old South," she gives an account of her family history through the Civil War, which parallels the account given in the Miranda stories, except that here she gives way to personal feeling. She is proud of her family, of their participation in Southern history, even in that difficult time after the war "euphemistically described as Reconstruction." "My elders all remained nobly unreconstructed to their last moments, and my feet rest firmly on this rock of their strength to this day."[7]

Her handling of the Southern material is most successful in the short sketches, where she attempts to impose no theme. Sophia Jane is the grandmother whom she loved to remember, the strong voice from the past speaking out still in clear tones to inform the present. She loves and respects all that the old lady stands for and adorns her sketches with the crinoline and lace and all the romantic paraphernalia that make her pages look like a parody of sentimental Southern fiction. Neither does she affect a moral superiority to a society that countenanced slavery. She does not, like some writers of her generation, including Southerners, approach her subject with rod upraised. In this respect, she is more the artist than Faulkner (at least in his later work), whose Ike McCaslin spoils a good hunting story with a long divagation about the sins of the fathers. But Miss Porter is more consistently the artist than Faulkner, and more consistently honest.

Her Negroes, says Winfred S. Emmons in a study of the regional stories, are enough to please the "hidebound segregationist" because they know their place and are content to stay in it.[8] Since Miss Porter's political views in her early years were very much to the left, she must have had reservations about the feudal society she grew up in. But Mr. Emmons is right. Only someone who has lived with the fact could have

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[6]Katherine Anne Porter, "'Noon Wine': The Sources," *Understanding Fiction*, eds. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (New York, 1959), p. 612.

[7]*The Days Before*, p. 156.

[8]Winfred S. Emmons, *Katherine Anne Porter: The Regional Stories* (Austin, 1967), p. 11.

caught so deftly the racial involutions in the minds of Aunt Nannie and Uncle Jimbilly; and only an artist of scrupulous principle could have drawn what she saw without personal comment. Aunt Nannie and Miranda's grandmother were raised up together. When the white girl's father bought the two field hands, the little pot-bellied girl with arms like sticks was thrown into the bargain for twenty dollars. "I want the little monkey," Sophia Jane told her father. "I want that one to play with." The girls grew up, married, raised their families — Sophia Jane eleven and Nannie thirteen — and in old age after their children are gone they sit together through long afternoons over quilt scraps, crying over the past and worrying over the present.

But when her mistress dies, old Nannie startles the family by asking Mister Harry what he aims to do with a certain empty cabin on the place. She wants it. "Lemme go there and pass my last days in peace, chil'ren." They feel put on that Nannie wants to leave them, but they shower her with kindness; the place is scrubbed and whitewashed, shelves put in and the chimney cleaned. And later when Nannie comes to see them, assuming for the time the old mask, they load her with presents, "baskets and bales of the precious rubbish she loved," hauled away in a wheelbarrow by one of her great-grandsons. "I know my chil'ren won't let me go away empty-handed." (pp. 348-351)

Uncle Jimbilly is an old handy man about the place who has spent so many years "bowed over things, putting them together and taking them apart, and making them do," that he is almost bent double. His "purplish skull" shows through patches in his wool, which has turned greenish gray and looks "as if the moths had got at it." Though the children are a little afraid of him, they enjoy his stories of the days when he was a slave. Politely, and feeling a little guilty, they listen to tales of incredible cruelty, though Uncle Jimbilly seems to have got over his own slavery very well. "Did they ever die, Uncle Jimbilly?" "Cose dey died. Dey died," he went on, pursing up his mouth gloomily, "by de thousands and tens upon thousands . . . . In de swamps dey used to stake 'em out all day and all night, and all day and all night and all day wid dey hans and feet tied so dey couldn't scretch and let de muskeeters eat 'em alive." (p. 342) Uncle Jimbilly, it turns out — though the children never suspected it until Aunt Nannie moved away from the house — is Nannie's husband. Their marriage of convenience dissolved when its reason for being had dissolved, and they took no

further notice of each other and seemed to forget that they had children in common. But when Nannie moved into her own house, Jimbilly turns up out front one day, sits down in the road groaning and bending himself into angles, "like a weary old dog." "Whut you doin with all this big house to yoself?" But Nannie sends him on his way. "I've served my time, I've done my do, and dat's all." (p. 351)

Other writers have drawn a greater variety of characters and shown them in a wider perspective, but none has touched with greater sureness the essence of racial identity. Nannie and Jimbilly are more than individuals. In them Miss Porter evokes a whole civilization. She projects the psychology of a peculiar race, at a particular stage of its development, using details which a less honest writer would shy away from but which in her hands round out the comic fullness of her characters without doing violence to their dignity. Aunt Nannie is the superannuated old Negress whose crochety ways are familiar to the Southerner, at least of Miss Porter's generation; but she is also "an aged Bantu woman of independent means," sitting on her own front porch "breathing the free air." (p. 349)

Katherine Anne Porter's scenes and characters, sparsely chisled in her careful art, remain in the memory, but they evoke no deep response from the reader. Faulkner's Dilsey becomes in her endurance an example to her race and to the humble of heart. The Negroes of Eudora Welty, the old woman in "A Worn Path," for example, have a way of growing out of themselves, individuals of a time and place, into a larger meaning. In her use of the past Miss Porter never goes, at least deliberately, beneath the surface to bring the old to bear on the new, as the great writers of historical fiction have done, from Scott to Faulkner. She refuses to place a value, or to discuss values at all. The artist must hold aloof, the heart kept in abeyance. Only those who are indifferent, she seems to say, are able to see clearly. On the whole, this Olympian attitude sits well with Miss Porter the cosmopolite, but it severely limits her use of the regional material.

III

Miss Porter was suspicious of the regional approach in part no doubt because of the influences of her time. She began as a quasi-revolutionary in Mexico, and not finding revolution very attractive, she moved at large on the international scene, leavening her gay, sophisticated

stories with a decorous element of Spenglerian gloom. She has frequently been charged with an excess of artistry, and perhaps the charge sticks most in her affectation of theme where in reality there is no theme. Miranda's breaking away from her family is supposed to suggest a modern predicament, but she fails to communicate her distress to the reader, if indeed it were registered on the nerves of the author. What comes through with brilliant effect is the life of a Southern family at the end of the nineteenth century. Miranda is not important to the story, her neurosis a mere afterthought.

The paucity of theme, here as elsewhere, adds to the feeling of shallowness, an unfortunate result in the light of the wealth of material that lay at hand and which, by temperament and inclination, she was prepared to put to use. Jenny in *Ship of Fools*, from "a mid-southern state," breaks away from home and spends years trying to beat those people out of her life"; and then years of ignoring them or hating them. But in the end, she returns, spiritually at least, to love them, "as she knew well she was meant in simple nature to do."[9] In all of her work, Miss Porter shows respect for simple people close to the earth. And all true art is provincial, she says in her essay on Willa Cather. She has always been at odds with the "new" writers — Gertrude Stein was only the chief one — in whom "poverty of feeling and idea were disguised, but not well enough, in tricky techniques and disordered syntax."[10] Eudora Welty, she points out, has never studied the writing craft in any college nor belonged to a literary group. "Nothing else that I know about her could be more satisfactory to me than this." Nor has Miss Welty been a Communist nor expressed, except implicitly, her attitude on the state of politics or the condition of society; but she is firmly grounded on "an ancient system of ethics — and this, it would seem to me, is ample domain enough."[11]

Katherine Anne Porter is in a sense more solidly impressive in her critical writing than in her fiction. She gives herself greater range and allows a largeness of appreciation which the speciality of her art proscribes. "There comes that day," she says, "when today's New begins to look a little like yesterday's New, and then more and more so," and when you ask if it really is new, the answer is "No, and it never was."

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[9] *Ship of Fools*, p. 186.
[10] *The Days Before*, p. 65.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 104.

She lived in a time when "everything in the world was being pulled apart," when everything was changing, even the very sexes, "multiplying weird, unclassifiable genders."[12] For all her early revolutionary fervor, her instincts are as soundly conservative as those of her Texas forbears. At heart, she is as much the provincial as Willa Cather and Eudora Welty and – she would add – Hawthorne and Turgenev.

Little of a provincial spirit, however, informs her fiction. No Southern writer, not even Faulkner himself, was in a better position to use the Southern material to advantage. Like Faulkner, she was a product of the last generation to have an intimate experience with the old order, to take in with the air they breathed stories of ruin and departed grandeur. "I am the grandchild of a lost War, and I have blood-knowledge of what life can be like in a defeated country on the bare bones of privation."[13] Her most essential qualification is a respect for traditional life, which seems out of place in that generation of writers to which she belongs. The poetic virtues of the Old South, says Richard Weaver – honor, dignity, fealty, valor – were made to look outmoded and futile by the events of history and have since had "to sneak in by the back door and apologize for themselves."[14] These are the virtues towards which Miss Porter yearns, and it is the strangest sort of irony that they receive the same suspicious treatment in her fiction when they are admitted at all.

With her fine wisdom of life and her superb art, which makes every line of her fiction an excitement, she was unwise in being led to assume a stance at variance with the culture to which she belongs. Faulkner, in his great period at least, shut himself off from the world and from critical influences in his home in Oxford, Mississippi. He loved to hear the rain on the roof of his back porch, he said. But Miss Porter allowed herself to be adopted and carried off by the post-Jamesian generation. She agreed with her friend and mentor Ford Madox Ford how "absolutely international a thing literature is," and that a writer must keep himself out of his books. "It is obviously best," says Ford, "if you can contrive to be without views at all."[15] Such detachment is hardly

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 155.
[14] Richard M. Weaver, *The Southern Tradition at Bay*, eds. George Core and M. E. Bradford (New Rochelle, N. Y., 1968), p. 274
[15] Ford Madox Ford, *Critical Writings*, ed. Frank MacShane (Lincoln, Neb., 1964), p. 87.

possible, even with Ford, and certainly not with Katherine Anne Porter. And here again she was led astray. The conventional view of writers, who were supposed to have no views, was that the world was in a pretty sad shape. "So far as I understand the order of things," says Chekhov, "life consists of nothing but horrors, squabbles, and trivialities mixed together or alternating."[16] *Ship of Fools* is a very terrible book, beneath the gay patter of its surface, about a group of self-centered, predatory people shut up on a ship to torment each other. "God, I'd hate to think I'd ever get even a postcard from anybody on this ship again, as long as I live."[17] This is her grand testimony to Chekhov's view, but even her Southern stories dissolve at last in dissociation and meaninglessness.

William Faulkner said that the only things worth writing about are the "old universal truths," and he was old-fashioned enough to name them: love, honor, pity, pride, compassion, sacrifice. Furthermore, he asserted that the writer has a mission: to lift up man's heart by reminding him of "the glory of his past." This sort of mind, the bardic mind, says Marion Montgomery, is seldom sympathetic to "the modern pathos of displacement, the self-torturing spiritual masochism called pursuit of identity."[18] Miss Porter was afraid to give free rein to the bardic impulse in her nature, and that is why Miranda at the end of *Old Mortality* hits such a flat note, why that superb story, so moving at times and so exciting in implication, peters out in the vacillation of a school girl – the values of a civilization sacrificed for the popular cant of "pursuit of identity." The source of Faulkner's genius, says Frank O'Connor, is in his intuition that "the plain people of Mississippi know a damn sight more about the business of literature than the dons of Cambridge," to which he might have added the critical establishment of the American universities.[19] Miss Porter knows that too, but she has refused to apply that knowledge to her art.

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[16] *Letters of Anton Chekhov to His Family and Friends*, ed. Constance Garnett (New York, 1920), p. 49.

[17] *Ship of Fools*, p. 401.

[18] Marion Montgomery, "Richard Weaver Against the Establishment," *Georgia Review*, XXIII (Winter, 1969), 453.

[19] Hollis Summers, ed., *Discussions of the Short Story* (Boston, 1963), p. 105.

This View from the Village

i. A Simple Street of September

It is a simple street, runs past my window.
It holds these houses,
and these stones.

Each morning, to write,
I face it,
set out to journey to a poem,
across
Jay French on his way to check the mail,
Tony Sterling down to start his store,
George Miller off to town,
old ladies (Mrs. Conway, Mrs. Gilliss)
children (the Dorman's, the Gordy's),
school busses,
pick-up trucks,
farm wagons,
green grass,
green trees,
autumn sunlight,
and these names

"French"
"Sterling"
"Miller"
"Conway"
"Gilliss"
"Dorman"
"Gordy"

beside the church
upon those stones.

ii. Here Comes the Parade

There is a chill in the air
this morning.
The weatherman says
sunny and seventy.
But even in the
autumn greenery

leaves
on the
ground

yellow
jackets
by the
late flowers

scarlet
birds
with a
different
sort of song

a few of these are softly crying

"It's coming! It's coming!"

iii. Are You There, Mrs. Conway?

This morning
my street is in shadow.

I do not know why
the yellowed leaves are falling
from the mottled tree
in my neighbor's
yard.

Across the street
a young girl
raps
loud
alarm
at an old
lady's
front
door.

Around she will go
to the back now,
rap
again.

Soon the old lady will answer
(she is a little deaf)
the cloud will pass, the street fill with light,
the tree, its leaves, will be green golden
falling.

It was, after all,
only an autumn
morning
reminder.

iv. The Road from the Village

When we are well
and truly grown

and pears no longer
fall along
Catch Penny,

and the shadows of children
(before the first frost)
no longer flicker

in the dusk along,
Cherry Walk,

and along Nanticoke
the river road
fishermen do not flee for cold water
(in the dark, the open spaces),
nor is the corn down,
nor do yellowed lamps light
the stubbled night,

who will remember then
(when the Graham house is gone;
the Gilliss house has fallen;
Jay and Clara French are in the
forbidding ground)
that it was you, not I, who said that

or that we saw together two trees against the late sky
– one dark, one bright –
and could allow (by the light from Sterling's store)
but not
touch

such
soft
mystery!

ROBERT SMITH

At the Heart of the Prodigal

Bennie Lee Sinclair

Jessie awoke, amazed to find she had slept after all. Over breakfast, she struggled with the idea of staying home from work – the day would be trying enough without having to face people. Since the news had begun to spread, her phone had done nothing but hum. Again, even at this irreverent hour, it rang. Bubba raced to answer it.

"Mama!" the boy yelled, "Mama, it's for you! It's Granny!"

"Oh, Lord, not again," she sighed, gathering the dishes as she rose, and making up her mind.

"Mama!" Bubba skidded into the kitchen, his face still flushed from last night's scene. "Granny wants to talk to you. She's waiting."

"I heard the first time, dear. Tell her that I can't talk now. I've got to get dressed for work. Look at you – you're not ready for school – you're not going to wear those dirty pants! Tell Granny that I'll call her later."

Jessie timed it so that she and Bubba came out of the house exactly at 8:05, just as the bus pulled into view. Fussing with the boy's satchel, always at a slant on his thin back, she did not have to acknowledge her neighbors' stares. Yet, even as she stepped onto the bus, she was reminded: the old Ford's ruinfully black tire marks arced freshly out of the drive. She could still hear the high, grating scream of those tires, piercing the night.

"Mama," Bubba poked at a fossilized lump of chewing gum on the seat in front of them, "when are we going to live with Granny?"

"Why, whatever made you think we're going to live with Granny?" she asked, sharply, thinking, "How dare her!"

"Granny said so," Bubba confided eagerly, "this morning. She said we would come to live with her and I would have a room upstairs."

"How *dare* her!" Jessie said, aloud. Then, with an attempt at calmness, she added, "We are *not* going to live with Granny. Granny is just talking, dear. We are not going to live with her – I want you to get that out of your head, understand?"

Bubba nodded, stung.

When they reached the school stop, she pressed his lunch money gently into his hand.

"Tell your teacher that I'll answer her note today. *Do* try and be a good boy, for Mama. Try and pay attention."

Watching him gallop away, frail shoulders sharp and sloping, she regretted again the irony that had given the child *her* looks and Hoyt's brain. Poor Bubba had nothing going for him; nothing at all.

Jessie had worked for three months in the Mesne and Conveyance office on the second floor of the courthouse, a job grown out of her mother's influence when Hoyt first began staying away. Her desk was beside a window that looked out on the backside of the square, making it difficult to concentrate. Sometimes, she lost herself out that window, absorbed in the traffic threading the narrow backstreets, or the dramatic comings and goings at the sheriff's office, directly below. Then the Registrar, Miss Woodruff, would snap her back with some cutting remark that left everyone, except her, snickering. It was not easy to be the 'new girl' in an office of old maids.

Pretending to sort papers, Violet paused by Jessie's desk and whispered, eyes averted, "Your mother's called twice. She said for you to call her the *second* you came in."

Jessie slapped her pen down in disgust. If her mother wanted to make so much of manners, why couldn't she understand that calling someone at work was a breach of etiquette, and one that could cost a job? Tersely, she returned the call, and, hardly listening to the voice at the other end, assured it that: yes, she was holding up under the strain; no, she wasn't going to weaken and do something she'd regret; yes, of course she knew it was all for the best.

Then, just as she was hanging up in anger, her feelings suddenly dissolved and regrouped into something quite different: a wrenching awareness of being alone, of things having got completely out of control. It was this, coming in incontinent surges, that was tingeing her hours with dread. She almost wanted to call her mother back, to hear a familiar voice – but no, it was not her mother's voice she wanted to hear. Instead, she went to the washroom and worked at her face, carefully applying liquid makeup to cover the pouches her tears had made.

"How can I look so much like Mother, and not be pretty?" she

wondered, as she did almost every day. It was strange that such subtle differences could matter – yet, where her mother's nose was fragile, her own was merely sharp; where *her* cheeks dipped in hungry hollows, Jessie's fell in flat planes. She and Bubba had not got much of a legacy, she thought resentfully: they were as plain and colorless as the mottled brown frogs that seemed to spring out of the piedmont earth each summer – unnoticed, until you almost stepped on one.

Around nine, the lawyers began coming in as usual, lingering to trade gossip and tobacco outside the narrow swinging door, waist-high, that served to separate the public from the inner workings of the office.

"Good morning, Jessie, How's your boy?"

"Jessie, honey, could you do me a favor? Could you sorta slip this deed under the table, so it won't get in the newspaper? I'd appreciate it, honey."

"Morning, Jessie Mae. You're looking well this morning," Sonny Cline greeted her. His wife had been her classmate in high school and, last night, when she felt she needed advice desperately, she had called him. Leaning closer, he referred to their conversation. "Don't you worry about a thing, honey. I'm getting the papers drawn up. We'll get every cent that rascal makes. Don't you worry, now."

During her break, she tried to compose the note to Bubba's teacher. But how could she admit, in the civil, evasive terms she must use, that she considered her child of six to be hopeless? "He can't be reached through reason," she wanted to say, "anymore than his father. He's from simple – no, *common* – stock, and his only attributes are enthusiam and good intention . . . his shortcomings are stupidity and the complete inability to ever amount to anything. Why complicate his life by making him try to learn?"

Instead she wrote, in the fine, professional hand with which she recorded the town's transactions, "I'm sorry that Bubba is causing you distress. I have instructed him that he must try harder to pay attention. He wants to be a good boy and I hope you will be patient with him."

The odor of confiscated sour mash came into the room, drifting up from the sheriff's office below. Now that the leaves were going, they would be finding stills all over the countryside, she thought wistfully; all that lovely whiskey would go down the drain. Not if Hoyt were

there. He would go down and finagle a pint from one of the deputies and go off on a magnificent toot, job or no job. Audacity was just another name for stupidity, and he had plenty of both – sometimes, she envied him.

"Good morning, Miss Violet, Jessie –how are you ladies this morning? How is your mother, my dear?"

For an instant, Jessie brightened.

"Mother is fine, thank you, Senator. And how is your wife?"

She had almost forgotten how pleasant the esteem of important people could be. For years, the faces of her youth had scurried into stores or down other streets when they saw her coming with Hoyt. Once, when her mother had wailed, "Where is your pride?" she had answered tartly that she had misplaced it; that she was not sure it would still fit if she should find it again. Lord, what shame she had caused her mother, for him. It was no wonder her world was falling apart.

"Jessie Mae, now don't you worry," Sonny Cline stopped again, on his way out. "You know Judge Mabry is going to see your side of it, honey. He'll show that rascal a thing or two." He started to leave, then turned and came back, remembering. "Claire said why don't you bring your boy over and let him play with Sammy sometime? You know, they must be just about the same age."

Jessie smiled, flattered. Now that she had returned, the old crowd could not be nice enough. Not even when she belonged to them, had her old friends been so thoughtful.

Just when it seemed her fortunes were looking up, she felt something slipping away: the moment; the day; her control.

"It's no use!" she thought, wildly.

Even with all that had passed, she was seeing Hoyt's side of it; taking up for him, in her mind.

What must it be like in the mill, she could not help wondering, with no windows to look out, and him so helplessly a man of trees and fields? *Of course,* that woman would interest him, sitting at the next bench with her thick thighs crossed, sharpening her claws for him. Hoyt would have no more resistance for her than Bubba had for the bullies who tricked him out of his dessert every day. As much as Hoyt made her suffer, she could not blame him. What she felt was not

blame, but whatever it was it was potent and terrible and did strange things in her mind. If she had had a gun last night she would have killed them all – herself and Hoyt and Bubba.

Let her mother live *that* down!

"Jessie, poor child, is it true? Have you finally thrown him out?"

She nodded, pressing her tongue instinctively to the roof of her mouth. Miss Woodruff smelled of an unhygienic feminine odor – Jessie could never be near her without fighting the need to gag.

"When I heard – someone called me early this morning, to tell me – I said, 'Well, it's all for the best. He's never been worth her shoelaces, we all know that.' It was so distressing to see you marry beneath yourself, dear. The whole town knew it would end this way . . . I just hope, for your sake, that you've really made up your mind."

Jessie nodded, vaguely, not looking up from the ledger. She had known, when she heard Hoyt's old Ford wail into the night, that you did not ask that kind of man to leave but once. His was a stark, evangelical pride, devoid of reason or substance, but painfully real, to him. She should never have let jealousy make her lose sight of that.

"You'll be better off. You'll all be better off," Miss Woodruff reasserted, in a tone both reproachful and consoling. "Let garbage go back to the trashpile, where it belongs. At least you have your boy, and your sweet mother."

"They never gave him a chance," Jessie thought, staring blankly at her work, and hating everyone. "Now they'll hound him and drive him out of this town and I'll never see him again!"

Then, in the fickle way she was coming to dread, she felt herself melting with resignation. Well, let him go. He and that woman were perfectly suited for each other, common people with common tastes and common, vulgar minds . . .

Two minutes later, she was astounded when a tear splashed onto the page before her, ruining the lines she had so carefully written.

"Lord, what's happening to me?"

At lunchtime, she eluded sympathizers by retreating to the third-floor fire escape, an improbable place she had found after the first few

agonizing lunches shared with the "girls" in the office. Though the days were beginning to grow cool, even crisp, she still went there: the privacy she found was the most bearable part of her working day.

She had stuffed her sandwich bag with kleenex, expecting collapse, but instead found herself pleasantly dazzled. It was a distinctly October day, ripe with the mellowed, slanting sunlight peculiar to that month. She could almost feel her heart shake itself out over the rusty railing, reprieved at some final moment by the startlingly fresh and golden air.

Gratefully, her thoughts took flight with the view over the courthouse square, trailing the town as it bunched out to the foot of a small, lone, snub-nosed mountain before dissolving into the conventional patterns of rural Southern earth: small farms; scattered communities; stretches of dark forest; abandoned fields stubbled with scrub pine. It was from this country, twenty miles out, that Hoyt had come to town with the impossible idea of making it big. The first time Jessie had given in to him he had told her his dreams – achingly naive – of a red car, silk shirts, rich women. It was, she thought, an ignorant Baptist boy's vision of heaven-on-earth. Yet, she had been desperate enough not to show her reaction. Hoyt read her silence as understanding. He was a frightened country boy, looking for someone to understand him.

In her own nearing-spinster heart, there had not been much of a question. He had strong, downy arms; a laugh that erupted joyfully; a small-featured, exuberant face made fine by willow-green eyes. When she was still hesitating, terrified by the child growing in her and her mother's constant hysteria, she had suddenly realized what it would mean to wake up to those eyes every morning.

A plane passed low overhead, making the fire escape shudder.

"Jessie!" Violet peered from the hall's shadows with acrophobic curiosity.

"Well, *here* you are . . . I've been looking *everywhere* for you. Your mother called and said for you to call her *at once*. She said it's an *emergency*."

Jessie started back toward the office, but then, thinking better of it, went to one of the pay phones in the basement. Her heart was lurching. It might not be beyond Hoyt to do something rash – take Bubba from the schoolyard or burn the house –

"Mother, what is it? What's happened?"

She listened, her mood changing violently.

"Oh, my God, mother! Did you call and scare me half to death to tell me *that*? *Of course*, I know where he spent the night – I don't need your network of spies to tell me *that*! Good Lord, Mother, what are you trying to do to me?"

Trembling, she hung up. For a long time she leaned her forehead against the cold telephone, too tormented even to cry. Finally, appetite gone, she tossed her lunch into a trashcan and bought a coke at one of the machines. Then, with the slimmest possible hope, she went back into the booth and dialed her own number. There was no answer. She called once more and let it ring a dozen times, but still there was no answer. She had a sudden, vivid image of herself, making dolls and sticking pins into them.

"Lord, am I losing my mind?"

The vision hung, the faces remarkably etched. Each incessant ring of the telephone was the toneless shriek of Hoyt or that woman as she stabbed them again and again, in her mind.

Bubba was stomach-down on the living room floor, coloring. Hoyt had been there: every single thing that belonged to him was gone, and some that belonged to both. For awhile she wandered about, searching, but he had been vengefully thorough.

"Mama, can we have hotdogs tonight?"

"Could you walk to the store and get them, all by yourself? Well, I suppose so, then."

It was not until they had eaten that she realized – Bubba had not *mentioned* his father once. She looked at him, but could not quite interpret the drawn lips; the evasive blue eyes.

"He *does* know," she thought, "but he's not saying anything. Why?"

She studied the boy with awakening respect, wondering if, after all, he would have her instinct – would be able to get by, knowing what *not* to say.

Her mother called, quite late, and in tears. She had been brooding

all evening, waiting for Jessie to call back and apologize – she could not think of sleeping until they made up.

Jessie drew doodles as she talked.

"Yes, Mother, I know what you've done for me. Yes, I *do* appreciate it, Mother. I *know* you've sacrificed . . . ." She stopped, aware of the tone that was edging into her voice. "Mother, I've got to hang up – I'm so tired. I'll call in the morning, I promise. Yes, I *know* I'm better off, and I'm fine, believe me." Then she added, out of context, but firmly:

"Mother, you know you never gave him a chance."

When she could think of no further reason for staying up, she undressed and got into bed, but Hoyt's empty side made that unbearable. Finally, she tiptoed into Bubba's room and stretched out beside the fretfully sleeping boy.

"I'll be able to see my friends again," she thought, salvaging, "and join the PTA and a bridge club, and go places without worrying about what humiliating thing Hoyt is going to do next – no more of his whistling at waitresses or saying 'shit' to my mother . . . ."

She awoke, in the middle of the night, at the rim of a great, damp spot seeping down from Bubba's side.

"Oh, no! Don't tell me he's going to start that again!" she thought, wanting to scream; to take the sleeping child and shake him until he, too, screamed.

"What's happening to me? What's happening?"

She felt her way back to her room, shivering with the cold that came up through her slippers and robe. In her mother's house, the floors were carpeted and warm. In her mother's house, the furnace could be depended upon to work throughout the winter, and Bubba could play with nice children – the children of her friends.

"No!" she said, aloud. "No."

Around her, the house was so quiet that she could hear Bubba's breathing from the next room. He slept wildly – damp, no doubt, and cold. She should wake him and make him change, but she did not. Yet, the sound got to her nerves. She could not go back to sleep, or even get comfortable. She felt as she had as a child: alone, and afraid

of the dark. Then, she had said her prayers – for comfort, and to keep away the evil of the night.

"I wish I still believed in God," she thought, sadly.

"I wish I still believed in something, so that I could offer to sell my soul. Lord, I'd give anything to have him back – anything!"

Envelope in the Pigeonhole

This evening when I returned to the hotel
I saw in my pigeonhole
Angela's writing on a yellow envelope.
What excuse, I wondered,
will she have for not writing.
She was too busy, perhaps,
stirring cauldrons of soup,
while the cats dashed about licking her calves.
Or don't the cats know enough
to lick at her calves?
Would that I were the cats
and the cats were taller.

DONAL MAHONEY

The Eyes Of Argus

Ruth Moose

Amy Bass held the black button on the red sweater with her thumb as she pulled the needle through. "Didn't know whether to use the black or red thread, but white's all you had, so I guess I didn't need to worry in the first place, did I?" She laughed through her nose and it tickled so she rubbed it.

At the ironing board, Mrs. Holly thumped the iron on its heel, jerked off the small brown gingham dress, shook it several times, then laid it back, spreading the collar like a doily. She attacked the collar with the tip of her iron, moving her fingers in the lace just a jump ahead of the iron. There was a small tearing sound like a weak cry and she lifted her iron quickly, frowning. "Snagged a place in that lace." She puckered her mouth as though holding pins. "Guess it's one you missed when you mended."

Amy looked up, "Law, I might have missed one, and more. I was lucky to catch as many as I did . . . lace was nothing but hanging threads in some places."

Mrs. Holly worked slower now. "It still makes me mad . . . Lou Christen giving us these things the shape they was in."

Mrs. Holly was thin as a post with long stilt-like legs, dangling arms and large hands. She had quick black eyes that didn't miss a trick and knew everything in the neighborhood before it happened. She often said, "I told you so," and nobody disputed her. Nobody disputed her when she said it was funny the fuel oil man kept stopping at Granny Bakewell's and it hot weather. And a few months later Grovine was going around singing all day and looking like she swallowed a pumpkin seed. That was Eppie; and Eppie had hardly got into the world good when Mrs. Holly saw Peuse Ekins slipping around the neighborhood. She gave him a piece of her mind, but it was too late; Lucille was on her way. That's when Mrs. Holly sat down with Granny and had a long talk and nobody disputed that, either.

Amy fumbled in the tin box in her lap and the buttons made clicking noises as she shuffled. "They aren't going to match."

Mrs. Holly snorted. "Never understood why anybody would go so far as to cut buttons off good clothes." She banged the iron on the board. "Just do the best you can. What does it matter if the buttons

don't match . . . long as it holds the sweater together. It'll be something to keep'em warm . . . poor little things."

Amy finished the sweater, buttoned it and held it out. It didn't really look too bad. She had put the black buttons at the bottom, where they wouldn't show so much. She tucked the sweater arms back, folded a neat red square and laid it on the mound of clothes in four boxes lined against the wall like huge tins of bread dough rising. She and Mrs. Holly had collected all the clothes: dresses, coats, sweaters, pajamas, shoes, even three pairs of galoshes. Mildewed, but after they were wiped and wrapped in brown paper, they looked good. She did hope the rest of the clothes wouldn't pick up that awful, rubbery smell. She unfolded a pair of little girl's panties; fourteen pairs they had in all. Enough to do 'em for a while. Three boxes of things to go to Eppie and Lucille at the orphanage, and the last box was for Grovine. Most of the things in Grovine's box came from Mrs. Holly. Some dresses and a pair of brown oxfords she said "Just killed her feet." Amy had put in a purple corduroy robe her children gave her Christmas, six years ago. She liked the robe, but every time she wore it, lint flocked to it like a magnet. "Grovine ought to like that purple robe," she said as she fingered it.

Mrs. Holly plumped a puff sleeve on the brown dress, picked up her iron, then set it back. "Here, Amy, you better do this. I don't know nothing about ironing little girls' things in the first place." She took Amy's chair, wiping long fingers across her forehead and pushed back tassels of gray hair.

Amy spread the sleeve like a paper muffin cup and wiggled her iron across it. "It's been a while, but I guess you don't forget."

Mrs. Holly rocked, "Somebody has to see to them. If H. C. had been the kind of brother he ought to be to Grovine, we wouldn't have had to take so much on ourselves."

Amy switched to the other sleeve. "It's awful how people . . . and family at that . . . can have no more feeling for each other."

" 'Course, it was to be expected. He didn't come around them when Granny was alive, and who'd think it now? Remember the funeral?"

Amy touched a few places on the collar and nodded, "H. C. on one side of the church, Grovine on the other. If it hadn't been for you and me and John, and the rest of the neighbors . . . there wouldn't have been a soul setting with poor Grovine."

Mrs. Holly got up and pushed the boxes close together, sighing. "In a way you can't blame him. Grovine with her petticoat showing the whole time. And if I hadn't taken it on myself . . . ," she tapped her finger on her chest, "*myself*, to get those kids ready, no telling how they would have showed up at their own grandma's funeral. Naked as jaybirds, I reckon."

Amy unplugged the iron, looked at the electric clock above the stove. "It's ten o'clock. I didn't know it was that late. John will be wanting his hot milk, says it helps him to sleep. You'd think the way he snores, he wouldn't need it." She laid the iron's cord across the board and it dangled like a cat's tail. "I better be getting towards home."

Mrs. Holly took the brown dress, folded it carefully and laid it on a box. "We done a good job, if I do say so. And everything's ready to go."

They decided to leave after nine the next morning. Mrs. Holly wanted to miss the mill traffic. Amy wrapped her shawl around her shoulders and darted out the back door, running across two back yards to her own. Her flashlight made zig-zags of light as she ran.

John was already in bed when she got there and after rolling her hair in knots on yellow plastic curlers she ducked her head inside a flannel gown, yanking off her clothes as she pulled down the gown, then curled next to John's back. He did have the hairiest back.

She was asleep before she knew it and dreaming of cherubs in pink feathered pinafores who played flutes and danced. They danced so close their feathers tickled and she laughed. They begged her to dance too and she did, dancing on the lightest feet until the rain started. But it wasn't rain; it was hard drops like crystal candies that stung when they hit. And when the drops hit the street they melted in a hiss. The cherubs cried and started to run, but the street was hot and burned their bare feet. Their cries were still ringing in her ears when she awoke enough to realize the dog was whining to go out.

At breakfast she was tired and John grumped because his newspaper was late and the grits had lumps. She was relieved when he finally left for the store, flinging his jacket across his arm, his hat crooked on his head.

She dressed quickly in her navy blue crepe, her white Enna Jetticks, and got to the driveway just as Mrs. Holly finished loading the boxes in the trunk of her fat black Buick. The Buick had been her

husband's before his death twelve years ago, and the paint had worn down to a mottled reddish-brown color.

Amy pulled on her gloves, holding her white purse flat against her stomach. When both gloves were on, she pressed her pancake of a straw hat flatter to her head and walked around the car. She got in, shut the door twice before she was satisfied. Didn't want to take any chances on falling out.

In the driver's seat, Mrs. Holly released the brake, let the car roll down the driveway and into the street before she started the motor. After she raced the motor several times the car jerked up the street, then bounced to a stop in front of a paintless two-storey house with a leaning porte-cochere. Under a bare chinaberry tree stood a straight chair, its seat torn and dragging the ground, making the new red-and-white "For Sale" sign sparkle in the yard.

"Just hurts me to see that," Mrs. Holly said, sucking in her lip. "But I guess none of us is going to live forever."

Amy folded her hands on her purse in her lap and crossed her ankles. It didn't seem possible. Six months ago Granny would have had the clothesline filled by this time of morning, and Grovine, Eppie, and Lucille out playing playhouse under the tree.

"Such a shock," Mrs. Holly stopped at the traffic light. "Her just to keel over like that. At least Grovine had enough sense to come get me. But you know, that girl wasn't any more excited or worried than if her mama had sent her over to borrow a cup of flour. I knew something was wrong when she said Granny was laying in the middle of the kitchen floor. Granny was one woman that didn't stop from sun-up to sun-down."

"No, siree," Amy stared straight ahead. "Didn't stop till she dropped dead in her tracks. Like you and me, I reckon." She laughed and looked at Mrs. Holly in her gray wool suit and black felt hat.

"Well, I hope not." Mrs. Holly stiffened her shoulders. "One of these days I want to sit back and let my younguns wait on me."

"That's right," Amy nodded quickly. "At least our younguns have minds and won't be a burden on us like Grovine was. I said a long time ago she was going to be the death of Granny." She took a handkerchief from her purse and blew her nose loudly, then lowered her voice. "If Grovine had been sent away some place when she was little . . . ."

"I know, I know," Mrs. Holly held the steering wheel tightly, and sighed. "I hated to be the one to call the County on Grovine, but somebody had to. Pitiful the way those little girls was running around barefooted and it frost on the ground." She slowed the car, pointed to a neat white house framed by a mat of green lawn. "Look at that. Ethel Shaw's got buttercups blooming already. Mine ain't even come up yet." She twisted her neck and moved her lips like she was counting the blooms.

"I declare they sure are pretty." Amy stretched to get a better look. "Ethel's always been so smart. Give me two bags of dresses her Sybil had outgrowed, said they ought to fit Eppie . . . if they didn't she could grow into them. There was a red-polka dotted one, and a . . . ."

"There's Ethel out in her yard now." Mrs. Holly nosed the car across the road and parked facing traffic. A blue truck tooted loudly as it swerved around them. "Yoo hoo, Ethel," Mrs. Holly yelled as she lowered the window. "Your yard sure does look pretty."

Ethel, in men's striped coveralls laid her trowel in a tulip bed, dusted dirt from her hands and walked toward the car.

"We're going to the orphanage to take Eppie and Lucille them things we rounded up. You want to go?"

"I'd love to," Ethel had a dirt streak like a dark scar across her cheek, "but I'm fixing to feed my boxwoods and I need to get it done before they start putting out. You all go on without me this time." She stepped back from the car.

"Sure do thank you for all them dresses," Amy leaned toward the window and hollered.

Ethel nodded, "You're sure welcome. Glad to get shed of them."

Mrs. Holly said, "Amy told me how you did everyone of them up, too. Not everybody was that nice." Her tone was cold. "I was up till ten o'clock last night. Lou Christen give me a box of things and I had to wash and iron every one of them myself. Some of 'em was nothing but rags . . . and she'd cut the buttons off . . . ."

"Lou Christen?" Ethel's face stretched. "I never would've thought it of her. All the money she and Ham's got and her cutting buttons off. They could buy a whole store-load of buttons."

"Now, Ethel, don't let on I said that." Mrs. Holly shifted gears.

"I wouldn't want to spread anything. It's what's in a person's heart that counts, I've always said."

Amy wiggled a gloved finger at Ethel as they drove away. When they crossed the center line, a blonde in a red convertible had to screech her tires to avoid hitting them.

"Did you see that hussy?" Mrs. Holly asked. "Bet she keeps the drug stores in business buying proxide. Nobody's hair's that color naturally."

Amy put her handkerchief in her purse and snapped it shut. "I think we did real well rounding up as many things as we did. And Mr. Andrews at the store giving five dollars for Grovine . . . ."

Mrs. Holly speeded up. "He said give it to her and tell her to buy what she needed, but I'm not handing her money. She wouldn't know what to do with it if she had it. I bought her a slip and three pair of step-ins. They had 'em three pair for a dollar in Belk's basement . . . seconds, but she won't know the difference."

As they passed the old Pickens place Amy fussed about how it had run down since old man Pickens died and his children fighting to keep one from getting a cent more than another. When they passed the Weatherfords' new house, Mrs. Holly said she had heard there was a bathroom for every bedroom and could remember when John Weatherford was knee-high to a grasshopper and didn't have a rag to wipe his nose on.

"You never hear of him going out of his way to do nothing for nobody," Mrs. Holly said angrily.

"Must be kin to H. C.," Amy shot back and they both laughed.

They rode in silence when the road became unfamiliar. Finally Amy said,"One good thing about it, the County sure didn't waste any time getting those kids taken into the home, and Grovine settled too."

"She won't last," Mrs. Holly shook her head. "Somebody'll have to tell her every step to make."

"I know it," Amy swallowed loudly. "And then what'll happen to her? And what do you reckon will be done with the money from the sale of Granny's house? You think H. C. will stick it in his pocket and Grovine not get a thing from her own mama's estate?"

"Lord, it's no telling what's going on. If Grovine can just hold out to work I'll feel better. And knowing Eppie and Lucille is being taken

care of, is a load off my mind. That orphanage may not be the fanciest place in this world, but they'll be raised *right*. There's a church there, I heard, and the kids march in every day for chapel and twice on Sunday."

"Is it an orphanage for girls, or girls and boys both?"

"Both, I heard, but I think the boys' home is on the other side of the road and somebody said they even have separate dining halls." Mrs. Holly squinted, "What's that sign say? Tillman's Home?"

"Tillman's Home for Orphan Children," Amy said proudly. "This is it."

Mrs. Holly steered the car toward the center of the brick-pillared entrance with a series of short pulls, tugs and audible grunts. "Which one of those buildings do you think they'll be in?"

They parked on the grass in front of the first brick building, under a large oak tree. Mrs. Holly got out, looked at the gray sky, held her hand palm up and said "Sure looks like rain" to a large dark cloud.

Amy waited at the car trunk until Mrs. Holly took her elbow, leaned close and said, "We'll leave the clothes and things in the car and surprise them later. Poor little things, aren't they going to be tickled?"

Amy patted her purse. "I had John bring them some penny candy from the store . . . little younguns needs a bit of sweeting once in a while. You don't think they'll take it away from them, do you?"

"Naw," Mrs. Holly breathed hard and grabbed the wrought iron rail beside the brick steps.

Amy pushed the wooden door and waited as Mrs. Holly sailed mightily through. "Well," she stood inside and looked around, "you can say one thing. This place sure is clean." She smiled and whispered to Mrs. Holly, "Just like a livingroom. They got reading lamps, a rug and even a television set."

Mrs. Holly marched to the desk, holding her purse to her chest like a shield. "We'd like to see Eppie and Lucille Bakewell, please."

The lady in the pink blouse smiled, handed her a card and a pencil. "Just complete this form while I call them. Are you expected?"

Mrs. Holly turned to Amy and said, "Don't see why I have to fill out any card . . . I'm just visiting . . . not wanting to adopt them."

"It's routine," the girl said still smiling. "For our records."

"Very well," Mrs. Holly wrote her name large, the *H* straight and

stiff. She was still writing when the lady behind the desk sang out, "Here's our Eppie and Lucy. You girls have company, isn't that nice?"

Like a color snapshot, Eppie and Lucille stood in the doorway, side-by-side, holding hands. Eppie, the seven-year-old, had her hair in a neat brown pageboy with bangs, and her red plaid pinafore was crisp and new-looking. Lucille, her blonde ringlets topped by a bow, pulled at the lace collar on her blue dress and stood with one toe of her black patent shoes against the floor. There was lace on her blue socks.

"My goodness," Mrs. Holly went to them, "You girls must have known we was coming and got all dressed up."

"No, ma'am." Eppie didn't smile.

Lucille dropped Eppie's hand and grinned.

"They must be feeding you girls good up here." Amy pinched Lucille's pink cheek. It was warm, smooth as cream.

"Oh, yes," Lucille said. "We had strawberry shortcakes last night and today we're having . . . ."

Mrs. Holly frowned tight bands across her forehead.

"Eppie," the lady behind the desk said, "why don't you girls take the ladies to see your rooms? Then show them around the grounds."

"Yes, ma'am," Eppie turned and started down the hall.

Lucille took Amy's hand and Mrs. Holly followed.

"It's room twelve," Lucille said, skipping beside Amy, her head bobbing like a bouy. "We can see the lake from my window, and Joanne, she's my best friend, says in the summer we get to go swimming and have hot dog roasts and . . . ."

"That's fine . . . just fine," Amy panted.

Eppie went inside a door at the end of the hall and Lucille led in Amy.

When Mrs. Holly got to the room she stuck in her head like an old turtle and muttered, "This sure is nice . . . nice."

Amy sat on one of the hobnail bedspreads on a maple twin bed and Eppie sat at one of the desks on each side of the window.

"We can't stay," Mrs. Holly stood rooted, like a large potted plant in the hall.

"Just for a minute," Amy said and patted Lucille's leg. "We wanted to see how you girls was getting along." She picked at a tuft on the

spread. She'd been saving stamps to get one just like and only needed three-fourths of a book more. "Do you like it here?" She untied Lucille's bow and retied it, crookedly.

Lucille bounced on the bed beside her. "O, yes. Mrs. Adams, my teacher is so sweet and I go to kindergarten. I drew these." She pointed to the pictures on the wall.

"You ever see your mother?" Mrs. Holly inched inside the room.

"Yes, ma'am. Mr. Ervin brings her every Sunday."

"Mr. Ervin?" Mrs. Holly's eyebrows shot up like someone had pressed a spring.

"Yes, ma'am." Eppie turned the pages of a book on her desk.

"He brings us candy," Lucille chirped, "a whole box and we can give some to our friends."

Amy pulled the two little brown paper bags from her purse. "I was about to foget to give you girls this. My memory's no longer than a minute. I'd forget my head if it wasn't fast to me."

Eppie peeped inside her bag, squeezed it shut and set it at the back of her desk.

Lucille ran her hand into her bag, pulled out a pinkish square and said, "Is it peppermint? I don't like peppermint." She shut her bag and handed it to Eppie.

"Well, my goodness," Mrs. Holly's face was flushed, "you can certainly give it to someone and not let it go to waste." She stared hard at the closet door. "Do you all have plenty to wear . . . or is what you got on, all you have?"

"Oh, no," Lucille ran to the closet. "We got lots of dresses. The first day we went to Wardrobe and they let us pick out what we wanted." She flung the closet door wide, revealing two neat rainbows of dresses.

Mrs. Holly turned, one foot in the hallway like she was getting set on her mark. "I guss we better be going."

"But we haven't . . . ." Amy stood, stretched her arm after Mrs. Holly. "Wait, we got all those things in the car yet . . . ." She turned to Lucille. All the work she and Mrs. Holly had done, surely . . . "Honey, does everybody up here have as many dresses as you do?"

"Oh, no," Lucille said. "They got more 'cause they been here longer."

Eppie gave them a cold look and went back to her book.

"We'll see you girls again," Amy said from the hall.

Lucille dashed after them. "We didn't show you the cafeteria or the library, or . . . ."

"We'll go next time, Honey." Amy patted Lucille's shining hair.

The girls sure did look good. She hurried after Mrs. Holly. She'd never thought Eppie was pretty. Her forehead was too broad, but with bangs . . . ."

As she passed the desk, the lady in the pink blouse sang out, "You ladies come again. We love to have you anytime."

Mrs. Holly drew in her breath as she marched past, but Amy smiled and waved.

Mrs. Holly went down the steps faster than she'd come up them and left Amy to close the door. In the car she started the motor and was backing before Amy got settled.

"Wait," Amy said, "I got my dress-tail caught. I was in such a hurry . . . wait." She opened the door, pulled her dress in and held a corner of it in her lap, brushing it. "Hope I didn't get any grease on it." She banged the door shut. "Grease is so hard to get out."

"My doors don't have grease on them," Mrs. Holly said flatly.

Amy leaned back, her dress spread across her knees. "What are we going to do with all those . . . ?"

Mrs. Holly didn't answer, just looked in her rearview mirror, her lips clamped together.

"This isn't the way we came, is it?" Amy said as they turned onto a dirt road.

"No," Mrs. Holly slowed down. "Look at that dust boil up . . . whew. At the County they said this is the quickest way to the place where Grovine's staying . . . they could've told it wasn't paved."

"Six months." Amy played with the handles of her purse. "It's just been six months since Eppie and Lucille was taken to the Home. I never thought I'd see such a difference in those younguns. Look a yonder," she pointed to a large windmill near a barn. "You reckon them things really work or are they just for looks?"

Mrs. Holly glanced at the windmill quickly, then went back to

reading names on mailboxes. "White Oak Farm, Hope Crest Farms, Four Pines, Tree Tops is the one we want . . . ."

"Tree Tops," Amy said excitedly. Right there. On that big mailbox."

Mrs. Holly saw nothing but another dusty road and trees. "Can't see the house for the trees," she muttered. They crossed a creek, the car jouncing on a wooden bridge, then up a hill. 'Hope we don't meet anything. This road isn't wide enough to pass a cat. Don't see why anybody ever . . . ."

They rounded the curve and saw the house for the first time, a gleaming white house with four large columns across the front. "Law, it looks like something out of a picture, don't it?" Amy craned her neck and pressed her nose against the cool windshield. Beyond the house she could see rows of gleaming metal chicken houses like huge bars of silver in the sun. "Wonder if Grovine works in the house or with the chickens? She ought to do real good at gathering eggs."

Mrs. Holly stopped the car and turned off the motor. "I'll see if anybody's home," she said, her hand on the door handle. "They might not want us visiting Grovine during the week. Some places is funny about their help."

Amy watched as Mrs. Holly wiped her feet and walked across the neat flagstone porch. In a moment, the big front door opened and she turned, beckoned Amy to come on. She swung her arm wide like she was gathering a bundle of air.

Amy left her purse and gloves on the seat, then took her purse, leaving the gloves. You never know who might walk by and decide to help themselves.

Grovine and Mrs. Holly waited as Amy crossed the porch. "You sure do look good, Grovine, Honey, real good." She hurried toward them. "Why you used to be nothing but skin and bones . . . a big gust of wind could've blowed you away . . . ."

Grovine laughed and put her hand over her mouth. "You all come to see me way out here?" She twisted her terry cloth apron, wringing it like wet wash, then let it go. It twirled against her like a drill and Grovine caught it with both hands, then started flapping it. "You all come to see me!"

"Of course, we did, Grovine," Mrs. Holly's voice was soft, sweet, as she patted Grovine's arm, and walked to the white brocade sofa.

"This is the *nicest* house, Grovine." Amy took a seat beside Mrs. Holly. "Everything's so fancy." She ran her hand over the shiny coffee table.

Grovine smiled, making a church steeple with her fingers.

"It sure is," Mrs. Holly echoed.

The sun poured through stiff organdy curtains and made a rainbow on the cut glass vase on the marble mantel. "You keep everything this clean?" Mrs. Holly glanced around. "Must be a big job."

"Yes'um," Grovine lifted her chin. "I dust in here and Matildabelle runs the sweeper and waxes and . . . ."

"Matildabelle? Is that Mrs. Ervin?"

"Oh, no," Grovine giggled, cupping her hands over her mouth. "Matildabelle's the maid. Mrs. Ervin's been in bed three years. Don't have no use atall for her legs."

"You have to lift and do for her?"

"Oh, no, ma'am," Grovine pulled her hair and held it behind her neck.

"Lifting a sick person . . . if they're any count at all, will just kill you. Grovine, you can't hold out to do that kind of work and they shouldn't expect you to. Should they, Amy?"

"Oh, no," Amy stopped admiring the ornate gold rimmed mirror above the mantel. She'd seen pictures in magazines of rooms like this. "It's just too hard on your back."

"I don't do things like that." Grovine stuck out her chin. "Mr. Ervin does. I mainly straighten up her room, and pick some flowers for her, and comb her hair . . . ." She looked at her hands in her lap. "I do some of the cooking, but Mr.Ervin helps me with that too."

"Well," Mrs. Holly let out her breath, "I'm glad about that. And he pays you too, does he? Along with your room and board?"

"Oh, yes," Grovine's cheeks looked pinker than ever. "And he's so good to me."

"You're fixing your hair different," Amy said excitedly. "I knew there was something new about you.'

"And you've gained weight," Mrs. Holly smiled.

"Yes, ma'am," Grovine blushed.

"Guess you have plenty of milk and eggs, fresh things from the

garden, living on a farm." Mrs. Holly picked up a magazine from the table. There was a woman with a low-cut dress on the cover, and big red letters said, "My Husband Is Not My Lover." Mrs. Holly began to fan with it.

"All you can eat, I guess," Amy laughed.

"Well, Eppie and Lucille are doing just fine," Mrs. Holly fanned harder. "We went there first."

Grovine crossed her legs and swung her foot in its trim black shoes with the big gold buckle on the toe. Amy thought of the lace-up brown oxfords in the box. "Eppie and Lucille look so pretty," she breathed.

"Is H. C. doing anything to help you out?" Mrs. Holly's black eyes pin-pointed Grovine.

"He got me this job," Grovine said quickly, jumping up. "And that's the best thing ever happened to me. H. C. just leaves me alone, and that's the way I like it." She glared at them, her nostrils enlarged slightly.

"I guess we better be on our way." Amy poked Mrs. Holly with her elbow. "Grovine's probably got things to do."

Grovine held the door for them, wiggling it back and forth, her feet doing little dance steps. "Bye," she said, "Bye."

Mrs. Holly fumbled her keys in the ignition, started the motor, then rolled the window down and leaned out. "You make Mr. Ervin bring you to see us now. You hear?"

Grovine had already shut the door.

"Well!" Mrs. Holly said, "I guess she didn't hear me." She watched the rearview mirror as she backed. "Keep an eye on that big tree over there, will you? Let me know if I get too close."

"You're okay," Amy said just before they heard the scrape of metal.

Mrs. Holly jammed on the brakes and turned to Amy, her lips in a hard line, eyes snapping. Then she got out with a rush.

Amy held her purse and looked at the house. "Imagine Grovine living in a place like that. Just imagine."

Mrs. Holly got in the car and shifted gears. "It tapped the bumper, but didn't dent it . . . sure was lucky. Could have been worse. I thought you was watching," she fussed. "I told you to."

Amy didn't say anything and they drove in silence for a while until Mrs. Holly leaned back in her seat and said, "Grovine looked the best I've seen her, didn't you think so?"

"Right fleshy," Amy took off her hat and laid it in her lap.

A car zoomed around them and Mrs. Holly blew her horn. "Smart aleck. They ought to keep people like that off the roads. Let them go to the race tracks if they want to race."

"I don't think all that weight was Grovine." Amy slapped her gloves back and forth on her purse.

"What was it then?" Mrs. Holly turned to her.

"You know."

"I know what?"

"You know . . . like before. She always did start to show early."

"You don't reckon?" Mrs. Holly's lower lip dropped and her mouth stayed open for a good two minutes. Amy was about to say if she didn't soon close it, the bugs was going to fly in, but she didn't.

"Who? . . . how would anything like that happen? Out there on a farm she don't see nobody but Mr. Ervin . . . ." The car veered off the road and Mrs. Holly jerked it back. "Mr. Ervin!" she swallowed loudly. "And his wife right there in the same house?" Mrs. Holly clung to the steering wheel. "Oh my . . . oh."

Amy nodded, "I'd bet my life on it." For once she beat Mrs. Holly to it and it felt good.

"Well," Mrs. Holly stared straight ahead. "It's H. C.'s fault and he can just see to this. He got her the job and got her into this mess. I'm going to write him and dump the whole thing in his lap."

Mrs. Holly spluttered and Amy half-listened all the way home. When they turned the corner, she heard the boxes slide in the trunk and couldn't help smiling.

Ethel Shaw, pruning her Crimson Glory rose bushes along the fence, waved as they passed, but Mrs. Holly acted like she didn't even see her, just speeded up.

Surfside Up — Surfside Down

Do you remember when you walked down the beach
barefoot,
holding my hand?
It was cold everywhere but us.
The tide came in and we watched our footprints,
filling first with foam,
then with water,
then with sand.
Then they were gone.

I still shiver when I remember the cold wind
that swept us next and I knew
the tide had changed.
You said, "It's too cold for more footprints,"
and went away.

DELFORD FURNEY

Lessons of the Sea: The Terror

That coil of smoke in the corridor
Right after Holy Communion
As we stood there hushed
In the daze of partial surmise
Oceans of salvation
Under the tapered skies
Holy water out of reach
Invisible flames in the walls of the ship
And the officers searching, searching
Patting the panels
Seeking the holy heat

Loitering in those terminal halls
Someone lighted a cigarette
With infinite care

Almost like a prayer

LARRY RUBIN

Mencken, Faulkner, and Southern Moralism

William H. Nolte

I

The most prominent of all that host of social pathologists who have diagnosed Southern culture were H. L. Mencken and William Faulkner. If Southerners howled more vociferously over Mencken's probing their innards than over Faulkner's fiction, that's because Mencken's meaning was never obscure: even the semi-literate, once they had consulted a dictionary, knew precisely what he was saying. Fortunately for his physical well-being he did not live in the South. Faulkner, on the other hand, avoided being lynched by obscuring his meaning in a cloud of prolixity and syntactical involutions that only the super-literate could penetrate. Needless to say, only a few of even his closest friends in Oxford have ever read more than a handful of his short stories. For all their differences in manner, Mencken and Faulkner were singularly alike in their assessment of the causes and effects of Southern moralism and the numerous paradoxes, ironies, and myths which that moralism has fostered.

Although Mencken has been accused of overstating his case against the cultural sterility of the South, he probably erred more in his praise of antebellum life there than he did in denigrating conditions circa 1920. In his famous "The Sahara of the Bozart," he insisted that "Down to the middle of the last century, and even beyond, the main hatchery of ideas on this side of the water was across the Potomac bridges." Here, as in other places, Mencken's Southern sympathies show clearly. At times, in a mock-serious fashion, he referred to himself as a Confederate. For example, in a *Smart Set* article in 1917 he wrote that he "would rather be chained by the leg in the common jail of Yazoo City, Miss., fed only upon hoecake and coca-cola, than smothered in violets by all the gals of Boston." The South may have been "the main hatchery of ideas" down to, say, 1830, but by mid-century the "peculiar institution" had pretty much impoverished the slave-holding states, Virginia in particular, first economically and then, correlatively, as a culture or civilization. One need go no further than Frederick Law Olmsted's *The Cotton Kingdom* to realize that the colossal failure of slavery as an economic basis for the region had all but brought the South to its collective knees long before Sherman's troops arrived to complete the devastation. Quite

simply, the expense and trouble of maintaining slaves, who were never very productive anyhow, far exceeded the gains therefrom. Free labor in the North – and in the South for that matter – produced much more for much less. Moreover, when Mencken used the word "South" in talking about ante-bellum culture, he should have written "Virginia"; the lower and western parts of the South, except for a very few isolated places – e.g., Charleston, New Orleans, the Natchez Trace, Savannah, etc. – were frankly barbaric. In his extensive travels throughout the area, Olmsted rarely encountered a man who could even read; and living conditions were such as to make one wonder how the inhabitants survived from one year to the next.

But before correcting Mencken's statement further, we must understand what he meant by the term *culture*. He always insisted that a national culture depended upon that small group of standard-makers who stood clearly above and apart from the masses. Hence, his great admiration for the salient individuals of the Revolutionary period – most of them Southerners. And hence his disgust for the present state of the South, of Virginia in particular, once "the premier American state, the mother of Presidents and statesmen, the home of the first American university worthy of the name, the *arbiter elegantiarum* of the western world." His essay, in fact, is largely built around the conviction that the cultural collapse of the South resulted directly from the post-bellum disfranchisement of the small aristocratic group. Such a collapse, it must be apparent, would have been unthinkable in the North had the South won and then seen fit to place an army of occupation in all Northern states, since the North possessed no such small aristocratic body, nor, on the other hand, was so large a part of the population barbaric. If the North had never succeeded in producing a civilization (a government, yes, but no outstanding culture), it was at least free from the dangers that always confronted Southern culture. Briefly, if the North could never rise so high as the South, neither could it sink so low.

Oddly enough, the Southerner who cried out against Mencken's strictures was really defending the status quo in his region, not realizing that he was thus placing himself in the untenable position of supporting a social order and cultural milieu that had been foisted upon him by the hated carpetbaggers and scalawags. The few members of the aristocracy who survived the War were bankrupt and demoralized – "and so the majority of the first-rate southerners that were left, broken in spirit

and unable to live under the new dispensation, cleared out." Normally, it is the misfit or malcontent who migrates – almost never the aristocrat. The prerequisites of an aristocracy – wealth, leisure time, manners, urbane habits of mind – are obtained slowly. It took generations for the planter society of Virginia to produce an authentic aristocracy. (An excellent recent study of the development of the Virginia aristocracy is Clifford Dowdey's *The Virginia Dynasties.*) Once produced, an aristocratic family, under normal conditions, would consider it insane to pack up and move elsewhere. Only in the South has the outflow of the best minds been so constant over so long a period, having continued well into our own century. In his *Days* books Mencken discusses a number of those displaced Southerners who landed in Baltimore, a favorite stopping-off place; they almost always prospered and became cherished citizens of the community. The cultivated Southerner who remained at home usually retreated from the sordid scene. As Mencken put it, "It is impossible for him to stoop to the common level. He cannot brawl in politics with the grandsons of his grandfather's tenants. He is unable to share their fierce jealousy of the emerging black – the cornerstone of all their public thinking. He is anaesthetic to their theological and political enthusiasms. He finds himself an alien at their feasts of soul. And so he withdraws into his tower, and is heard of no more."

In Faulknerian terms, as we shall presently see, he becomes a "Hightower." In the Compson family, Jason III retreats into alcoholism and sardonic skepticism while one son, Quentin, sacrifices himself to an outlandish code of honor, and another son, Jason IV, denies the existence of any viable honor altogether and takes on all the worst characteristics of the mob. Each over-reacts against the present hopelessness. One attempts to restore a purity of the past (that obviously never existed), or rather to believe in a purity, which he confuses with his sister's maidenhead, that exists outside time, which he attempts to annul since nothing *in* time can remain changeless and hence pristine. Quentin thus moves to the outer limits of idealism; he refines away, as it were, all that is gross or material; he seeks the realm of pure idea. Suicide is thus the logical answer to his dilemma. Moving in the opposite direction, Jason IV denies all intangibles, including all concepts of honor, and thus becomes a *reductio ad absurdum* of all that is most grasping and pragmatic. Each is doomed since each is the slave of his eccentric convictions. Together they compose the dual heritage of the South.

Above all else, Mencken abhorred Southern moralism and intolerance, which are stem and branch from the same root. Moreover, they are almost always "Christian" in origin. Mencken insisted that the prevailing mental attitude of the region had been, for several decades past, "that of its own hedge ecclesiastics. All who dissent from its orthodox doctrines are scoundrels." A rabid, almost insane Protestantism had completely strangled Southern writers and would-be writers for two generations before Mencken tossed his bomb across the river Potomac. In "Puritanism as a Literary Force," he stated that Puritanism was as thoroughly national as the kindred belief in the devil. Moreover, it was in the South, rather than the North, that it took on "its most bellicose and extravagant forms." Mencken claimed that the tendency to locate Puritanism in New England was based, in large part, on a fallacy:

> Berkeley, the last of the Cavaliers, was kicked out of power in Virginia so long ago as 1650. Lord Baltimore, the Proprietor of Maryland, was brought to terms by the Puritans of the Severn in 1657. The Scotch Covenanter, the most uncompromising and unenlightened of all Puritans, flourished in the Carolinas from the start, and in 1698, or thereabout, he was reinforced from New England. In 1757 a band of Puritans invaded what is now Georgia — and Georgia has been a Puritan barbarism ever since.

The early Cavaliers in control of the plantations clung to the seacoast; the inhabitants of the hinterland were the sons and heirs of the same moral philosophy that produced Cotton Mather. When the War destroyed or put to flight the more civilized Southerners, the already powerful Philistinism was able to thrive unchecked.

W. J. Cash elaborated on the theme in *The Mind of the South*, still the best book we have on the area. (Incidentally, Cash's book grew out of an essay with the same title that Mencken published in *The American Mercury* in 1929. Mencken encouraged Cash to expand the essay into a full-scale study of the South and got Alfred Knopf to underwrite the labor. For a detailed analysis of Mencken's influence on Cash, see Joseph Morrison's *W. J. Cash: Southern Prophet.*) Echoes of Mencken are evident in both the style and content of the following passage from the book:

> Had it still been possible in the Old South to be an open atheist or skeptic without suffering any physical penalty? Pious and patriotic drunks, riding home from a camp-meeting or a

> party rally, were apt now [i.e., during Reconstruction] to send bullets crashing through the unbeliever's windows. And sooner or later the Klan was almost certain to pause in its routine labors long enough to teach him reverence and a proper regard for the safety of his country with a horsewhip or a coat of tar.
>
> Tolerance, in sum, was pretty well extinguished all along the line, and conformity made a nearly universal law. Criticism, analysis, detachment, all those activities and attitudes so necessary to the healthy development of any civilization, every one of them took on the aspect of high and aggravated treason.

The most militantly Christian organization in the South is still the Klan, which happens also to be the most outspoken advocate of hatred, violence, and bigotry. While most Southerners consider the Klan simply a laughing stock – a kind of mindless hooliganism given to periodic self-advertising of its congenital idiocy – it is nonetheless true that heterodoxy still generates in the orthodox more animosity in the South than in other sections of the country (with the possible exception of those areas in the East where Catholicism is most powerful). If Southerners no longer react as hysterically to outside criticism as they did in Mencken's heyday, the average citizen still refuses to listen to critics – many of them flagrantly unfair, to be sure – who presume to judge him. In the Depression years the most vocal defenders of the status quo were the Agrarians, who objected strongly to Northern "atheists" who strove to interfere with Southern life. In an article he wrote for the *Virginia Quarterly Review* (January, 1935), Mencken chastised the group for its advocacy of a bucolic economy and its insistence that the South cut itself off from the culture of the nation at large. After admitting that he sympathized with many Southern viewpoints, he objected to the isolationist principles of the Agrarians:

> [The South] can, in point of fact, no more cut itself off from the rest of the country than it can cut itself off from the industrial organization of Christendom. Its best interests are bound to be colored and conditioned, not only by the best interests of the North and West, but also by their notions as to what would be good for it, and what it deserves to have. And its canons of taste can no more be formulated in a vacuum than its principles of politics can be so formulated . . . . When the flow of ideas from without is cut off, or hampered by filters and barriers, then the bubbling of ideas within slows down.

> That, in brief, was what was the matter with the South during the long half-century after the war. Too many cultural Tibets were set up, and too many survive to this day. Certainly it would be folly to try to get rid of them by surrounding the whole region with new Himalayas.

Rather than take affront at what the damyankees were saying, the young Southerners ought, Mencken stated, to rid themselves of their political, theological, and cultural masters who still held the South in bondage. More briefly, the South needed a transvaluation of values.

II

That the South's greatest novelist should have been one of its most severe critics should surprise no one. Indeed, given the salient characteristics of the region, it would be impossible for a great writer *not* to indict his fellows and the customs and moral views they upheld. The fact that many Southerners still look askance at Faulkner's racial and religious views supports my contention that the natives have a long way to go before leaving the Sahara through which they've been wandering now for a century. When I was in Oxford a few years back, I learned that even Faulkner's friends showed embarrassment over what they considered his too-liberal views on the Negro. Those who were openly hostile to him as an individual always attacked him for moral reasons. As one man, with whom I chatted at great length, told me: Faulkner was an atheist, a drunkard, and a niggerlover – and was hence undeserving of the honors that were then being heaped upon him. I felt at the time that the man would have come nearer the truth had he just said that Faulkner was not a Christian, that he was known to like his bourbon, and that he considered Negroes human beings.

If Faulkner, as numerous critics have said, preferred the past to the present, he in no sense decorated it with the tapestries of romantic fiction. The contrasts he makes in numerous of his novels and stories—particularly, *Light in August*, *The Unvanquished*, *Go Down, Moses* and *Absalom, Absalom!* – are made less to show the superiority or inferiority of a culture than to explain or account for the present. In his best fiction he is seldom content with just *recording*, after the fashion of an Erskine Caldwell. In Faulkner's fiction, Southern *is* can never escape *was* since *being* always reflects *what has been*. At times, indeed, he seems to be explaining, or trying to explain, the matter to himself, allowing his read-

ers at the same time to look over his shoulder at the findings. If the "findings" are often obscure and sometimes contradictory, the reality is all the more heightened thereby. A general outline, however, becomes clear: the South was done in by word-mongers, that is to say, by fanatics who used *a priori* assumptions to validate their subjugation of the innocent. To embody his convictions with the greatest possible authenticity, the fanatic – then and there as always and everywhere – ended by confusing his will with the will of God. The Abolitionist, fired with a heavenly mission to correct the behavior of his fellows, was countered by the moralist who saw a kind of benevolence in his rule over the bodies of black men. It is noteworthy that nearly all Faulkner's god-intoxicated characters are streaked with insanity. In like manner, those who believe most strongly in abstract concepts – whether of love, freedom, justice, patriotism, or whatever – function as enemies of the people and of themselves.

Light in August furnishes us with the most complete portrayal of Southern fanaticism and its victimization of the innocent – in this case, Joe Christmas, a man who, once caught in the moral conditioning of his environment, is ever after unable to break the "circle" that encloses him. By referring to Christmas as an "innocent," I mean that he was deprived of anything resembling free choice. He never seems to *will* an action; rather, he reacts to stimuli .We follow his life from its beginning in the orphanage to his final immolation some thirty-six years later. Had he lived in another time and place, his life, as Faulkner strongly implies, would have been completely different, particularly in its moral foundations. Strangely enough, Christmas has been frequently described as a villain. Actually, he is, as Robert Penn Warren pointed out, "a mixture of heroism and pathos. He is the lost, suffering, and enduring creature . . . ."

In this most thoroughly naturalistic of his novels, Faulkner examines in great detail a number of events that fashion the child into the boy, the boy into the man. "Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders." Thus begins chapter six in which events from the childhood are recounted – first, at age five, the scene with the dietitian and her lover. Fearing that he will tell on her, the dietitian goes to the janitor, Pop Hines, who takes Joe away. After being returned to the institution by the police, Joe is quickly "placed" in a foster home. Hines had encouraged the

children in the orphanage to call Joe a "nigger," a kind of self-flagellation since, after all, the child is Hines' grandson. Here Faulkner is saying, it seems to me, that Southern racism is simply familial torture or suicide. If anyone is a Southerner, the Negro is. Why then, Faulkner asks, should Southerners hate Southerners? The dietitian reports the "fact" of Joe's race to the matron in charge, who in turn gives the child to the McEacherns, who act as another link in the chain.

In the next chapter, Joe, then eight years old, is whipped for not knowing his catechism: "It was years later that memory knew what he was remembering . . . ." At fourteen he had his first sexual experience with a woman, or rather a Negro girl. By choosing various such events, Faulkner portrays a character who is never more clearly the victim of moralism than when he is rebelling against it. The point he makes, and one that too many readers fail to grasp, is that Christmas is not only a victim, in the sense of being a whipping-boy, of the insane moralism of Pop Hines and McEachern, but is imbued with the very moralism that he abhors and runs from. One of his distinguishing traits, for example, is his inability to bear uncleanliness in any form. Everything must be clean, pure – words that have several connotations in the South. In this he resembles Quentin Compson, another casualty of outlandish puritanism. When Joe is told about menstruation – the "periodic interval of filth" – he cleanses the thought from his mind by killing a sheep and bathing his hands in the warm blood (washed in the blood of the lamb). After this ritual he is able to accept what his boyhood friends told him: "He found that he could live with it, side by side with it. It was as if he said, illogical and desperately calm *All right. It is so then. But not to me. Not in my life and my love.*"

After Joe strikes McEachern, who has followed him and Bobbie, the whore who fascinates the puritanical boy, he is at last on his own. Bobbie and her cohorts will have nothing to do with him, of course, now that he may be wanted by the law. They flee to Memphis, the Babylon to the north. Joe has no choice but to run – for the next fifteen years – down "The street [that] ran into Oklahoma and Missouri and as far south as Mexico and then back north to Chicago and Detroit and then back South again and at last to Mississippi." In a sense, Joe never leaves Mississippi, or, rather, he takes it with him – the "physical outrage and spiritual denial," the rigid taboos, the hatred and despair. He can no more escape his moral training, by then reversed, turned inside out,

than he can escape the shape of his nose. He insists that the races be distinct even though he does not know what he is himself. (Neither does the reader, for that matter. One of the major ironies of the novel revolves on this point. When the town learns that Joanna Burden has been murdered, no one much cares – until word gets out that a nigger killed her. Then the entire community rises in arms.) Joe beats the whore who was not insulted by his admission that he was Negro; he is the incarnation of racist absurdity in that he insists he differs from whomever he encounters. Finally, he lives with Negroes in Chicago, taking to bed a "woman who resembled an ebony carving." Then: "He was thirtythree years old." And one afternoon he found himself on a Mississippi road. Just like that.

Why this fondness for the age of thirty-three? Is not Faulkner impishly pulling the reader's leg? Is he not saying, "Here is your Christ figure come home, here is what you have done with your Christ, the symbol you employ for your viciousness, fruit of your religion"? True enough, Christmas does not die, or rather is not crucified, until three years later – after undergoing a Passion Week – at the age of thirty-six. But that probably was a slip in chronology. Faulkner often erred when constructing time sequences.

The irony of this modern crucifixion scene becomes clear when we realize that the Mississippi cross is constructed by the hands of followers of Our Lord. One thinks immediately of the "Grand Inquisitor" passage in *The Brothers Karamazov* where Ivan tells Alyosha that were Christ to appear on earth He should have to be executed again – this time by the Church which he founded. Christmas is hounded to death by the fanatical Eupheus Hines, his "spiritual" Father and actual grandfather; and by that remarkable Calvinist of the old school, McEachern, whom Faulkner describes as "a ruthless man who had never known either pity or doubt." Even more unbearable than the brutality of religious men was the pity of women: "It was the woman: that soft kindness which he believed himself doomed to be forever victim of and which he hated worse than he did the hard and ruthless justice of men." Too strong, in the fanatical sense of the word, to pity others and too filled with self-hatred to pity himself, Christmas is finally destroyed by Joanna Burden's obsessive desire to help him, in effect, to *save* him. Pity is synonymous in his mind with femininity and weakness. Pity destroys; indeed, it destroyed God: "Thus spake the devil to me once," says Nietzsche's

Zarathustra: " 'God too has his hell: that is his love of man.' And most recently I heard him say this: 'God is dead; God died of his pity for man.' "

If Lucas Burch is the Judas of the tragedy who sells the body of his Master for a few pieces of gold, the architect of the final scene is Joanna Burden, spinster daughter of a long line of Yankee abolitionists and Calvinists whose moral fervor, as we now know, did much to free the slave de jure and did much more to insure his de facto enslavement for years to come. After the Union victory what remained of the Southern gentry was disenfranchised, leaving carpetbaggers and Southern white trash in control. As Mencken pointed out in his "The Calamity of Appomattox," an independent South "might not have produced any more Washingtons, Madisons, Jeffersons, Calhouns and Randolphs of Roanoke, but it would certainly not have yielded itself to the Heflins, Caraways, Bilbos and Tillmans." Going further, he expressed the theory that both sides would have benefited had the moralists not been victorious. His argument, so abhorrent to our conditioned views of the matter, has always struck me as being in large part sound. Moral reasons, after all, can never have the force that economic reasons have, because they must rely on abstractions which vary from culture to culture and even man to man. Morality can never be *constant* since it can never be natural — that is, based on a fact of nature. Indeed, it is a contradiction in terms to say that something is moral by nature, as various transcendentalists and idealists of all stripes and hues have said in an effort to make their moral views absolute rather than relative. If the knowledge that man has gained in the last two centuries about the material world and his place in it reveals anything of philosophical importance, it is that nature is not just amoral but is *beyond* all questions of good and evil. In contrast to moral views, economic considerations can be understood easily enough by everyone since all people are responsive, in varying degrees, to physical wants.

A paragraph from Mencken's essay will help clarify his disgraceful (and perhaps even unAmerican) attitude toward our Civil War:

> No doubt the Confederates, victorious, would have abolished slavery by the middle 80s. They were headed that way before the war, and the more sagacious of them were all in favor of it. But they were in favor of it on sound economic grounds, and not on the brummagem moral grounds which per-

> suaded the North. The difference here is immense. In human history a moral victory is always a disaster, for it debauches and degrades both the victor and the vanquished. The triumph of sin in 1865 would have stimulated and helped to civilize *both sides.*

Faulkner's portrait of Miss Burden and the lengthy analysis of her moralistic forbearers give flesh to Mencken's historical theory. Eupheus Hines used biblical text to "prove" the Negro inferior and a born slave; Joanna used it to incite rebellion. Both are moral monists or absolutists, and hence depraved. Miss Burden lifts the Cross into place, as it were, so that others – in particular, Percy Grimm, the perfect one-hundred-per-cent American patriot – might drive nails through the hands and feet of the victim. Joanna imagines that all babies are, and must be, hanged from crosses, from *the* cross of the black man. When she asks Christmas to pray, to pray for what he is (or thinks he is), for what needs no prayer, she associates herself with Hines and McEachern, from whom Joe had been running and against whom he had been rebelling. In brief, the harlot-nun asks Christmas to pity himself, the one thing (in his conscious mind, at any rate) he refuses to do.

In contrast to Christmas, we have Lena Grove, an almost totally amoral creature. In chapter one she ambles on the scene, large with child, and then ambles off at book's end – joyfully accepting what tomorrow will bring, always sure that things will turn out all right. In his magnificent lines about animals, Whitman might have been referring to Lena:

> I think I could turn and live with animals, they're so
> placid and self-contain'd,
> I stand and look at them long and long.
>
> They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
> They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
> They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
> Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania
> of owning things,
> Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands
> of years ago,
> Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

Not once, it should be noted, does Lena meet Christmas whose life, as I have remarked, is enclosed in a moral circle. Lena looks outward;

she is concerned with the tangibles of the world. Little concerned with the tangible world, Christmas constantly seeks selfhood. His life, a complex of strain and frustration, turns inexorably toward a tragic conclusion. Lena cares not a whit about her "self" and is not even particularly interested in finding the father of her child. She is simply taking a trip, seeing the sights, anticipating the surprise that comes just around the corner, knowing beforehand that she will enjoy it. When informed by the furniture dealer that they are approaching Saulsbury, Tennessee, she sums up her entire attitude toward the world in her response (the last words in the novel): "My, my. A body does get around. Here we ain't been coming from Alabama but two months, and now it's already Tennessee." Catastrophe may find her, of course, but one thing is sure: she lives and will live beyond tragedy.

Like the figures in Robinson Jeffers' narrative poems, which almost certainly influenced both the thought and metaphoric language of Faulkner, the characters in *Light in August* lend themselves to symbolic interpretation. While they are never just symbols, they are still more than individuals. Gail Hightower (one almost wishes Faulkner had been a bit less obvious in the symbolism of his characters' names) clearly personifies the literate Southerner's worship of the past, which in turn breeds impotence. Although Hightower figures rather prominently in the events of the story, his most important place in the novel does not become clear until after the death of Christmas. It is worth noting that Christmas dies in the home of Hightower, where he had run in search of sanctuary. Symbolically read, the scene illustrates two related points: Christianity offers no protection for the Christ against those who are nominally, at any rate, Christians; and the man who resides vicariously in the past cannot cope with exigencies of the present.

Finally, the history of Hightower, revealed in chapter twenty right after Christmas' death at the end of chapter nineteen, is a meditation on Southern history. Hightower's grandfather, described as "a hale, bluff, rednosed man with the moustache of a brigand chief," was the antithesis of the puritan grandson. Hightower's worship of his grandfather, who was killed in the War twenty years before the grandson was born, was no more nor less ironic than the worship of the past by Southerners today. Ironic in that the grandfather himself worshipped nothing. Nor could the grandfather understand the moralism of his son (whom I shall call Hightower II). Father and son, we are told, "lived amicably enough

in the two-storey house in town, though for some time now the son had refused, quiet and firm, to eat any food prepared by the slave woman who had raised him from babyhood. He cooked his own food in the kitchen, to the Negress' outraged indignation, and put it on the table himself and ate it face to face with his father, who saluted him punctiliously and unfailingly with a glass of Bourbon whiskey: this too the son did not touch and had never tasted." When the Ur-Hightower, a lawyer, learned that his son had become a preacher, he laughed in the son's face: "The son listened to the laughter as he would if it had been shouts or curses: with a cold and respectful detachment, saying nothing." When the son married, his father, smelling of whiskey and cigars, informed the bride: "All the sanctimonious cuss wants anyway is somebody that can sing alto out of a Presbyterian hymnbook, where even the good Lord Himself couldn't squeeze in any music." And, with his clothes, his demijohn, and his slaves, he moved out of the house, which he never entered again. The son and his bride liked the father, "admired him in a hushed, alarmed, secret way: his swagger, his bluff and simple adherence to a simple code." They heard of his doings, for example how he invaded a church revival meeting and "turned it into a week of amateur horse racing while to a dwindling congregation gaunt, fanaticfaced country preachers thundered anathema from the rustic pulpit at his oblivious and unregenerate head."

While Faulkner in no sense romanticizes the ante-bellum South by claiming for it a cultural sophistication it did not have, he does imply that the men, like Hightower I, who died in the conflict were at least more healthy in mind and body than those who were born later. Between the grandfather, who believed in living and letting live, and the grandson, who inherited the disease of introspection, there lies a wide gulf. Hightower II was a man split down the middle, unable to see the paradox in the fact that he aided the side whose principles he rejected. He returned from the War a changed man – " 'Deodorised,' as his dead father would have put it, of sanctity somewhat." Faulkner describes him as one of the phantoms with whom the last of the Hightowers grew up—"a minister without a church and a soldier without an enemy, and who in defeat had combined the two and become a doctor, a surgeon. It was as though the very cold and uncompromising conviction which propped him upright, as it were, between puritan and cavalier, had become not defeated and not discouraged, but wiser." The son of this

man took the final step that reverence can take – into a worship of the past, which, in his mind, was the same thing as a worship of God. Glued to a fabulous time, "When swords were bright and steeds were prancing" – to an abstraction, in effect – he cannot function in the real world. Having lost or destroyed (surely he destroyed his wife, as he finally admits to himself) everything in his life, or, rather, having sacrificed everything real to his phantoms, he is left at the end a flabby, hopeless dupe of his dreams – of "the wild bugles and the clashing sabres and the dying thunder of hooves." Caught in the vicious moral fanaticism of the South, Christmas perishes on his cross. Oblivious to moral preachments, Lena Grove copes with life's accidents. The criticism of "the moral view" implicit in the three separate, though related, stories constitutes one of the great triumphs in literary counterpoint.

Three years before *Light in August*, Faulkner had shown, in *The Sound and the Fury*, that reliance on a mythologized moral system was hopelessly ineffectual. There is no doubt that Benjy, the timeless idiot, was meant, however vaguely, to embody Christian restraint. The witless embodiment of all innocence, the eternal sufferer (the numerous references to his crying), Benjy has for his sole mission to bemoan the knowledge of evil in others. He acts as though he were the last shred of moral consciousness for his beloved sister whose unswerving and helpless degeneration might be interpreted as the fall of honor. (Certainly her brother Quentin so interprets it.) Only Benjy can in any way restrain Caddie's leap to moral destruction; and in the end he is ineffectual, is left with nothing but chaotic memories of her childhood innocence. To Quentin, Benjy is the "Refuge unfailing in which conflict tempered silenced reconciled. Benjamin the child of mine old age held hostage into Egypt." Before acting, Caddie and Quentin take a sidelong glance, as it were, at Benjy. That *they* consider him a symbol seems obvious. Of course, the thought of Benjy's innocence can no more prevent Quentin's suicide than it could save Caddie from her pathetic promiscuity.

Faulkner not only denies the efficacy of Christianity as a moral guide, but he constantly derides man's proclivity for abstract thought as well. In this he resembles Joseph Conrad, who insisted that "Thinking is the great enemy of perfection. The habit of profound reflection, I am compelled to say, is the most pernicious of all the habits formed by the civilized man." Quentin's problem, as his father tells him, is simply that he believes more strongly in abstractions – in abstract concepts of

virtue – than he does in real life. Indeed, Faulkner seems to imply that an addiction to abstract thought induces a hatred of life in so far as the abstracting individual attempts to live *outside* nature. His ardent believers, no matter what the belief – whether in religion as in the case of McEachern or Hines, or in some secular ideology or racial view – are generally injurious to others. His abstractionists, like Quentin and Hightower and Darl Vardaman (in *As I Lay Dying*), injure themselves.

As I Lay Dying offers the best commentary on the curse of self-consciousness, the one enormous difference between man and the lower animals. Faulkner would agree with Jeffers that we have been endowed with a mixed blessing since consciousness interposes symbols between man and his environment. Before marrying Anse Bundren, Addie believed in symbols or words; that is, she believed that experience had a particular nomenclature. Love, for example, might be given body or physical shape. In other words, abstractions had concrete referents. Her discovery that abstractions could never be anything but abstractions led her to her final rebellion against the emptiness of a life based on concepts. In her one monologue in the novel, she recalls that Anse "had a word, too. Love, he called it. But I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time came, you wouldn't need a word for that anymore than for pride or fear. Cash did not need to say it to me nor I to him, and I would say, Let Anse use it, if he wants to. So that it was Anse or love; love or Anse: it didn't matter." Both Anse and love had become empty spaces, nothings, *nada por nada*.

With "love" a dead sound, she sought to give flesh to "sin," to give material clothing to the concept. So she chose Whitfield, the preacher, since "he was the instrument ordained by God who created the sin, to sanctify that sin He had created." She would wait in the woods for Whitfield, thinking of him as dressed in sin. "I would think of him as thinking of me as dressed also in sin, he the more beautiful since the garment which he had exchanged for sin was sanctified. I would think of the sin as garments which we would remove in order to shape and coerce the terrible blood to the forlorn echo of the dead word high in the air." She learns, however, that here, too, the word *sin* remained a word.

Cora Tull chides Addie for having too little faith in religion and in Brother Whitfield, whom Cora calls "a godly man if ever one breathed

breath." Cora proudly proclaims that her own life "is an acknowledgment and expiation of my sin." A somewhat comical simpleton, Cora believes in words with all the faith that only total ignorance can engender. Addie muses on Cora's absurdities, that is, her abstractions:

> And so when Cora Tull would tell me I was not a true mother, I would think how words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and how terribly doing goes along the earth, clinging to it, so that after a while the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other; and that sin and love and fear are just sounds that people who never sinned nor loved nor feared have for what they never had and cannot have until they forget the words. Like Cora, who could never even cook.

Addie recalls how Cora's "high dead words in time seemed to lose even the significance of their dead sound." She concludes her monologue with another comment on Cora: "One day I was talking to Cora. She prayed for me because she believed I was blind to sin, wanting me to kneel and pray too, because people to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words too."

Of all the Bundren children, Cora's favorite is Darl. And rightly so since it is fitting that the stupid should cotton to the insane. The true idealist or abstractionist, Darl leaves the earth altogether in his word-mongering. Of all the characters in this comic-heroic opera, he has by far the most sections – of necessity since the insane person has the most difficulty in bringing the world about him into some kind of focus. Little Vardaman has several sections, but his attempts to comprehend what is going on about him, ghoulishly humorous though they may be, are the gropings of a child but not, as some critics have said, those of an idiot. The "metaphysician" of the novel is Darl, who would doubtless have felt at home in Swift's Laputa if not Mississippi. In one of the most wildly comical passages in this most comical of all American odysseys, Darl deciphers the problem of being:

> In a strange room you must empty yourself for sleep. And before you are emptied for sleep, what are you. And when you are emptied for sleep, you are not. And when you are filled with sleep, you never were. I don't know what I am. I don't know if I am or not. Jewel knows he is, because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not. He cannot empty himself for sleep because he is not what he

> is and he is what he is not. . . . And since sleep is is-not and rain and wind are *was*, Addie Bundren will not be. And Jewel *is*, so Addie Bundren must be. And then I must be, or I could not empty myself for sleep in a strange room. And so if I am not emptied yet, I am *is*.
>
> How often have I lain beneath rain on a strange roof, thinking of home.

This delightful lucubration brings to mind Mencken's definition of "The Metaphysician": "A metaphysician is one who, when you remark that twice two makes four, demands to know what you mean by twice, what by two, what by makes, and what by four. For asking such questions metaphysicians are supported in oriental luxury in the universities, and respected as educated and intelligent men."

If Mencken or Faulkner had been asked for a definition of infinity, he could have answered, without violation of any of his recorded views, that the length of infinity might best be ascertained by measuring the height (or depth) of human folly. And as diagnosticians of peculiarly Southern folly, they were in remarkable agreement.

Transition

The need for ambulance speed
having become pointless with
his debilitating years,
we help my Father slowly
from the bed he has shared with no one
for forty months, help him to his
automobile that will take him away
from his humble, homemade home
for the final time.
My brother drives down Orleans Road,
bordered by the budding trees
of a South Carolina spring.
We drive past houses of neighbors,
occupied mostly by widows, fewer widowers,
houses of friends whom my Father
has outlived and of those who will outlive
my Father.
But he does not look, for he knows it would be
a last look and prefers not to see them
thru dying eyes.
We proceed eastward on U. S. 17
past the outlets of our basic needs:
shopping centers and gasoline dealers,
a grocery store named Piggly Wiggly,

a Baptist church named for Ashley River.
Our only stops are two required by traffic lights
insensitive to the human condition,
and in less than an hour we arrive at Roper Hospital.
He has been here before – many times – but it still
is not like the home where his shirts and suits
remain hanging in a closet. Neckties knotted.
Shoes unworn for months gathering a little more dust.
It does not matter. He will not need them.
Hospital pajamas are the uniform of the day.
He is checked into a semi-private room

so that he will not die alone.
Ordered to rest, he refuses to sleep away
his last days and nights. I spend the first
of the last by his side. He is unable to speak
and I to keep up a one-way conversation.
I read aloud awhile from a book by a Greek
of whom he has never heard.
At last he feigns sleep to allow me rest.
The morning marks another day gone.
I excuse myself as starched nurses
begin the day's routine

EUGENE ROBERT PLATT

For Ruth Rankin

When I was ten, I bore the white man's burden
For Ruth Rankin, spinster principal
Of Waialua Elementary School.
Despite the *l*-sound and iambic flow
Of her domain, it was my playground prose
Which most concerned her. When in Waialua,
She pronounced, one's language shouldn't do
As Waialuans do – especially when
One's had advantages.
When I was ten
I couldn't argue *whassamatta you*
No like da kind with Miss Ruth Rankin, true
Apostle of the Standard English Word
To non-Caucasians. And even now, with my
Gentility still sentenced by her white
Command, for which I'd loosely and darkly curse her,
I cannot be too ruthless in my verse.

JOHN N. MILLER

With a Cast of Thousands

Some time ago I would have felt it tragic
to come upon that blue-remnanted patch.
Feathers, tedded casually about, testify
that here he brought his catch
in frosted night's seclusion
and stilled the yawping heart
with strong and practiced champs.

Not out of need. Not food anyway.
He has his fill of canned
and granulated products, and
padded box to sleep in where
night noises can't disturb him.
Perhaps the morning sounds I
take for joy perturbed him; may
mean to him intrusion
in his own kind territory.

Or the song the jay sang
may have struck a primal chord
in some ancient feline cell
that until then had lain unknown
and dormant, as it does now when
I stroke his purring belly. Too rough
a rub will trigger those strong
hind paws yet, and he'll seek
to disembowel my testing hand.

I'll watch him for awhile,
remembering that a band
of my ancestors and that pride
of his once played a bill
together in the Colosseum,
hoping that his new knowledge
will not throw him out of time.

DALE ALAN BAILES

grandfather dancing

if anyone touched the keys
of the rattley old piano in the parlor
you could tell in a minute
without even looking
that grandfather was dancing
an old-fashioned jig
in the next room

for all the floorboards
would begin shivering
under your numb slow feet
and you could hear the faint sound
of his old manly laughter
coming muffled through the doors
that kept the warm from the cold

and if you looked up
through the panes of the doors
you might catch the glint
from the brass on his suspenders
and you surely could see
through distorted glass
the quick broken figure of his dancing
but that was long ago
when we were children who liked to bang
on the rattley old piano in the parlor
and now there is nothing
but the image of his laughter

IDRIS MCELVEEN

The Visitations of Kali

That random snatcher
hovers over probing scalpels,

crouches in the shadows
watching the walls of arteries
bursting with clock-ticks,

accelerates the driver
drunk on his sorrows.

Around which corner does she
hone a drugstore switchblade
for its moon-reflecting flash,

adjust the telescopic sights
of rifles barrelling from windows,

hollow out the brains of suicides
to hold the ashes of her fires?

ALICE CABANISS

Reviews

A Tricentennial Anthology of South Carolina Literature, 1670-1970. Selected by Richard James Calhoun and John Caldwell Guilds. Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press. 580 pages. $6.95.

No anthologist can avoid the possibility (or even the inevitability) of two kinds of sins: the one of omission and the other of excision. He must constantly make hard decisions about what writers he will include, as well as about how much he will print of the writers that he selects. In an historical collection such as the present one, there is another and even more difficult decision to make. This one involves a distinction between what is really literature and what is actually documentation of one sort or another.

In their handsome and otherwise impressive volume of South Carolina writing covering the past three hundred years, the editors have come off on all counts with high honors. The book gives ample evidence of scholarly care and of judicial discrimination. If the editors are guilty of some small failures, whatever weaknesses the volume has may be fairly said to lie in the material—as a perceptible tone of apology in the introduction seems to suggest.

For the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the editors were understandably hard pressed; thus they were often forced to fall back on writing that is more valuable as history than as literature. For example, William Hilton's record of "discovery" that opens the volume and the selections from Le Jau, Laurens, Drayton, and Ramsey could hardly be considered *belles lettres.* In spite of the fact that Charles Woodmason's heroic couplets in the manner of Pope's *Windsor Forest* are quite respectable and that the poem on the culture of indigo in the *South-Carolina Gazette* is a competent "imitation" in the manner of the eighteenth-century georgic, only Mrs. Eliza Lucas Pinckney emerges as a genuine literary talent. Her vivid epistolary accounts of life in the state are in the best tradition of English letter writing; and her astute comment on Richardson's *Pamela* indicates a critical intelligence at once fresh and incisive.

The nineteenth century, of course, offered a far richer field. But even here some padding seemed necessary. The first and only considerable poet before Simms, Timrod, and Hayne was James Matthew Legaré,

whose plainly limited but highly refined product places him in the purest classic tradition of the eighteenth century. Poets like Washington Alston (who might best be remembered as a painter), William Crafts, and William John Grayson, like John Brown Ladd of the previous century, deserve inclusion only from an antiquarian interest. In other fields, Hugh Swinton Legaré had only a minor critical talent; and John C. Calhoun was far greater for what he contributed to history than what he did for literature.

The spirited activity of the mid-century, centered around *Russell's Magazine* (designed to rival the *Atlantic Monthly* founded at the same time), forms at once the noblest and the most pathetic episode in the literary history of the state. Out of it emerged three colorful figures. The first was William Gilmore Simms, whose tremendous energy, burning Southern nationalism, and considerable talent made him the most important single literary figure that the state has ever produced. With justice he was called the laureate of the Confederacy; but when his poetry is read in the cold light of the twentieth century, it seems, with a few exceptions, little better than mediocre. To be really appreciated, Simms must be read as a novelist. Unfortunately, however, the overlong Sharp Snaffles yarn selected for inclusion in the anthology does not show him off in his best light. The second figure was Paul Hamilton Hayne, who turned out a large amount of verse. But his poetry is involved in too much movement to achieve depth, yet not enough to generate true ecstasy; and it is inclined too often to read like warmed-over Shelley, Tennyson, or Swinburne. The thirty-three pages allotted to Hayne seem to be too many.

After all, the only real poetic talent in the group was that of Henry Timrod, whose best verse is as beautiful and as moving as it ever was. Capable of achieving the lovely economy of a late classicist like William Collins and the direct emotional appeal of a nature poet like Wordsworth, Timrod emerges at the same time *sui generis*.

Of the nineteenth-century prose writers, William Elliott, the naturalist, and Mrs. Mary Boykin Chestnut, the diarist, were first-rate talents in their own fields. They deserve to be better known.

The focal point of twentieth-century literary activity in the state was the Charleston group, inspired at the outset by John Bennett and later to some extent by the stimulus of The Poetry Society of South

Carolina. One has only to turn over the pages of the *Saturday Review of Literature* in the 1920's to observe the importance on the national scene of such South Carolina writers as DuBose Heyward, Hervey Allen, and Julia Peterkin—the last named of whom did not, of course, actually belong to the Charleston group. Although Heyward and Allen were both competent poets, it was their fiction, along with Mrs. Peterkin's, that won a large reading public. Pulitzer and other prizes, dramatizations on Broadway, and so on gave South Carolina writers of the decade a kind of preeminence that they had not had before and have not had since. Except for Allen, who was excluded because of copyright restrictions, the best of the Charleston writers—including the talented novelist and poet, Josephine Pinckney, and the fine poet, Beatrice Ravenel – are appropriately represented.

Both in and outside Charleston, a new regionalism drew its inspiration from the Gullah Negro, whose culture in the sketches of Ambrose Gonzales of Columbia and of Dr. E. C. L. Adams of the same area came (perhaps a little naively) as a "discovery" to be used most successfully as literary material by Heyward and Mrs. Peterkin. Yet however remote this regionalism was from the so-called genteel tradition, it did not have the impetus of a more rebellious sort that produced William Faulkner in Mississippi, Thomas Wolfe in North Carolina, and Erskine Caldwell in Georgia; and it failed to reflect the most important elements of social change even then taking place.

It is therefore not surprising that the idea of South Carolina as a literary center faded in the 1930's when a more vigorous group, already on the Nashville scene as the "Fugitive" poets, electrified the literary world with their "Agrarian" manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*. And even in North Carolina a continued vigorous pursuit of the native tradition under Professor Frederick Koch in Chapel Hill appeared to be more dynamic in the production of both drama and fiction.

One would not want to say that since the thirties, South Carolina has not been distinguished for literary creativity. Writers like Elizabeth Boatwright Coker, Herbert Ravenel Sass, Ben Robertson, and Max Steele have displayed both talent and energy. However, on the national scene names like those of Randall Jarrell, Eudora Welty, Peter Taylor, Flannery O'Connor and Elizabeth Spencer from other Southern states have tended to set the tone of Southern letters. James Dickey, an admittedly distinguished poet and novelist, should certainly be added to this list; but,

after all, as proud as South Carolina may be to claim him, he is a recently adopted son. It is thus a little ironic that he is allotted more pages in the anthology than any other literary figure except Simms and Haynes.

In the presence of such a rich storehouse as the present volume, one might be accused of quibbling if he suggested a few names that he thinks might happily have been included. Among the diarists and autobiographers, for example, there might have been selections from Henry William Ravenel (1814-1887) and William C. Preston (1814-1887). Among contemporary writers, Samuel G. Stoney, J. McBride Dabbs, Henry Bellamann, and Louis Rubin come easily to mind. And might not a writer like Hamilton Basso have been included on the same basis on which Augustus Baldwin Longstreet was? But pursuit of this sort of thinking is not really profitable. A reviewer is not called upon to produce another anthology, especially if the one under review is as good as this one plainly is.

LODWICK HARTLEY

New Writing in South Carolina. Edited by William Peden and George Garrett. University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, S. C. 1971. $6.95. 175 pp.

Whenever I read an anthology such as *New Writing in South Carolina*, I am aware of the tragic waste in American letters, as well as the other arts, that is inevitable since New York is the center of publishing and reviewing. (Of course, it would also be tragic if the South dictated the tastes and values of our time.) For, as honest and skilled as they are, most of the writers represented here could not find a New York publisher. Nor will book ever be reviewed, other than as "a regional effort" (read "provincial") by the national magazines and newspapers — in spite of the reputations of the editors, William Peden and George Garrett.

The truth is that most of the work here is simply out of the main stream of American letters today. For example, there are no stories on drugs, communes, dropouts, or sexual deviants — nothing that can be labeled Black Humor. There are only a few allusions to the "in" world

of TV and movies, and all the stories have a beginning, middle and end – as if respect for the storyteller has not all but vanished in sophisticated circles in the 1970's. Furthermore, the poems show little influence of neo-surrealism or post-Beatnik formlessness.

The editors, in a preface that seems overly apologetic and admits the unevenness of the collection (writers submitted manuscripts, published and unpublished, in a competition; and many of the best South Carolina writers refused to take part), are at pains to show that South Carolinians are up on the very latest literary currents. Yet much of the work included seems to belie the claim, although this is not necessarily damaging.

What is South Carolina fiction like today? Well, there is a good deal of it that wouldn't interest the New Yorker. Most of the stories have rural settings, more than a few tinged with nostalgia. The Civil War still grips the Southern imagination, as in "Billy Cocklebur," an extended anecdote, and Helen King's nostalgic essay, "Christmas under Lake Murray." In fact, there is more about the Civil War than Vietnam.

On the other hand, there are the virtues that we have come to expect in Southern fiction: a fully realized sense of place, with the background particularized, as in Roger Pinckney's hunting story, "Things That Vanish"; the enduring folkways and dialect such as the Gullah speech in C. S. Murray's "God Use Both Hand" (most eastern readers would not have the patience for it); and a deep concern for religious and moral values. Finally, there is present in many of the stories that signature of Southern fiction: violence in the form of rape, murder, and racial hatred.

Religion is as pervasive as in Irish fiction, and it informs the most successful stories. Dale Coleman's "The Just for the Unjust" is a haunting story of a crazed minister who is alienated from his wife and family – even his lower-class congregation after a woman challenges him during a sermon (she later dies). In the end, he comes to see that he has been preaching *his* word, not the Lord's. Although it is marred by a touch of melodrama at the climax, Mrs. Coleman's evocative, poetic style generates enough power to transcend this limitation. She is as complex and memorable as Flannery O'Connor at her best. Lynn Rosmer, a young black writer, is even more compelling. "The Furnished Room" tells the story of a guilt-ridden intellectual Negro who has injured his hands and

feet with glass from a stained-glass window, taking on Christ's wounds. When he allows himself to be seduced by his slatternly landlady, he loses the last vestige of sanity and decides to kill himself. There are other successful stories by Beth Parrish, Roger Pinckney, Frank Durham, and another young black, George H. Lynn, whose "Forests of the Night" seethes with the power of racial hatred.

The poems included can be dealt with briefly; they make up less than a fifth of the anthology – and too many of them are unrealized, derivative, or simply sentimental magazine verse. The poems of Franklin B. Ashley, Lee McAden and Alouise D. Cope ("Hattie's Rhythm") come alive. But of all the twenty-one poets represented, only Gay Cothran commands a talent that assures her a future. "The Cham" is stunning in its originality, and "March, 1966" is a perky delight, fresh in rhythms and feeling. Beside her full-blooded poems the others, among them cinquains and academic sonnets, appear pale and commonplace. If this collection is truly representative, then fiction in South Carolina is far superior to non-fiction and poetry.

Perhaps my wish not to judge this anthology as a provincial work, which would have been condescending, has led me to be unduly harsh on a number of the contributors. I hope this is not the case, for I respect the value and need for such collections – particularly in the South of the 1970's. *New Writing in South Carolina* undoubtedly shows more promise than fulfillment, but this is inevitable. In any case, the two superb stories of Dale Coleman and Lynn Rosmer and the poems of Gay Cothran are enough to justify the anthology.

GUY OWEN

William Price Fox. *Ruby Red*. Philadelphia & New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1971. 368 pp. $6.95.

As everyone knows, country-western-gospel music upholds personal purity and family stability. Not only an arm of the church and a reminder of the sorrows of misplaced trust, it aids in the selling of Southern staples, such as flour and corn meal, hamburgers and automobiles, and is therefore good for the economy. Its idols include such worthies as Ernest Tubbs, Hank Williams, Loretta Lynn, Porter Wagoner, and Arthur Smith, all of whom personify the earnest wholesomeness of their musical

message. Their homespun exteriors and twangy, lugubrious songs clearly define the good life as love of God, the beauty of nature, total abstinence from spirits and drugs, and the absolute sanctity of love, marriage, and the home.

Well, William Price Fox, in his latest novel *Ruby Red*, has now rewritten this myth. He says that it not only takes no great musical talent to recognize the corn and grits in country and western but that its inevitable blend of gospel sweetness is a fraud and that the people in the entertainment business are mockeries of the virtues they extol. The heroine who carries these ideas is a coldblooded Southern gal from Columbia, South Carolina, named Ruby Jean Jamison, who sells her body and soul to get to Nashville, Tennessee, the rollicking center of c. and w., only to find that everybody in the business is as ruthless as she. She is therefore right at home, and after a vigorous love life, she beds her way, with only the paltriest musical talent, into an early morning show of her own, dispensing syrupy c. and w. and virtuously offering sentimental advice to early risers and insomniacs.

The story is highly entertaining. At first we see Ruby and her friend Agnes McCoy, formerly Southern Bell operators, singing at church socials and school parties. They call themselves The Rose of Sharon Girls. But then, stung with stardomitis, Ruby goes to charm school and gets a song-writing manager, who changes the team name to The Honkeytonk Angels. Now with a gimmick – a pure gospel singer taming a go-go dancer – the Angels set out on a tour of the Carolinas and Georgia enroute to Nashville. After ditching her moonshining boyfriend, Ruby lives with her manager, then ditches him for an Opry celebrity named Big John Harmon, a twice-divorced, alimony-ridden, hypocritical slob who specializes in songs about lonesome truckdrivers. From selling Bite Quik hamburgers, Ruby eventually gets her big break. Meanwhile, her partner Agnes, a bit more susceptible to other human emotions, righteously resents her boyfriend's attempt to seduce her on the front seat of a car, turns for solace to her self-righteous pastor, the Preacher Roebuck, who, smitten with a desire to emulate Billy Graham, also goes to charm school. After a turn-about Agnes succumbs to her first boyfriend, marries him, and leaves the Bite Quik team when her pregnancy shows.

And so on. For Fox narrates with great skill. Some of his comic scenes, moreover, are what one would expect from the author of

Southern Fried, a collection of hilarious short stories, and *Moonshine Light, Moonshine Bright,* a fun-filled story about moonshining in Columbia. Not many contemporary scenes in Southern fiction can equal that of Preacher Roebuck's leading his Wednesday night congregation of the Washed in the Blood of the Lamb Baptist Church to the moonshiner's house where he preaches through a bullhorn to drown out the jukebox; or that of the seduction scene with which the book opens; or that of the time Ruby becomes so nervous she "can't pour her peanuts into the Dr. Pepper."

But if comedy is one of the weapons for ridiculing the world of c. and w. and g., the language of banality is another. Gospel singers are "hymn bleeders"; Ruby's manager talks "fast, like a salesman with one foot in the door" and with a "two-beat rhythm in his voice"; Ruby looks at her nearly nude figure in the mirror, "taking readings on her best angles"; once when she is lonely, "The warm wings inside her turned cool and brushed a tender area." Then too, the book is full of glib Guitar talk: dobros, brass, Gibson, Fenders, wide track, double clutching, Seeburg solenoid, and strobe lights. Fox apparently knows the business. And this trade talk — slick, clever, and racy — is thematically pertinent for deriding a banal and moronic pop subculture.

A third tool that Fox uses is the freaks and stereotypes, now stocks in trade in Southern fiction: the manager is an albino, and one songwriter is a "carnival geek" who used to eat raw chickens. Characters who are not freaks are equally one-dimensional: the moonshining yokel with the heart of gold; the vain, crusading preacher; the whoring gospel singer; and the good but fallen gospel girl. Although these stereotypes have thematic justification — suggesting electronic puppetry and the slender "heroes" of an idolatrous public — Fox overdoes them. He shows himself more interested in the sociology of the country-gospel circuit than in character analysis. The result is often staginess and melodrama. Only once, when Ruby visits her Mother, does she pause to question her real identity and sense of belonging. Two other characters — Agnes and the Preacher — show more of a fullness of human personality, a capacity for love and selflessness, but Fox leaves them in the wings. In the main, the characters are as platinum-coated and lifeless as the rhinestone-studded hats and belts of the c. and w. stars at the Ole Opry house. No doubt, that is largely Fox's intention: to the extent that c. and w. and g. symbolizes Southern culture, to just that extent is Southern culture

hollow. It has succumbed to the values of Hollywood and of the Eastern entertainment world.

On its own terms, therefore, the book has real merit. It tells a lively story and makes its own glittering world. It demonstrates afresh that Fox has one of the rarest gifts for comedy among Southern writers. The novel is also Fox's most ambitious effort to date, and it opens up a promising new field for further exploration. Although the theme is not new in real life, Fox gives it vivid literary form in the seemingly artless, but highly skilful, toned-down journalistic style of our time instead of imitating the oratory of the old school. For all of these achievements by a promising native son, we can be very grateful.

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