

XAVIER REVIEW

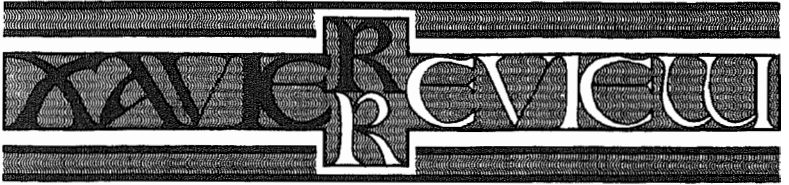


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Tennessee Williams

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BAIRD W. WHITLOCK
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Conversations with Robert Frost
(from a work-in-progress)

As Robert Frost sprawled in the easy chair in his farmhouse in Vermont, he looked at the three of us and asked, "Have you ever read Burton's translation of the *Arabian Nights*?" We each allowed as how we had not, and off he went, telling us of the story of the man who couldn't keep from being king. That was how a friendship with the man I had come to recognize as America's leading poet started.

The three of us were myself, newly arrived as an instructor in English at Middlebury College, Don Putnam, who had arrived at Middlebury a couple of years earlier and had come to know Frost because of the latter's willingness to read and criticize Don's poetry, and Pardon Tillinghast, in his second year in the History Department. There were lots of reasons for choosing Middlebury as a place to start teaching, but none was more exciting than the prospect of getting to meet Robert Frost somewhere along the line. I knew that he summered in the hills near Middlebury and was connected with the Breadloaf School of English run by the College, but beyond that I was ignorant of most things about him except his poetry.

Like so many other college students, I had heard him give a reading while I was an undergraduate, and, like almost everyone who had ever attended one of those affairs, I was immediately taken by him as a person. And I loved his poetry, largely because it had the true New England note that I had come to admire through many summers in the mountains since 1930. Some of that love was misdirected, of course. One of the first arguments I had had with a professor on returning to college from the Air Force had been at a meeting of the honorary English Society, when he had said that Frost was really on the side of "Good fences make good neighbors" in "The Mending Wall." I was appalled at what I considered a very blind reading of the poem. I had a lot to learn about Frost.

It was impossible to spend more than a week at Middlebury without learning a good deal about the poet. Most people referred to him in terms coming close to idolatry; others loved to tell and retell examples of his New England crustiness. But there were three sources of genuine information: Doc Cook, head of the American Literature Department, who also ran the Breadloaf School of English, had known Frost and his friends the Morrises for years and was one of Frost's

genuine hiking companions; Arthur Healey, head of the Art Department, had vacationed with Frost and was able to reveal a side of the man different from most of the reports I had heard; and Don Putnam, who had visited Frost several times at his farm and cabin. That farm, I soon came to know, was on the left side of Rte. 125 on the way to Breadloaf (both school and ski area owned by the College), up a dirt road marked only by a mailbox for the Homer Noble Farm. Ted Morrison, a Harvard professor and head of English A there, and Kay, his wife and Frost's secretary and buffer against the world, lived in the farmhouse with their family during vacations. Frost's cabin was in calling distance up the hillside.

By the end of my first year at Middlebury, I had a pretty good idea of what America's leading living poet was like: lovable but crusty, superpatriotic even in a day when almost everyone still had a feeling of pride about WW II, individualistic in person as he was in poetry, biased on a number of subjects—especially “obscure” poetry—but in every way fascinating. By early spring I had become as interested in the man as in his poetry, and I kept trying to find someone who would give me the chance to meet Frost on his own turf. That person turned out to be Don Putnam. Don had called Mrs. Morrison and asked if he could come up for a visit and bring along a couple of his friends; Frost had given his approval.

Naturally I immediately visited both Doc Cook and Arthur Healey for advice. Doc told me to relax because Frost certainly would; Arthur Healey gave me even better advice. He told me of his vacationing with Frost. They agreed before they started that they wouldn't discuss each other's vocation. Frost was to be a farmer and Arthur a builder or architect. Arthur's point was that Frost would be more himself if he wasn't treated as a major poet, and I would learn a lot more about him as a man if I let him move to any subject he felt like talking about. It was apparent from all sources that there would be no problem about conversation. In that area, Frost was a prime mover.

In the years that followed, I often blessed Healey for the advice. I approached Frost in the role in which he felt completely at ease and one which we shared: teacher. When he moved on to his own poetry, or any other subject, it was always at his own decision.

When we arrived at the farmhouse and were introduced to Frost, he had been reading Burton's translation of *The Arabian Nights*. Having found that we were not acquainted with the story of the king who could not successfully abdicate but was continually thrown back into leadership, Frost took off, explicating the story, working on the general idea of people whose ability took away their freedom from

responsibility, working up phrases that put his ideas in better and tighter form. Although none of us knew it at the time, we were at the birth of a poem. The book lay on the arm of the chair in which he sat, and he would occasionally read us passages. For the next year I watched the idea grow, first at a talk at Middlebury, where actual lines of poetry were now forming, usually in words close to those he was groping for that May afternoon, than in the finished poem, "How Hard It Is to Keep from Being King When It's in You and in the Situation," the next summer—which he had read earlier in the spring at the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

In his biography of Frost, Lawrance Thompson implies strongly that this poem was written as a way of getting back at Erle Berhneimer for the sale of his collection of Frost items in early 1950. That simply isn't true, any more than many of the examples of what Thompson read as inherent meanness in Frost. He had simply been caught by a universal truth that spring day in a story that captured his interest and held it long enough to issue forth in a long poem.

Don Putnam first brought the talk around to poetry and asked, "What do you need for a poem?" Frost thought for a flicker of a moment and answered, "A tenable position." That led him into a fine discussion on Catullus, whom he always claimed as a major influence on him. When he noticed that we were impressed by the number of memorized lines from Catullus, he told of seeing Thompson's *Hound of Heaven* in a bookstall in Britain, buying it ("one of the few books of poetry I ever bought"), and memorizing it immediately. Naturally, he then proceeded to quote it a length. For a poet who has been criticized as being interested only in his own work, Frost showed a side I have never met in any other poet: the willingness and ability to memorize astounding amounts of other poets' works, from the classics to the most contemporary. It was noticeable that when he criticized many modern poets, he still knew them by heart.

On that May afternoon, he moved into the general area of religion when he found that Don's and my common friend, Pardon Tillinghast, was a strong Episcopalian. Frost dropped his first description of T. S. Eliot as a "Cocktailian Episcopalian." That was a remarkable piece of foresight. In August of that year I saw the first performance of Eliot's *Cocktail Party* at the Edinburgh Festival. Then he launched into a story that Dorothy Canfield Fisher had told him she ran across in the Paris archives. It seems that there was a French fishing village during the time of the inquisition in which all of the men went for week-long fishing expeditions. One time, just after the men had left, an inquisition team arrived, complete with investigators, lawyers, and judge. They

went through the village, looking for stories of potential witches among the women and managed to stir up considerable gossip of an incriminating kind, worked up cases against a few, put them on trial, and were proceeding to execution. Only one woman kept her head and sent one of the older children down the coast to find the husbands, who always fished near shore. The men, when they heard the report, hoisted sail and returned as quickly as possible, arriving just before the fires were to be lit. Leaping from their boats, they drove the inquisition team out of town and then returned and spanked all the women involved. The ending was one I was to hear many times later: "It may not be true, but it should have been." When he retold the story a year later, he said he had written about such religious fanaticism in *A Masque of Mercy*:

By something to believe in Jesse means
Something to be fanatical about
So as to justify the orthodox
In saving heretics by slaying them,
Not on the battlefield, but down in cellars.
That way's been tried too many times for me.
I'd like to see the world tried once without it.

During this second conversation, at the end of June, 1950, he took off on a long discussion of poetry and metrics. He said that the language of farmers was often naturally poetic. One example had happened at a recent baseball game in which he had taken part in Ripton. One of the farmers was asked the time, and he replied that the sun was "still three hours high."

He had an even better example, though, one which he described as just about the best line of poetry he had ever heard. One time he was giving a reading in Tennessee and asked his host if he could have a ride out into the mountains to see how the farmers worked in that kind of country. On one particularly precipitous hillside, a farmer was making his way around boulders in the middle of a field, working a simple plow drawn by a single horse. Frost got out of the car and started a conversation with the man. He couldn't resist telling the Tennessean that in New England the farmers gather up the rocks and stones in the fields and make drystone walls around the edges. The farmer thought about it a while and then replied, "I leave 'em lay where God flang 'em."

He said that he had a continuing fight with Sandburg over rhyme and meter and the use of free verse: "I would as soon write free verse

without rhyme as play tennis with the net down." The next year I told him that Sandburg had quoted that line in Chicago and added, "But I say that you can play a better game with the net down." Frost thought a bit and then said, "Sure you can play a better game with the net down—and without the racket and balls — but it ain't tennis."

During the 1950 conversation, however, he went on and said that the last time they had met, Sandburg had contended that regular rhyme, as in

In the Bay of Bengal
I lost my all

was not as good as

In the Bay of Bengal
I lost my shirt.

Frost disagreed and told Sandburg he wasn't playing fair, as he used a stronger second line. The best solution would be

In Mt. Desert
I lost my shirt.

Then, with the usual sly look that accompanied the delivery of a good line, he said, "I wonder what the best second line would be for 'In Paris, France, —?'"

He also told of the early kind of experimentation he put himself through to get the right sound of actual conversation:

There's that cat got in.
Out you go, you cat.
He'll be right back.

He also made his usual attack on poetic obscurity. To the modern obscurantist poets he said, "You got somethin' you want to hide? Well, keep it." And about Eliot in particular, "A poem shouldn't need footnotes before, during, or after reading."

At one point I asked him whether he thought that Herrick's love lyrics indicated real "affairs" on the part of the Devonshire parish priest. He smiled, thought about it for a while, and then said, "No but he had an eye!"

It was during the later part of this conversation that Frost opened up the darker side of his mind and experience for the first time. Once he came to trust someone, he was willing to open the door into his insecurity as long as the other person didn't push. It was at this point that Arthur Healey's advice paid off in getting to know the poet. I told him of an event up at the Breadloaf School of English, a mile or so away from Frost's cabin, of the lights failing and the near panic that ensued. Again he referred to *A Masque of Mercy*:

Courage is of the heart by derivation,
And great it is. But fear is of the soul
And I'm afraid. (*The bulb lights sicken down,
The cellar door swings wide and slams again.*)

Then he moved to "Provide, Provide" and remarked that the ending was not as light-hearted as it appears:

No memory of having starred
Atones for later disregard
Or keeps the end from being hard.

Better to go down dignified
With boughten friendship at your side
Than none at all. Provide, provide!

I believe that it was during this conversation that he first reminded me of Solomon's dictum: "Better a live dog than a dead lion."

It was this summer that I came to appreciate Frost's need for external support and approbation. It struck me as surprising — and still does after having come to know him well — that he was always fair game for the grossest flattery. He did not seem to be able to separate out sincere admiration from fawning attention. That inability, long recognized by many of his closest friends, has since led to much of the character assassination of the poet after his death, for some of the most outspoken flatterers have enjoyed telling as many stories as they can find to emphasize Frost's meanness. It is not that they lie; they simply insinuate and select evidence to make their point.

A year later he was regaling several of us with stories of one of his favorite Americans, Calvin Coolidge, whom he described as "a Spartan with a sense of humor added." He said that someone had told Coolidge that his father could have been made Secretary of State under Teddy Roosevelt for the asking. Cal replied, "Reminds me of the story of a man who offered another one all the kingdoms of the world from a mountain top. Only trouble was he didn't own them."

Later that afternoon he moved into a general discussion of philosophy. He said, "God created two beliefs and one unbelief. The two beliefs were science and religion; the one unbelief was philosophy." The latter is the critic of the other two and has only a negative or trimming position. He went on to the problem of ranks and privileges and said that, as the poem says, only in a garden can we see ranks and rows "without regret." That was not his usual position,

unfortunately. But it did represent one of his mixed stances on many issues that lent special power to his poetry as it presented multiple "tenable positions" from which the reader could choose. "The Mending Wall" is simply the clearest example of what is true of most of his major poetry.

On the nature of God, "The only thing God cannot do is create a stick with only one end." That sense of God's omnipotence with the single limit of self-contradiction was a constant with Frost, even though he would strike out at what he considered unfairnesses in Biblical story and theology. He certainly felt that strife was not beyond the limit of God's ability or willingness to impose. It is instead a major source of God's interaction with man. "Any strife brings disappointment that is meaningful, and only those kinds of disappointment are worthwhile." "Perhaps it's not worth winning a game unless you could have lost it." At that point, he got up from his Morris chair and took the volume of his poems that I had on my lap. He wanted to read "An Empty Threat" in order to show his early feeling about the importance of that potential of defeat for true victory:

Give a head shake
Over so much bay
Thrown away
In snow and mist
That doesn't exist,
I was going to say,
For God, man or beast's sake,
Yet does perhaps for all three.

Don't ask Joe
What it is to him.
It's sometimes dim
What it is to me,
Unless it be
It's the old captain's dark fate
Who failed to find or force a strait
In its two-thousand-mile coast;
And his crew left him where he failed,
And nothing came of all he sailed.

It's to say, 'You and I'
To such a ghost,
'You and I
Off here
With the dead race of the Great Auk!
And, 'Better defeat almost,
If seen clear,
Than life's victories of doubt
That need endless talk talk
To make them out.'

A week later, he moved into talk about how much he hated people analyzing his poems; he said he disliked people "talking about" deeper meanings in his poetry. I never heard him say that people were wrong in finding deeper meanings for themselves. Again and again he said, "a poet has a right to anything a reader can get out of a poem." He was usually amused by readers getting "messages" out of "Stopping by Woods." He told of a young man who asked what the inner content of the last lines meant, and Frost answered, "Why I suppose I meant, 'Let's get the hell out of here, it's late!'" I heard the exact same exchange with a little old lady at Case Institute years later. She started off by asking, "When you wrote that last line, you meant something like 'death,' didn't you?" Frost's reply was the same, with his eyes twinkling all the time. While he was on that poem he told for the first time the story of being asked why he repeated the last line: "Why I guess I just couldn't think of another line." I know of only one acquaintance of Frost who ever took that answer seriously.

He talked about death a little on this visit as well, perhaps triggered by an earlier remark about skating on insecurity all his life. He said he wasn't much attracted to the idea of death or dying, but the idea of *having been* dead a thousand years was pretty interesting. On the subject of religion and art, he said, "One God makes for tragedy, more for comedy." His point was that you can always call in the others.

The following summer I went up for a visit and was met by his pet schnauzers, Sheba and Mark, as usual, but there was no sign of Frost. I went up to the cabin, and after receiving no answer to a knock at the screen door, I put my head around the corner of the door into the main room. Frost was lying back in his chair with a book open on the expanse of his stomach.

"What's the matter, Mr. Frost?"
"I'm being mad at Shakespeare."
"Why are you being mad at him?"
"He made it impossible for all the rest of us!"

That summer he wrote a long section of his poem *America is Hard to See* in my copy of his poems, and it led to the one example of which I am aware that Frost let someone else talk him out of a good line of poetry. Years later he told me as we were on a long drive that he had read the Columbus poem, including the lines

He might have fooled them in Madrid.
I was deceived by what he did.

At a university, and at a party afterward, a history professor had said, "I'm surprised at you, Mr. Frost, for such bad history. The capital of Spain in 1492 wasn't Madrid." Frost worried about that the rest of the evening. The next day, he saw the same man and said, "I can change the line if you think it would be better: "He could have fooled Valladolid." The professor wisely admitted that Frost's original line, though inaccurate, was far superior. To the mystification of most of his friends, however, Frost himself later changed the line to reflect the more historical truth, much to the loss of the poem itself.

That same summer in a talk at Breadloaf he started off with comments on the habit of tearing apart a poem for critical reasons and even dissecting individual parts. "Sometimes if we like the whole, we have to cheat ourselves on the parts." This led into a long discussion of what he always called "Correspondence": whether a reader can get the poet's images or feel the antennae the poet puts out. His example was his image in a poem about late fall: "The banks had not yet grown together." Does the reader feel the image of ice growing out from the banks that way? If not, the reader should not worry about it. It just doesn't work for him. Obviously the writer cannot worry about that sort of thing when he writes the poem. Both sides simply have to admit that at that point there is no correspondence and go on.

For the next two years I was away in Scotland, but when I returned to the States, I and my new Irish bride had lunch with him, and he got off on his usual remarks about Pound and the way the group around him rewrote each other's poetry. He went on to say that you can't judge modern poetry. "It's what you like or don't." He said he thought Eliot was far above all the rest, especially his followers. I asked him what he thought of the *Four Quartets*, and he neatly dodged the

question. Later he asked me, "Did you notice how I didn't answer you about Eliot?" I must say that through the years of talks, he never did engage in criticism of any contemporary poems. His comments, both those of criticism and praise, were about the poets themselves, not about any of their works in particular. Or where there was talk about a given poem, such as *Burnt Norton*, the criticism was of a philosophical nature rather than strictly poetic.

Later that summer several of us spent an afternoon with him. He spent some time talking politics, but as was usual when he got on that subject, he soon shifted to religion. This afternoon he seemed more against the church than usual. He got off on to the mystics and said that there was a good deal of unhealthy psychology mixed up in their actions. I told him I had always been bothered by the mysticism or otherworldliness in someone like St. Teresa, as it was always mixed with a somewhat too hard business head. Frost agreed, but Pardon Tillinghast, who was also there, with his high church Anglican position, disagreed strongly, much to Frost's amusement.

Frost said that he had been at a gathering with John Crowe Ransom some time before. As they were talking, Allen Tate wandered up, having changed to the Roman Catholic Church, and then Auden, having become High Church Anglican. The foursome was finally joined by a Catholic priest, with "much fathering all around." Frost said he turned to the priest and said, "I trust that you're not a convert." The priest was "a good fellow and laughed and said, no, he wasn't." Frost replied, "Let's shake on not being converts," and they did, much to the annoyance of Tate and Auden. Frost said that day and many other times that he couldn't stand converts to anything. Then followed a line that I heard from him often in many different contexts: "I want to go to Hell in my own way." Usually it took the form of the dictum: "Everyone has a right to go to Hell in his own way." This time he carried his remarks a bit further and commented on his opposition to current passport restrictions, linking them with the silliness of laws against suicide. "A person ought to have the right to leave when he wants to."

That winter I had him come to the University of Vermont to give a talk. He started out by saying that the poet and the reader were not democratic but intellectual equals, which is necessary for the "play." He said that he always tried in a poem "to play with something I trust the reader already knows." Then he invited the audience to play with him. He said he probably came to that approach from nursery rhymes and children's songs. He pointed out that nursery rhymes always had two levels: the one the children got and the deeper one that the adult

got. He made it clear that he didn't have anything Freudian in mind by that. He gave the example of

Pussycat, pussycat, where have you been?

I've been to London to see the coronation.

(Elizabeth's coronation had taken place less than two years before this talk)

Pussycat, pussycat, what did you see there?

I saw a mouse run under a chair.

The point, Frost said, was that you didn't see anything you couldn't see in Vermont. "This is a very profound poem. It's against foreign travel."

He then moved on to familiar ground: he played with the difference between "freedom of" and "freedom from." The first was good; the second bad. He said he wrote in rhythm and rhyme because he wanted the freedom of them, just as he wanted the freedom of the dictionary and grammar and syntax—and colloquial speech. Later in the evening, as he was saying his poems, he repeated "The Silken Tent" twice and said it was a good example of what he meant by "freedom of." Someone asked him about his own writing habits. He said he figured that he had about 600 poems covering 60 years, so he had averaged about 10 a year. "I don't write by the day or week—probably by the year." He said that he always tried to hold back after writing a poem before he started on a new one so that he didn't repeat himself, but this led to the problem of always being slightly rusty when he set out to write a new one. He said he couldn't live near other writers because "I always feel ashamed when they ask me what I did last night—probably nothing!" Wilfrid Gibson, one of his English friends who wrote the best description of Frost as a conversationalist in "The Golden Room" used to ask that kind of question until Frost decided on a plan to escape the daily inquisition. He told Gibson he was writing an epic, and when Gibson asked what he had been doing, Frost would tell him what chapter he had reached. He then said something I never heard him say before or after: "I'm getting ambitious nowadays." He said he found that he wished some of his rivals were dead.

Poets die young. Some of them into philosophers, some into teachers, some into critics. Most just die." His explanation: "They lack the driving force to write." Some just give in to economic necessity. He said that if he had a lot of money to give, he'd do it in the form of small life-time salaries that wouldn't support the poets completely but would take away the danger of starvation—"see if that helped." He talked some about John Masefield, the British Poet Laureate, and his death in the form of becoming a national figure. "When he first started writing poetry that was published, his family bought up all the copies in the area so that no one would be able to get one."

He said that Eliot was unquestionably the best of the whole group of obscure poets, but he criticized him for neglecting "the all-important matter of sound poetry—except 'The Hollow Men.' He plays the game there." And then he added "Prufrock." He said he doubted whether any of the four quartets were poetry by that standard. He said someone had read him a section of the quartets the other day, "and it's not poetry. It's a prose section on an idea, and not a very good idea. The trouble is that it isn't even his. He's got it worked out that without space there's no time." Frost continued, "He's got it worked out—but it's not his."

The next morning at breakfast he got on to the Civil War. He said he admired Grant and his ability to see the whole war; Lee only saw the fight of the sovereign state of Virginia. This discussion slid into one of the longer religious statements I heard from him. He said, "There isn't any atheist. It doesn't take long before you can find what a person really believes in. If a man really were an atheist, the only logical conclusion would be suicide. The main cause of real depression is when a man puts his God in terms of power." He said he once got into an argument with two people on the Civil War, one of whom, a Northerner, had a father who helped command Negro troops in the war, and the other, a woman, a Southerner, who was rabid on the subject, whose father was a bishop. He asked them which side God was on. The woman said a bishop ought to know about that, and he said God was on the Southern side—Frost added, "but they lost."

He spoke about the Lord's Prayer and said he had been thinking about it recently—how strange it was: "Lead us not into temptation." "After all, that is the devil's business, not God's. You have the jobs mixed up. It's immoral to suggest God would do it." And "Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven." "If His kingdom comes on earth, what need would there be of a heaven?" I brought up the scariness of praying that our sins be forgiven as we forgive others, as we really didn't stand a chance if He forgave us only that much. Frost agreed—and there was no chuckle in his response. He went on to say that "the mind rebels against the virgin birth." It was not the miracle that bothered him; it was the theological point that such a birth was only necessary to free Christ from original sin, which means that sex is sinful, and he couldn't accept that.

No mention of Frost's religious views would be complete without some example of his feelings of insecurity. Perhaps the best way to exemplify that would be a conversation we had while I was driving him across New England during the summer of 1955, after I had brought him to Colby College in Maine to give the graduation speech. The day

had been beautiful and continued to be, with marvelous views down across the White Mountains. The part of the conversation that sticks to me to this day more than anything else he ever said came during that drive. As we were driving down a long hill, he suddenly pointed out a farm at the bottom and said, "See that farm?" He then was quiet for over half an hour. When he broke his silence, it was to ask if I remembered the farm he had pointed to, and I said I did. He went on to explain that he owned it and that he had a daughter living on it. "She won't let me visit, though." The anguish in his voice was clear. He kept talking, however, explaining that he kept a couple employed to take care of her. He hoped that some day she would get over her bitterness towards him, but it was pretty obvious that he realized that in her psychological condition (extreme paranoia) she never would. Again there was a silence, followed by a phrase I had heard from him four years earlier: "I've skated on insecurity all my life, like thin ice."

A mutual friend of his and mine, Mrs. Claude Simpson, tells the story of being called one night up at Ripton by Kay Morrison, and being asked to visit Frost right away, as Kay said Frost was depressed and she was fearful. The Simpsons went up the cabin and talked about various things for several hours. When Frost saw them down to the car, he looked at them whimsically and said, "Kay sent you up, thinking I'd do something, didn't she?" No answer was required, and he turned and walked back up towards the cabin as they pulled off down the road.

A couple of summers later I spent a long time with Frost because of a grant I had on the teaching of the humanities in engineering schools. One part of our conversation touched on the subject of poetry, at least as it is a general part of literature. We were talking about not only the lack of effectiveness in getting across the greatness of works of literature in class, but even the negative effects that often resulted. Frost said that we read literature in order for a book to light up for us: "We read for the one time a book lights up for us. If we're lucky, maybe two or three times. Then we take all the books that have lit up men's lives and assign them so that they won't do it for our students." He had no solution for this dilemma that faces all teachers of literature—just a king of sorrow in his voice. His one suggestion was that we not manhandle the works, but let the students react on their own. Naturally, he quoted Wordsworth's "We murder to dissect."

In 1961 I brought Frost out to Case Institute of Technology, now part of Case-Western Reserve, to give another talk. His main thesis in that talk was that science was the only human enterprise—"a descent into matter." He noted that he had said that recently at a Catholic college, and it had bothered a Catholic priest. Frost took him on and

said that "God seemed to feel this way too—the center of Christianity was God's descent into matter. Wasn't that what the Incarnation was about?" Back on the track of his talk, he said that it always had to be remembered who was doing the science: "me—in other words, man. And the keeping in mind of this relationship was the business of the humanities. He said that he "reserved the right to kid the scientists about reaching the moon until they got there." He went on at some length saying that he was fed up with those who thought the age of heroism was dead, with space pilots around aiming for the moon and planets.

On science being the only human enterprise, he said, "So all real history is in almost a straight geographical line from the near east, let's say Sumeria, northwest to America. It's like a broad cinder track, and up to the present, it's been a race along that track. In our days, we've left the ground like a pole vault." As he did so often, he used Shakespeare's line on the star "Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken" to show the relationship of science and the humanities. Science can tell us about the star, but it takes humanities to discuss the worth.

My last conversation with Frost was on the day following that lecture, as I drove him down to Columbus, where he was giving another talk that night. He was still in good shape and talked almost all of the way, showing no signs of weariness. He did get tired of driving, though, and after lunch at Howard Johnson's he wanted to walk around for nearly half an hour. At one point, after he had been quiet for about ten minutes, he said, "One of the signs of friendship is being able to be quiet together. I don't feel I have to talk when I'm with you."

But talk he did. At one point we got on to Wallace Stevens, and Frost said that Stevens was "frequently under the influence. One night at a party, he said to me, 'The trouble with you, Robert, is that you write on subjects.'" (Frost imitated Stevens' slurred speech to illustrate his point.) Frost answered, "The trouble with you, Wallace, is that you write on bric-a-brac." When Stevens' next edition of poems came out, he sent Frost a copy by mail with a remark on the front page, "S'more brick-a-brac." He said that he once visited Stevens in his Hartford insurance office, whose walls were covered with past insurance company presidents. Frost asked, "Is this your school of poets?" Stevens didn't think it was very funny. But Frost always talked about Stevens with affection, at least to me, even though he obviously didn't like Stevens' kind of obscure poetry.

He was bothered by another subject that I had not known about, the controversial birthday party given by Holt. But he got into it by a

back door. He talked about two Ripton boys who had come out to Cleveland with Major Scott, the aide to Newton D. Baker (Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of War), because Scott thought them bright lads. After a couple of months they came into his office one day and said they wanted to go back to Ripton because there were "no mountains to look up against." Scott told them that he had always done what he wanted to and urged them to do the same. Frost said he didn't really feel this way (although I can remember several times that he had said he needed "a mountain to throw my mind up against"). He said he enjoyed one part of the country about as much as another—he could "take either city or town or country."

Then he got to his point. He said he had been very embarrassed at a recent birthday party at Holt's at which Lionel Trilling gave the address. Trilling had started out by saying that the city poet was the poet of our time, while Frost was a country poet. Then he talked about Frost's poetry and said that his greatest poetry had a dark side. Frost said that when he got up afterwards to read, he "had to flip through the book wildly, trying to find some dark poems." He said that everyone apparently felt ill at ease, which was certainly true from other reports.

In his talk about the relationship of science and humanities the night before, he had made several religious remarks that showed a closer relation with orthodox Christianity than he had formerly done. He got back on the subject again in the car, and he went back to the topic that he had touched on at breakfast in Vermont. "In spite of all the wonderful stories in Christianity and its emotional drawing power, the reason sticks at two things and won't allow the mind to accept them: the first is that one man's sin would cause the downfall of all men. The Adam story of temptation is a true one for each person, for we all have choices to make, and we all make the wrong ones. And then it is clear that we can't make amends on our own. God has to take the initiative to get us back to Him. But to make Adam the cause of our sin is wrong. The second is the idea of the immaculate conception or the Virgin birth. We can't believe that having children is sinful, and that's the only reason for the doctrine — to get Christ born without sin."

The last note I have put down of my conversations with Frost was of the continuation of that discussion. I told him of an all-night session I had had in a cottage on Delaware Bay years before with an aging atheist. He had said that as far as he was concerned, the only possible prayer for a believer was "Thy Will be done." Frost thought about it a while and then said, "No, the greatest prayer was 'I believe. Help Thou my unbelief.'"

Another mutual friend, Jonathan Aldrich, as a young poet used to house sit at the Homer Noble Farm when the Morrises were away. Jonathan was, even then, a fine poet, and Frost had said some complimentary things about his poetry. One time he asked if Jonathan was going to keep at it. When Jonathan asked what that entailed, Frost answered, "To be a poet you have to believe something so hard that it would break your heart if it wasn't true."

JOSEPH HARRIS

The Man Who Died by Lightning

Next to the smoking tree,
he fell from mundane tasks
into the select dimension
of those in ancient times
who knew heaven's fire.

Into what courts did he bolt
through time's thin fabric,
like some pilgrim rocket
from familiar to the unknown,
fire-chosen and elect of the gods.

Are auguries here, with texts
of death's dusty riddle never
found on meteorological charts?
Does heaven select her company
always by the dice of chance?

When he fell with earth's
taste still strong on his tongue,
was this the host of a last
communion, an act of grace;
the quick absolution of fire?

MALCOLM GLASS

Flaws

Somewhere in this poem is a flaw
or two, hidden carefully like a thread
whipped inside. Weeds, the fronds of palms
and ferns, leaves fallen at four a. m.
(or any hour), thicken the ground, and you
must look quite closely to detect mistakes—
which may number more than two by now,
quickly whisked under the rug. Your eyes
scan along the edge to catch the central
error as it separates to rise
in your peripheral vision. You weed and mow
the words with analytical wit. You rake
the blades and, un-pro prospector-like, pick through
to find the chip of glass, the worthless gem.
With shards and errors exposed, you sit back calm
and satisfied; but heed this warning: read
it through again; you haven't found them all.

St. Lawrence Skiff

That foghorn again sounds
over this transparent wind.
How long shadows stretch out
the waves shivering close
on this frozen ocean spectrum.
As if caught in flight
a dozen gulls knot into harbor
breaking company
with all earthly reality
yet sparkling a mysterious echo
over the sea-side green.

Whale Watching

In cold blinding crystal waters
the sea still haunts its gulls.
Our spiritsail is friendless
morning offering attentive wings
to birds crackling burly coats
along the ocean's stillest voice.
Here is a flight of strangers
in the black-blue form of foam
mirages cut away from the sea
in the ocean cloudy terror.

**TENNESSEE WILLIAMS
1911 - 1983
A TRIBUTE**

**St. Louis Cathedral • Jackson Square • New Orleans
19 March 1983 - 4 p.m.**

J.S. Bach, *Fantasy in G Major* - Timothy Wilson, organist

Invocation *Biblical Scripture* - Rev. Robert Pawell, O.F.M.

Bach, *I Plead to Thee, Lord Jesus Christ*

An Appreciation: *the Poet as Playwright* - W. Kenneth Holditch

Bach, *Three Preludes*

***Readings from Tennessee Williams* - Sylvia Miles**

**Bach, *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desire* - University of New Orleans Chorale,
Gerald A. Sousa, Director**

Prayer *Ecclesiastes III* - The Rev. Sidney Lanier

Hymn *Abide With Me* - Lillian Boutté

Bach, *Prelude & Fugue in G Major (The Little)*

W. KENNETH HOLDITCH
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ORLEANS

Tennessee Williams: Poet as Playwright

Those cathedral bells, which summon us to worship, to celebrate, or to grieve, have become for those of us who live within range of their sound, a symbol, an essential part of life, so often heard that we hear them unaware, like the beating of our heart. The French Quarter, rich as it is in history and legend and the multi-faceted variety of its people and its sites, is, of course, full of symbols. Some of these we can find for ourselves, no matter how literal-minded or unimaginative or lacking in creativity we may be, no matter how caught up in the problems of everyday life; but others demand the acuteness of vision, the sensitiveness of consciousness, and the genius of the articulate voice to be discovered and appropriately expressed. These are the qualities of the poet, and we gather here today to honor such a man; such a poet: rare—in every meaning of that word—as poets always are. How appropriate then that we should be gathered beneath those bells, which will continue to ring not only for those of us fortunate enough to live within their sound—a blessing and a summons and a joy—but also for those outside the periphery of their sound; and why? Because a poet has made them a symbol in his work, has called the world's attention to those particular bells. And that, of course, is the purpose of a poet, among other purposes, to find and define and identify and point out to the rest of us the symbols to which we should attend; to make us look at the world around us in a new way, to see the richness in that which we, alas, may have come to take for granted.

How many millions of ears and eyes do you imagine heard and saw that "rattle-trap streetcar" named Desire without a second thought until one poet shaped it into a metaphor for the human condition? How many millions traveled that undistinguished avenue called, with inflated hopes, Elysian Fields; how many heard those cathedral bells—without exalting avenue and bells into symbols? How many? And then one man came along, one simple and very complex man, one poet, and pointed out to the rest of us, caught up in our mundane lives, that they existed and that they meant something. That is what a poet does. That is what Tennessee Williams did. To take the ordinary and make it special; that is the task and the privilege of a poet. Now we can never again travel that avenue or see a streetcar or hear those bells without having our consciousness raised, because the poet has so well done his job.

I do not think that Tennessee thought of what he was doing as a job; I do not think that he thought, consciously, "I am being a poet," or "I am not being a poet," for that is not the way of poets. But a poet he was. I do not have to prove that to this audience, I am sure, for you would not be here if you did not realize the value of the man we here honor. We know that bells and the streetcar and the avenue named Elysian Fields, and all those other objects and locales and persons which he brought to life in his dramas have become symbols not just to those of us who live within the sphere of their existence, but for all the literate and reading and playgoing world. His name is Tennessee Williams. His fame—I don't have to tell you that: he is the great American playwright. He is the poet.

Why? Well, because he has taken those bells and that rattling street-car and that undistinguished avenue and that simple, sad collection of glass animals, and made them into symbols, when no one else had noticed them, or commented on the fact that they meant something. Because he knew human suffering, and he described it, dramatized it; he knew human pain and he described it and dramatized it; and he knew human joy in its multiple forms, sometimes simple, sometimes complex, and he acknowledged them all and certified them all and celebrated them all. He touched us, each of us, in a special way. From the day of his death until this day in which we honor him, I have been told repeatedly, by young and old, by student and teacher, by conventional and unconventional, by liberal and conservative, "You know, when Tennessee Williams died, I felt that I had lost a member of my family." Why?

Why? I don't *know* the answer for all of you; I don't know the individual reasons why each of you is here, but I think that you are probably here as I am here because Tennessee Williams spoke to you in his work in a unique way, and although many of you never met the man in person—though certainly some of you did—he lived sometimes in our midst and worshiped on occasion in this cathedral—you feel as though some of those lines, so memorable and so beautiful and so painfully true, were written just for you, just for you alone. And they were.

How appropriate, then, that we gather beneath those bells to honor and to grieve and to celebrate the man, the playwright, the poet. To honor the incredible achievement of the man who brought new life to the American theater and, indeed, to the theaters of the world; who over a period of forty-five years in play after play, story after story, poem after poem, held the mirror up to nature, showed man his faults and his weaknesses and his glory. To grieve his passing, the passing of

one of the last of the titans of our literature; "We shall not see his like again." But most of all, I think, to celebrate, as he would wish, the fact that he has left us all a legacy too rich to be measured by lawyers, the gifts of his genius, those poetic lines wrought out in the pain and anguish of the creative act. So he lives on, in a way not vouchsafed to many men or women, in those works, for I believe, with all my heart, that as long as there are theaters in the world and audiences to fill them, the works of Tennessee Williams, those immortal characters and lines and scenes, will be recreated. No finer tribute could any man wish. No finer legacy could any man leave.

Tennessee's fellow poet, fellow genius, fellow Mississippian, William Faulkner observed that it is the duty of the poet to write about man's compassion and sacrifice and endurance, and I need not name for you the characters of Tennessee's plays that exemplify just those qualities. Faulkner continued in one of his most famous utterances that it is the poet's "privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail."

My point, then, if it needed to be, is proven. Tennessee Williams is a poet. An abiding concern in his work was always that urge to life and exalt the spirit of man. Remember that scene in *Summer and Smoke* when Alma remarks to John that "All of us live in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars." She is, of course, quoting Oscar Wilde, who, one hundred years ago last summer visited in this very cathedral, and what she voices is one of the recurrent themes of the poet Williams was. It is a romantic theme—he called himself, you recall, romantic puritan on one occasion—and it is the theme we encounter over and over in the works of the great romantic poets, John Keats for example. Because it is a great poem and a favorite of mine and because it is appropriate to this solemn occasion and because, as I have learned recently, it was Tennessee's favorite poem, I would like, if you will indulge me, to read to you Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," which beautifully and poignantly exemplifies that desire to transcend, to move upward toward the stars, to flee from the gutter and soar among those birds, perhaps, that breathe celestial air:

Ode to a Nightingale

I

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness, —
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of Beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

II

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

III

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs;
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow.

IV

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
 Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
 But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
 Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
 Already with thee! tender is the night,
 And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
 Clustered around by all her starry Fays;
 But here there is no light,
 Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
 Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

V

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
 Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
 But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
 Wherewith the seasonable month endows
 The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
 White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
 Fast fading violets covered up in leaves;
 And mid-May's eldest child,
 The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
 The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

VI

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
 I have been half in love with easeful Death,
 Called him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
 To take into the air my quiet breath;
 Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
 To cease upon the midnight with no pain
 While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
 In such an ecstasy!
 Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
 To thy high requiem become a sod.

VII

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

VIII

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fabled to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

Keats was right, of course, but great poets often are. The poet and the musician and the artist can lift us out of ourselves, out of the tedious cares of everyday life, but only briefly; then we must return to the world. But we are all the better for having been taken away, for having been exalted. That is what Keats could do; that is what Tennessee Williams could do and will continue to do, though he is no longer with us in the flesh. He was a man who had a seemingly infinite understanding of human suffering, an infinite sympathy for human weakness and his plays have, I believe, made many of us more human, more understanding, more sympathetic.

Tennessee Williams was a playwright without par among his contemporaries, without par among American dramatists; and he will endure because he was also a poet—an unbeatable combination, as William Shakespeare proved beyond question four centuries ago. I would like to close, then, with a poem by Tennessee that is also part of a play, a beautiful and touching commentary on the plight of many by Nonno, the aging poet, who is on the verge of death. It is his last poem, his farewell, his valedictory to the world. From *Night of the Iguana*, Nonno's last poem:

Nonno's Last Poem

How calmly does the orange branch
Observe the sky begin to blanch
Without a cry, without a prayer,
With no betrayal of despair.

Sometime while night obscures the tree
The zenith of its life will be
Gone past forever, and from thence
A second history will commence.

A chronicle no longer gold,
A bargaining with mist and mould,
And finally the broken stem
The plummeting to earth; and then

An intercourse not well designed
For beings of a golden kind
Whose native green must arch above
The earth's obscene, corrupting love.

And still the ripe fruit and the branch
Observe the sky begin to blanch
Without a cry, without a prayer,
With no betrayal of despair.

O Courage, could you not as well
Select a second place to dwell,
Not only in that golden tree
But in the frightened heart of me?

The Linens

talk by touch: "we care. We are here,"
the way nurses talk
right by our sides,
smelling like wash.

Tablecloths are numbered among them.
blankets and quilts.
Pillows are cousins.

The ones that touch our bodies everyday
are dry and bright
and put us at ease.

politeness itself.

Aren't they like the kiss
when you were small and sick
that your grandmother gave you
after she had done changing your bed?

Each laundering linens are born again
like plates
like us
as if we'd never been used.

They are boasts of cleanliness
imperishable as
housekeeping is.

They are folded away
roots in the dark
ready to come up
in the useful sunshine
and open in broad flat footages.

Linens are
a steady hand on your wrist
benevolent and tranquil.

The Grey Men Under the House

Night after night we later knew we'd heard
them under our sleep—grey men we finally saw
selfless as children, afraid themselves, invisible
in the avenues—doomed to listening harder than kings
in the dust below our rooms, in the hot darkness
where the words of our stories and our steps
were known like familiar thoughts. They crawled
for their rest and were glad, their wine pungent
as the dank air of their sleep/sounds. We barely heard
the growth of their breathing; then we flushed them out
and threatened them with Law until they shrank
before us. We nailed the door and slept harder
than ever, remembering only their young eyes, burned,
their rosey-ashen fawning, their birdlike hands.

ANTHONY MERCER

Eighth Grade Review

She assembled her photographic
history on the quilt-covered bed
like an Indian reading the future
in stone chips on a flat patch of earth.

She was orienting the photos,
turning them this way and that
and rearranging the order
to obtain azimuth.

She knew nothing of the girl, really,
could not tell if she was hiding
a bruised knee, a deserved scolding,
or wishing death on someone.

She was sinful, she knew, in all
the photos, for there is always Original Sin
if no others are available, no matter how
good she tried to look.

She wished she could release this girl,
let her walk freely through a library,
reborn on a cutting room floor
so that her fanciful legs would never
have to ache with anxiety
or her face redden with shame.

No, she decided, they were not her
photos. It was father
she saw in her face,
holding a silver water eye
below the brown hair of his forehead.

He was holding a pool between his hands,
looking through its depths at her,
and she was longing to leap through
to the clear of heaven.

LEE MEITZEN GRUE

The Great Southern Roach War

Friday, July 11th, at home, New Orleans, Louisiana.

My wife went away. She went to Las Vegas on a Court Reporter's convention. She is in pursuit of continuing education in the form of C.E.U's, small units of credit in her field, which is court reporting. My wife is afraid computers will replace her, which is a legitimate concern. She left in a bit of a huff. I had made a passing remark about housecleaning. I said, innocently, "I could clean this pigsty without ever missing a step." Mona said, "Do it," and left.

I am temporarily without gainful employment, alone with the roaches. In our house the roaches are rampant: *Raging and unchecked* is the dictionary definition of *rampant*. A sudden interest in genealogy has led me, in my spare time, to a study of Heraldry. I have been drawing a coat of arms for our future descendants: rampant roaches with a dominant shield, an uplifted arm and large hand, aimed downward, clutching a can of *No Roach*, index finger on the button.

Mona has often remarked proudly, "You live in Louisiana? You got roaches." I don't see it that way.

July 12th

I don't know why I moved South. Peoria, Illinois, may sound dull to many people, but I now remember the cold, the oatmeal, the placid existence with twinges of sweet nostalgia. What I remember most is what I don't remember at all: the roach. I'm sure there are roaches in Peoria, but they don't own real estate; they are not accepted at the country club; and they are not insolent on buses.

It was my sophomore year in the Navy when I discovered decadence and believed it superior to the work ethic with which I had been reared. At that time, the idea of staying up all night had a certain raffish charm. I can remember, vaguely, spending a weekend in a bar on Decatur Street called "The Blue Crystal," tended by a warmhearted creature named Mary, who sported a wooden arm. I was alternately drinking Hurricanes, and throwing them up into a continually flushing toilet, where a large cockroach was swimming contentedly. Surely, I should have suspected then, the roach is a sturdy species.

Yesterday, at the Merry-go-round Bar of The Sierra Leone Motel, where I had retired in hopes of glimpsing feminine persons and a little *vive la bagatelle*, I sat upon my favorite black stallion, *Blatta*, and ordered a Ramos Gin Fizz. As I drank my Fizz and revolved slowly with the bar, which moves around completely once every fifteen minutes, I

saw another imbibor of Gin Fizzes ride out of the darkness on a black bear. A person of some corpulence and large black moustaches, he rode the ungainly beast with remarkable grace and ease. There were only the two of us and the bartender, no bright plumaged birds of the night, and no games of chance, a fact I remarked upon to the bear rider. He said, "O.K. Me too," in heavily accented English.

As the evening wore on, we became quite chummy, I mentioned my wife's departure, her lack of domestic accomplishment, and my home's constant roach infestation. He was sympathetic. A wonderful storyteller, he described the giant, indestructible cockroaches of Turkey, a country of which he was native. As we were talking, a small German cockroach strolled across the bar. My friend killed it with his bare hand. I was amazed, but then remembered the Turks are fierce, no-quarter soldiers. He said, "It is a Greek roach. Ancient enemy." After performing this feat, he gave me a sure cure for roaches: Turkish Delight, a boric acid cookie. "My mother's recipe," he said. "Boric acid and goat's milk. Make into sweet by sugar." Remarkable. I shared the recipe with the bartender. He said, "They'll love it." I find this fatalistic Southern attitude disgusting.

I have made four batches of Turkish delight and deposited them in drawers in the kitchen. I look forward to an 8 a.m. body count.

July 13th

The body count was disappointing. Only eight dead. Death could have come from old age or traffic accident. Today I received a postcard from my wife. It was a beautiful picture of a bank of slot machines in the MGM hotel. My wife was born in South Louisiana: she thinks the slot machine is high technology, equal in importance to the moon shot and the invention of penicillin. The card said: "Having a wonderful time. Saw Lola Falana, Redd Fox and Connie Francis, ate Chicken Divan with green peas, knee to knee with fourteen lovely people. Lost \$300. Wish you were here. Love, Mona."

July 14th

Today, I went to Bell Supermarket and bought twelve Roach Hotels. Each has a picture of Mohammed Ali on it, his first is in the air in a gesture of victory. The label says "The contents of this package are not poisonous. The interior of the Roach Hotel is treated with a sweet, sticky substance irresistible to roaches." I think it's honey. The hotels cost two dollars and fifty-nine cents apiece, but what price glory? Mornings have not been good. As I sip my first Scotch, even before reading *Executive Job Search*, while I wait for my Oro-wheat bran toast to pop up, at least ten little brown beasties flee the hot toaster. I smash them on the formica counter-top with a broad truncheon I bought from Gendusa Security.

July 15th

I think the cat dishes draw them. I promised Mona I'd feed the cats, but sometimes the dishes are left on the floor afterwards. Little crusts of residual Puss and Boots line the sides of the green plastic bowls. At night roaches herd like wild animals around a watering hole. They also gather on the handles of the pots soaking in the sink. When Mona was here they would flee when she turned on the light in the kitchen, but now, ominously, they remain feeding.

The tom cat, Harry, has not been home for days, I think he's cleared out, only Mama Cat is left. Temporarily, she is in a deflated condition, non-footballish, her sides sunken in. Her personality is uncharacteristically pleasant, so I reward her by opening a can of expensive cat food. She doesn't like it, and leaves to defecate in some obscure corner, which is impossible to clean, but well within reach of my nose. Mama Cat doesn't like me, but she's been known to eat cockroaches. There is some good in everyone.

July 16th

Recently, I read an article in *The Christian Science Monitor* about German roaches, the little brown ones which are everywhere. The article said they are evolutionally superior. They now live in Antarctica and are destined to survive nuclear holocaust. They multiply rapidly, have shells which are attack resistant, and they can slip through any crack and will eat anything. I wrote a letter to Mona saying "Come home, Mona." But before I could get my message to the post office, the roaches ate the glue off the stamp and it fell off the letter.

I feel a profound depression, a lack of control over my environment. In this world there is nothing a thinking man can do.

July 19th

I lost some time in bed, but feel better now. I've come to a real decision. Even for a peaceful man, defense of the home is a sacred committal, a Holy War.

Today I bought Professional Strength Roach Killer with a tank and roach gun. I got my gear from a guy who looked like Humphrey Bogart in "Key Largo." He said, "Listen, Sweetheart, this is a great little set-up: stainless steel tank, one handed pump, dual action for quick firing, and a straight muzzle—clean bore, deadly aim."

With difficulty, I loaded it into the car. I am not a hunter, and know little of weapons, but my resolve was lethal. I came into the house shooting in the grate of the floor furnace, luckily it was off, but I singed the toes of my right foot in a flame-thrower effect, when my weapon set off the pilot light. Ignoring this slight pain, I went on to the bedroom, where I shot my shoes out from under the bed, riddled the

edge of the mattress, then trained my sight on the night table, where roaches had danced in endless debauchery the night before. There, I accidentally sprayed the luscious body of Miss Candace Leventhal of Hartford, Connecticut, a centerfold and teacher of handicapped children. War is War. I went through the house opening closets, shooting anything and everything. A raid on the bathroom zapped the T.P. and lathered the toothbrushes. Roaches love toothbrushes. They shine their little bellies on them while eating the tooth-paste. The medicine cabinet is now coated with petroleum based ooze reminiscent of primordial swamps and smelling like the Love Canal. War is hell. Mona's garden of recreational delight is gone with the wind, and I have turned to Southern Comfort.

July 20th

The enemy hides in the trees waiting for nightfall. Last night, huge roaches zoomed from drapery to drapery like vampires, the sound of their wings a harsh wind blowing the white curtains.

July 21st

This morning I heard someone yelling, "Mailman, mailman." It was the postman at the gate. He wouldn't come in. Asked, "Do you have a gas leak or something?" "No," I said, "just doing a little exterminating." He said, "Live and let live." And he gave me a card from Mona. Mona has decided to stay another week.

The card reads "High roller last night. Lost at roulette while waiting on Silver dollar pancakes for breakfast. Laissez bon temps roulez. See you on the 26th. Love, Mona."

I've seen Mona play a slot machine. There is *nothing* we've ever done together in which she participated with such abandon.

Nothing new in the job market. My scotch tastes funny. Less smoky, more like mescal. It burns going down. The outside of the bottle was a little oily, but I shined it up. I hated to spray the whiskey, but it was that or hit a roach with my bare hand. You have to be born here to do that. Mona can. The kitchen is crawling. You can't see the pattern in the congoleum. I may have to call in mercenaries.

July 22nd

Fred the Fixer is here. He looks like a survivor of bubonic plague, smallpox, and war in the Congo. I asked him and he says, "Naw, just 'Nam." He says he used to look up when they were spraying Agent Orange. He says when they were short of dope they used to drink Agent Orange. He says the stuff in the tank is Agent Orange. I ask him if it will hurt humans or pets. He says "Naw, you can spray it on food stuff." To prove it, he wets down a package of Mrs. White's Refined and Bleached Self-rising Flour. It rises. "See," he says, "it don't hurt

nothing. Good as it ever was." I believe him. I have to believe him. He is the liberating army.

July 23rd

Fred is going to bomb the house. He is sealing the doors and windows with polyethylene. I have been making expeditions into the interior to retrieve our provisions before all is sealed away for the duration. I have four bottles of Scotch, two of Vodka, one of Southern Comfort, and a bottle of Cherry Heering. I have settled, for a moment, on the patio steps to write in my journal and toast the holocaust. Fred has set off three timed devices in the house: one in the kitchen, one in the bathroom, and one in the living room. He returns to my side. There is a moment of incredible silence, then the plastic on the doors and windows puffs out and crackles. Fred says, "I need a drink, buddy." I offer him a Scotch, but he declines saying "Do you have anything 150 proof?" I lie and say "I did, but the roaches drank it." That did it. Now he's gone berserk. Rushing out into the patio with fixed bayonet, he charges the bamboo. I cheer him on from the bleachers. He gets them on the run, big suckers coming up from the shelters in the flower beds, big so and so's running for their lives. The ground is covered, a prodigious sight. It's moving, like the time in New Mexico, when driving across the desert I saw dark waves approaching, tarantulas on the move, wave after wave of tarantulas rolling across the desert. The same here. I take another swig out of the bottle, but they don't go away like the tarantulas. They aren't fleeing the patio; they're advancing on the house!

"Fred," I shout, but he is drunk with rage. He sprays the fish pond. Two ornamental carp surface gasping, then turn belly up on the pond. Fred, looking for survivors, is flipping over bricks with the point of his spray gun. One big guy lunges at Fred, but Fred gets him with the bayonet.

"Fred," I yell, "we've got to make our stand in the house, The bomb won't hurt humans, pets, or property. Let's take cover inside." Fred has a dazed look on his face, but my words are effective, he seems to come to. "I hear you, buddy." He splits the plastic with his bayonet. I dive into the lung-searing smoke while Fred covers my exit with a fine mist. He backs into the house still spraying the climbing roses. A wise move. The big ones are scaling the rosebush oblivious to thorns.

July 25th

Fred and I have been holed up for days, coughing and telling the stories of our lives. I like the dark, but here, like the inside of the refrigerator, a light is always burning.

Roaches are nocturnal creatures; the light keeps them away. Fred has built a redoubt of furniture. I have my bottle of Scotch and my journal. Fred has a pack of Camels and a gun. We smoke and talk quietly, waiting for the big attack. You really get to know a man under these conditions. Occasionally, Fred shoots out of the window. It's kept the outside roaches down.

July 26th

The phone rings. It's a telegram from Mona. They tried to deliver it, but thought nobody was home. I told them I'd been home all along. The man at the telegraph office reads the message aloud: "big winner stop eastern flight 509 stop 3 p.m. friday the 27th stop did you feed cats stop love mona stop." Typical Mona. More than ten words.

As I stand at the telephone, I can survey the battlefield through the window. The enemy has been decimated. Brown roses droop above the puce leaves, like dead sentinels; the skeletons of bamboo stand over the corpse of the fish pond where carp float on the black water. I realize, suddenly, there is not going to be a big attack. They're gone. I've saved my home as surely as one-eyed General Kutuzov saved Moscow from Napoleon. They've retreated, and they're never coming back. There is nothing for them to live on. We've fired the fields and burned Moscow. We are victorious.

Fred and I celebrate until 4 a.m. when the booze runs out. Fred doesn't like Cherry Heering, so I have to drink it myself. Fred staggers into the street with a three-day growth of beard. A brave man lost in a world that doesn't care. I'm proud to know him.

July 27th, 6 a.m.

I have a yearning for strong coffee. While pouring water through the top strainer of Mr. Coffee, I am racked by a sudden coughing spasm. I lean against the counter and notice there are dozens of small bodies on the strainer. I recover my breath and walk over to the sink to dump them in the garbage disposal; there, I stub my toe on something stiff and hard. I flip on the light. It's Mama Cat stretched out on the cold floor, an enormous cockroach caught in her teeth.

"Mama Cat," I whisper respectfully, "you died good. So long old girl."

I pick up the cat dishes and rinse off the oil. It's simply a mopping up operation now. No live ones. I sweep crisp remains into a neat pile around the cadaver of Mama Cat. I figure to pick them up with a dust pan, and tidy up the kitchen before Mona gets home. I begin humming, anticipating her delight when she walks in and realizes there are no roaches in our home. The poor girl has never been free before.

Holding my broom like a drum major's baton, I sing out in my rich

baritone, to the gurgle of Mr. Coffee, a triumphant burst of sheer happiness:

Old Roach Brown's body lies a mould'ring in the grave.

Old Roach Brown's body lies a mould'ring in the grave.
while we go—marching—on.

A small brown roach with an egg case scurries from the warmth of Mr. Coffee. I slap her with my bare hand, but I miss.

ENID S. SHOMER

The Startle Effect

I have tamed logic
to a pet. The rhetoric
of cause/effect bores me.
If I have picked a thousand
perfect blue irises,
it is the imperfect
white one I want.
If I have read philosophy
which snares me in its net,
it is the unpredicted snag
I like that tears the mesh.

The startle effect is
what I want: suddenly to see
the dictionary on the
library stand open its wings
to "L" and fly off
like a long-legged bird.
I want to stare at the sea
and see nipples streaming
sea-milk where ordinary
whitecaps rummage the shore.

I want a story with
no characters, no plot, no verbs,
only images blooming
from a poverty of words
like forced bulbs in shallow soil.
I want the sweet taste
of metaphor to melt,
achingly as chocolate
on my tongue.

ROGER WAYNE-WRIGHT

No Answer in Pledges

Finding no answer in pledges
which are always spoken by you
to see if they can really float
on the sea of insincerity

There is no truth in your affirmation
of love or loyalty or the inflection
your voice makes does not convince
the bewildered prince on a pinnacle
shadowed in a crooked doubt formed
like a gigantic question mark

There is never any solace without you
even though with you there are second thoughts
about us nothing that does not speak
against us making it apart or together
surely something could be made to work
like a pick to pick a lock with
something expediently convenient

Finding no peace without you in heart
yet in head no comfort is found from you
that linger in thoughts unattainable
wishfulness creating confusion wondering
what you are in reality outside mocking dreams

PHILIP CASTILLE
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From Pontchartrain to Yoknapatawpha: Faulkner's Mosquitoes

Lake Pontchartrain has long been celebrated in folktale and lyric, from the Indian tribes—among them Tangipahoa, Houma, and Biloxi—who first inhabited its shores to modern balladeers such as Hank Williams, singer of "On the Banks of the Old Pontchartrain." The lake has also served as part of the necessary exposition of many New Orleans novels, beginning with the French classic *Manon Lescaut* (1731), in which the heroine dies near its sandy perimeter. But perhaps the most extended, if static, literary use of Lake Pontchartrain is in William Faulkner's second novel, *Mosquitoes*.

Faulkner's first period of residence in New Orleans came during the first half of 1925, when he was twenty-seven years old. He lived in the French Quarter and supported himself by selling freelance sketches and stories. During this period Faulkner participated in several outings on Lake Pontchartrain. On one occasion, according to Joseph Blotner, he joined a group that rented a yacht to motor across the lake to an amusement park near Mandeville, Louisiana (*Faulkner: A Biography* [New York: Random House, 1974], I, 453). Engine trouble caused the craft to drift close to the swampy north shore, and a fierce swarm of mosquitoes drove the party inside the cabin. This abortive expedition was the germ of the novel.

In the summer of 1925 Faulkner traveled to Paris and began *Mosquitoes* while living in the Latin Quarter. However, he quickly tired of this New Orleans-based narrative, probably because of greater European attractions at hand. He took up a number of other writing projects which occupied him during the remainder of his tour through the Continent and Great Britain. Not until the summer of 1926, when he was again on the Gulf Coast (in Pascagoula, Mississippi), did he resume his Lake Pontchartrain novel. He finished it in September and sent it to Boni and Liveright, who had brought out his first novel, *Soldiers' Pay*, seven months earlier. *Mosquitoes* appeared in the spring of 1927.

The plot opens at dusk on a late August afternoon in New Orleans. The main action begins the next day and mostly occurs on board the yacht *Nausikaa*. A group of passengers drawn from the French Quarter art colony is bound for the amusement park at Mandeville. After a one-day voyage across Lake Pontchartrain, the *Nausikaa* nears its destination. However, when one of the passengers tampers with the steering gear, the yacht drifts aground on a spit near the mouth of the

Tchefuncte River (spelled Tchufuncta in the novel), several miles west of Mandeville. It remains aground for three days. After repairs are made and the yacht is again afloat, the *Nausikaa* returns to New Orleans without having reached Mandeville.

In isolating a group of artists, would-be artists, would-be patrons, quacks, and misfits on a grounded yacht going nowhere, Faulkner is plainly attempting allegory. *Mosquitoes* amounts to a reworking of the Narrenschiff legend, the old tale of the Ship of Fools. Since the late Middle Ages, writers have commonly used this conceit as a means of denouncing the folly and corruption of the world. *Mosquitoes* is written in this vein. Faulkner's second novel is an angry fable intended to reveal the failures and abuses of his age. As such it has much in common with Faulkner's first novel. It shares with *Soldiers' Pay* the central theme of the first phase of his novelistic career: an anguished and occasionally bitter belief in the decline of the modern spirit as a result of man's loss of a vital relationship with the natural world. In his writings of this period, Faulkner often appropriates imagery from ancient mythology to develop ironic parallels between the legendary past and the devalued present. He intends to show how the fertility ethic developed in ancient agricultural societies has been supplanted in modern society by the new cult of sterility. (For a thorough analysis of Faulkner's indebtedness to sources such as Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* as well as his awareness of "the mythical method" pioneered by Joyce and Eliot, see Margaret Yonce, "*Soldiers' Pay: A Critical Study of William Faulkner's First Novel*," Diss. Univ. of South Carolina 1971, pp 2-5, 52-56, 245 et passim.)

A central part of this strategy is the portrayal of characters who are somehow cut off from nature. They do not participate in its energy or in its endless capacity for renewal. They fall under the spell of abstractions (such as virginity) which oppose and distort the necessary processes of change, and they attempt to substitute their ideals for the content of the actual world. They are given to sexual frustration, despair, and self-destructiveness. The common outcome of their private defeats is the widespread collapse of man's vital faith in the power of life over death. As a result the modern world falls into impotence and stagnation. Faulkner's chief aim in *Mosquitoes* is to show the suppression of healthy sexuality by a society which has become disjoined from the forces of natural life and reproduction.

Faulkner's second novel carries a step further the derision of bisexuality and homoeroticism prevalent in *Soldiers' Pay*. In his first novel Faulkner mocks the post-World War I "Year of the Boy, male and female." In *Mosquitoes* he satirizes the Jazz Age generation, "A kind

of sterile race: women too masculine to conceive, men too feminine to beget' " (*Mosquitoes*, Laurel Ed. [New York, Dell, 1965], p. 209). In such a declined culture, there arises a false worship of androgyny, symbolized in the novel by the reverence which most of the characters pay to the sculptor Gordon's peculiar statue—the truncated torso of a woman without breasts—as well as by the curious attraction which Gordon and others feel for the slim and boyish Patricia Robyn, the statue's living counterpart.

From Gordon's point of view Patricia is "Sexless, yet somehow vaguely troubling" (21). Like Cecily Saunders, who epitomizes in *Soldiers' Pay* the sterile bisexuality of modern life and fashions, Patricia is a representative of sexual aberration and social chaos. She resembles Cecily in her slender and angular build, and she is also compared to a poplar (24), a tree of ceaseless agitation. Patricia is uneasy about her femininity and adopts masculine manners and styles. Her admiration for Gordon's strange statue is an indication of her essential sterility. When she first sees it, she stares in rapt attention saying " 'It's like me' " (21) and gesturing to the breastlessness of the marble. Moments later, caught up in an autoerotic reverie, she touches the torso, "Stroking it with slow desire" (25). This scene not only establishes that her admiration for the statue results from her fundamental narcissism, but also it anticipates her later homoerotic advances toward Jenny Steinbauer.

Patricia is actively pursued by Gordon—whose masculinity is acknowledged by everyone on board the *Nausikaa*—but she does not return his interest. The only man to whom she seems attracted is her twin brother Theodore. She woos and pursues him because he is the embodiment of herself—the same reason that Gordon's statue appeals to her. In her final scene in the novel, which occurs in New Orleans after the return of the *Nausikaa*, she tries to seduce her brother on the night before he is scheduled to leave for college. These actions appear motivated by a desire not for affection but for possession, and her ardor for him seems accounted for only by the self-love implied in symbology of twinship.

Patricia's sexuality is, at best, confused. The fact that to Gordon and others she expresses an ideal of femininity is a clear index of cultural unhealthiness. Her androgynous appeal represents a reversal of ancient images of feminine allure, which emphasize erotic power and procreative potential. These traits are represented in *Mosquitoes* by the sultry young New Orleans woman, Genevieve Steinbauer, whose characterization seems intended as a foil to Patricia's. Unlike Pat, Jenny is serene and sensual, and there is nothing doubtful about her

sexuality. As Richard P. Adams has suggested, "in Jenny we have a full-blown, if not overblown, version of the earth-mother image represented later by Lena Grove in *Light in August* and Eula Varner in *The Hamlet*" (*Faulkner: Myth and Motion* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968], p. 46). However, unlike earthbound Lena and Eula, inhabitants of Yoknapatawpha County, Jenny finds herself seaborne on Lake Pontchartrain. While she is marooned on the *Nausikaa*, Jenny is cut off from the fecund life of the Louisiana shore. This predicament is in keeping with the Ship of Fools allegory in *Mosquitoes*. By stranding his characters offshore, Faulkner seems to be suggesting that contemporary society has lost contact with the land and its timeless cycles of seasonal promise and renewal.

As a consequence the "world" of *Mosquitoes* is utterly static, a sterile realm of endless talk and inaction. Such a world has neither use nor reverence for an earth goddess. Thus, Jenny functions in *Mosquitoes* as a kind of earth goddess *manque*, a symbol for vitality and sexual potency who is without a land or a lover. The fact that Jenny cannot find a lover on board the *Nausikaa*, coupled with the defeminized appeal exerted by Patricia Robyn, is intended satirically to demonstrate the infirmity of a society in which the ancient reverence for fertility has given way to a modern culture of narcissism and androgyny.

Although Jenny is a woman of rife sensuality, she is repeatedly frustrated in her efforts to take a lover. On at least four occasions Jenny tries to give herself to one of the men on the yacht, yet her offers go unaccepted. Each of the men—Pete Ginotta, Ernest Talliaferro, Major Ayers, and Theodore Robyn—is either intimidated or unaroused by her sexuality. In many respects her boyfriend Pete resembles Popeye Vitelli in *Sanctuary*. Pete is an Italian bootlegger, and it may be that Pete too is impotent. Like Popeye's, Pete's masculinity seems only superficial. He is unnerved by close contact with Jenny and shuns her advances. Talliaferro, a buyer of women's underwear, is a laughable fop who mistakenly believes himself to have power over women. But when Jenny leads him to a secluded deck area, he runs away in alarm. When the oafish Major finds himself with Jenny on an empty section of deck, he is confused and fumbling, and he quickly retreats after giving her a clumsy chuck under the chin. On the last day of the voyage Theodore allows Jenny to squeeze into his deck chair, but he abruptly pushes her away after a brief embrace.

Consistent with the emphasis on bisexuality in the novel, Jenny's only definably erotic encounters on the yacht are with women: the advances she receives from Patricia Robyn and her later seduction by

Eva Wiseman. Patricia watches attentively while Jenny strips off her clothes and sits naked before a mirror in her cabin. A short time afterward as the two women lie in Jenny's bunk, Patricia reaches out in the darkness and "slowly stroked the back of her hand along the swell of Jenny's flank. Slowly, back and forth . . . back and forth and back . . . 'I like flesh . . . Warm and smooth. Wish I'd lived in Rome . . .'" (121), she whispers. When Jenny falls asleep, Patricia caresses her nude body. In a three-page typescript passage, deleted from the published text of the novel, "Patricia makes tentative approaches to Jenny, who, still not properly awake, responds with a kiss" (Michael Millgate, *The Achievement of William Faulkner* [New York: Random House, 1966], p. 71). Obviously enjoying touching Jenny's body, Patricia then offers to teach Jenny a new and "refined" way to kiss. However, this scene ends abruptly when Mrs. Wiseman enters the cabin.

Eva Wiseman, an acknowledged lesbian, is the author of a slim volume of verse entitled *Satyricon in Starlight*. Three of "her" poems (later published by Faulkner in 1933 in *A Green Bough*) appear in the novel, the longest of which is a sonnet entitled "Hermaphroditus." In that poem a breastless virgin languishes in a narcissistic torpor of "Sick despair of its own ill obsessed" (208), a fitting description of the pervasive neuroticism in *Mosquitoes* and perhaps an oblique reference to Patricia Robyn's frustrated desire for her brother. Preoccupied by thoughts of Jenny's body, Eva decides to seduce Jenny. On the day after discovering the two young women in bed together, Eva helps Jenny to change clothes and while doing so embraces and kisses her. Jenny initially shows little response to these approaches. However, after three nights on the *Nausikaa* and repeated disappointment in her efforts to find a lover on board, Jenny lies naked in her bunk, not knowing "what it was she wanted, except it was something" (186). Eva enters the cabin and fondles Jenny's face and hair. As the scene closes, it seems sure that Eva completes her seduction with Jenny's passive acquiescence.

However, Jenny's lesbian encounter does not distract her from her relentless search for a man. Back on dry land in New Orleans, Jenny goes out with Talliaferro but quickly dismisses him when she finds a huge man to dance with her. In his last glimpse of Jenny, Talliaferro sees her happy in the arms of her new friend. Perhaps Jenny at long last has found a man who can satisfy her needs. (For an effective analysis of Jenny's relation to themes of power and sexual promise, see Edwin T. Arnold, "Freedom and Stasis in Faulkner's *Mosquitoes*," *Mississippi Quarterly*, 28 [Summer 1975], 281-297.)

The ending of *Mosquitoes* leaves most of the characters in states

of heated frustration. In Patricia Robyn's final appearance she lies fitfully tossing in bed, naked and sweating, thwarted in her desire to make love to her brother. Dorothy Jameson, a virgin well past her youth, fails utterly to lure even so desperate a choice as Mark Frost into bed with her. In his final appearance, Pete is approached by a prostitute who speaks suggestively to him, but he is wholly unaroused by her. Talliaferro, rejected by Jenny, is last seen returning his unused prophylactic to its customary place in his bedroom dresser. Dawson Fairchild last appears sick with liquor, retching on a sidewalk in the Vieux Carre, too drunk to accompany Gordon to a brothel.

If Jenny is the only woman in *Mosquitoes* to achieve any satisfaction at the end of the novel, Gordon is the only man to do so. He frees himself from his crippling devotion to virginity and sexlessness implied by his strange statue and " 'feminine ideal: a virgin with no legs to leave me, no arms to hold me, no head to talk to me' " (23). He molds a stunning clay mask which signifies his dawning maturity as an artist. More importantly, he outgrows his disabling fascination with androgyny. This advance is symbolized both by his implicit rejection of his statue and his apparent loss of interest in Patricia Robyn. With this breakthrough Gordon senses 'a new and robust feeling for the power of actual life. He last appears in a French Quarter brothel, lifting a woman in an exuberant embrace, "smothering her squeal against his tall kiss" (280).

Like this icy-eyed sculptor—who seems in many respects to be an idealized self-portrait—Faulkner must have learned something about himself during the course of *Mosquitoes*. Looking back thirty years later, he said of his second novel, "I'm not ashamed of it, because that was the chips, the badly sawn planks that the carpenter produces while he's learning to be a first-rate carpenter . . ." (*Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958*, ed. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner [Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press 1959], p. 257). Faulkner perceived—and most commentators have agreed—that *Mosquitoes* is not a fully realized novel. Perhaps the chief flaw in *Mosquitoes* is with its structural design: the Ship of Fools allegory which Faulkner attempts in it is unevenly handled and does not always support his thematic purposes. Intended as a fable of cultural inanition, *Mosquitoes* often veers into recondite matters of aesthetics and rhetoric. These convoluted discussions are awkwardly assimilated into the narrative, and they divert attention from the novel's social satire. Faulkner's emphasis on gender blurring and sexual enervation is meant to be a sharp rebuke to Jazz Age styles. But in *Mosquitoes* social criticism is often displaced by art criticism. In this

respect *Mosquitoes* is less successful than *Soldiers' Pay*, which shares the impulse toward ridicule and censure of society, but which maintains a clearer focus on the relation between cultural failure and sexual incapacity.

Mosquitoes compares unfavorably with *Soldiers' Pay* in another important way. In his first novel Faulkner effectively evokes the timeless forces of the natural world (Millgate, 88) and uses them as a powerful contrast to the broken and empty lives that somehow are left over from the catastrophe of the war. The references to place, climate, and season which lend structural stability to *Soldiers' Pay* and serve to anchor the actions of its many troubled characters are lacking in *Mosquitoes*. As a result the narrative in *Mosquitoes* is insufficiently realistic, and for long stretches of the book Faulkner does not sustain his cultural indictment. While they are stranded on Lake Pontchartrain, the characters in *Mosquitoes* are literally cut off from the land, a situation which occasionally makes for good comedy, but which weakens Faulkner's effort at social criticism. In large part Faulkner's advance in his next novel, *Flags in the Dust*, was his renewed evocation of the land and its abiding presence as a backdrop to (and implicit commentary upon) the turbulent events of the Sartoris story. *Flags in the Dust*—begun while *Mosquitoes* was being edited at Boni and Liveright—returns Faulkner's fiction to solid ground, not to the Georgia landscape of *Soldiers' Pay*, but to the hills of north Mississippi. In *Mosquitoes* Faulkner found that a carpenter with his skills works much better on the firm soil of Yoknapatawpha County than on the mud shoals of Lake Pontchartrain.

CHRISTOPHER WOODS

Gargoyles

There are a hundred flower stalls on the Isle de Paris.
Who would speak of death
Here where flowers bloom
As we pause for the view,
Notre Dame's gargoyles?

Paris glistens,
A never aging vaudeville chanteuse
Who gloats on herself.
This the gargoyles know.
It is why they cling like time,
Howl like bistro drunks.

What is there to do
With little left to will it?
In a cafe over aperitifs we count our wrinkles
Across a table where shadows dance.
Do not speak harshly
As everything is in time as it should be.

Above the gargoyles gloat.
A feeling gathers in the wings of beings
Beaked, weather worn white
Still basking in sunlight
Watching what fills a world below.

We pose with agonized smiles for the camera.
In dusty years we will study the photograph
When nothing remains but gargoyles
And a memory overexposed, frazzled,
Coping with itself.



To the Little Lamb in a Holy Chair

In the name
Of the Father
Of the Son
And the Holy Spirit,
She feared water,
The Christian
And the Bible too.

In the name
Of the Past
Of the Present
And the Future,
She photographed
A white Jesus
Near a white she
In a holy chair.

In the name
Of my mind,
This little lamb
Sheds her wool
At my feet
And makes a coat
That keeps me warm.

In the name
Of the Mother
Of the Father
And the Reverend,
She was washed
And cleansed
To a purified soul.

A Sacrifice for Illinois

All the battle-lined, one-way roads
in the Vicksburg National Military Park
point to the Illinois monument,
the final stop on the tour.
Those eighty-eight steps to the door,
though concrete, sag
in the middle
with the weight of the weary thousands
who have badgered them
on their way to the eye of history.

The Illinois monument—
one rounded wall arching
to a hole at the top—the eye.
But the rain, anywhere else
washing the earth of itself,
never works through
to the marble floor.

So the names carved in iron
inside, all around you—
names of North and South, telling who was there
(look to see if a soldier bore your name)—
go uncleansed. The grime
of fingers reading them
as if blind
cuts across the scrolls.

But if under the monument
a soldier's body has died
for these hundred years,
at least his name,
no matter how often
forgotten or fondled,
whispers his claim.

Every name on the wall
cost the State of Illinois
seventeen dollars in 1937.
Such inflation! For in 1863
the name was scratched
on the mortar-ripped hills
with only a cringing, final shudder
or a silent, home-bound oath.

BETSY MARTINEZ

The Bad Story

*With thanks to Lee Smith,
who writes good ones.*

The character [Mary or Jane or Anne] lies in a tangle of bedclothes, a look of innocence on her sleeping face. [Insert description of the bedroom and of the weather, which is threatening.] Suddenly, an alarm rings insistently, and a slim, white arm reaches out into the chill morning air to turn it off. Mary [or Jane or Anne] saunters [or ambles or glides] to the window and looks at the gray day. It mirrors her mood. She has felt this way ever since John [or Fred or Robert] left.

Mary [or Jane or Anne] strolls [or shambles or totters] to the bathroom and looks at herself in the mirror. She is a woman of twenty-nine [or twenty-eight or in her late twenties] with golden [or raven or strawberry-blond] curls framing her oval face. [Insert detailed description of her entire body with particular emphasis on its contrasting purity and sensuality. Mention one appealing flaw, and end with her face, which is that of a madonna, except for the hint of mischief in her lavender (or amber) eyes.]

She plods [or trudges or lumbers] downstairs to the kitchen and stands at the window hugging her [Insert description of bathrobe.] around her slender frame. She remembers when John [or Fred or Robert] planted the rosebush outside. A single tear falls.

On the counter are two coffee mugs labelled "Mary" [or "Jane" or "Anne"] and "John" [or "Fred" or "Robert"]. She remembers when Timmy had measles and John [or Fred or Robert] stayed up with him all night. Suddenly, she realizes that John [or Fred or Robert] enriched her life. She feels her heart breaking and turns in despair [or anguish or torment] back to the window. [Insert description of her appearance at the window, which includes a childlike pout on her soft lips and a painful vulnerability in her thin shoulders.]

"How can i go on?" she questions [or inquires or queries] outloud. [Use lowercase for the first person pronoun to indicate her feeling of insignificance and the author's identification with e. e. cummings.]

Suddenly, a ray of light pierces the dark [or black or ominous] clouds and falls on the rosebush. She meanders [or shuffles or staggers] outside and finds the first rosebud beginning to open. It is orange and it glows just as the sun did rising over the beach at Acapulco the morning after Mary [or Jane or Anne] and John [or Fred or Robert] were married. She sinks to her knees, with Faith [or Hope or Joy] pulsing through her veins. Her feminine intuition tells her: John [or Fred or Robert] will return . . .

Joseph Coleman: A Memory

For the eighty-eight years that my grandfather lived on this earth, he would say none of them was a wasted year. He enjoyed telling me about his eagerness to learn, to work, and to service those in need. He traced his early years back to Darlington, Louisiana where he was born to a sharecropper from somewhere near St. Louis and a mulatto from St. Louis. Joseph Coleman was his father's thirty-fourth child and his mother's twelfth.

As a boy his education was limited. In the late 1800s and the early 1900s, every hand was needed to help the family survive; therefore, learning had to be squeezed in between planting time and harvesting time. His older sister Edith was the community's teacher, so he managed to remain in school through the fourth grade. After that time he assumed a man's share of responsibility.

Fondly recalling his experiences planting and picking cotton, he said that the workers would sing in the fields, not because they were happy but because the music provided a steady rhythm for them to work by. They would produce more by working steadily than by alternating from fast to slow. This also made them less tired at the end of the day.

My earliest memory of him was that he was a man completely dedicated to his work and religion. He lived with us during my first twelve years, and I had the opportunity to observe his daily routine since his room was just across the hall from mine. His routine never varied—up at 5:00 A.M. to get ready for work; home by 6:00 P.M.; to church at 8:00 P.M.; and in bed by 11:00 P.M. While this schedule appeared mundane to my young eyes, later he was to tell me that his greatest satisfaction came from his job as a tourist guide driving a horse-drawn carriage. He loved interacting with people and even became a celebrity of sorts. His picture was taken by hundreds of people only to appear later on posters, post cards, place mats, and in the *Times-Picayune* and magazines. Sought out to make commercials, he even appeared in three movies.

The greatest influence on his life was his religion. His belief was very basic and he believed every word the Bible said. It said, "Thou shalt not lie," and he obeyed, not even allowing himself to tell a joke because it was a lie. He had more than a nodding acquaintance with his God. They were very familiar with each other. He talked to God whenever he felt a need, and he felt that God talked to him. He

believed that he prospered and had a long life because he was faithful to God's word.

Our activities at home were fashioned to a great extent by Grandpa's strict moral code. He had inflexible standards and was unyielding in demanding the same conduct from us. Activities like playing cards and listening to records had to be done when he was not around, and we kids made a game of hiding the evidence of our "sinful" activities and not getting caught by him.

His insistence on goodness, loyalty, honesty, self-respect, a low toleration for failure, and a no-nonsense attitude about school work shaped the lives of his own children and transcended into my generation. While this picture may be that of a cold unyielding disciplinarian, there was the other side of him who loved animals—our house was never without a dog or two; the side of him which made us rush to meet him because he always had a treat for us; the side of him which found him sitting beside the pool for my swimming graduation; the side of him which protected me from my parents' wrath when I had become absolutely impossible; and the side of him which took me with him to court his girl friend.

When Grandpa peacefully slept away, I felt no sorrow, but more a sense of gratitude that I had known this person and that my life was richer for having been exposed to a man of his caliber. He had lived in this world, but not of this world, and was the better for it.

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Reviews

Alice Walker. *The Color Purple*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1982.

Alice Walker's most recent Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Color Purple* is a masterpiece of contradictions. The language is simple, and yet it is profound; the characters are in many respects tragic, and yet in the end they emerge triumphant; the conflict is bitter, but it finds a peaceful resolution. Ironically, the plot builds to a climax, as it simultaneously exposes the failings and shortcomings of certain characters. However, in the aftermath of the climax, all that has preceded in these characters' lives seems so unimportant. *The Color Purple* is a dramatic illustration of the funny and tragic things which happen along the way of life as both men and women try to discern what the other sex is all about.

It is a story about Celie, the main voice in the novel, a young, innocent child of fourteen who is continually raped by a man whom she thinks is her father. "Pa," as she calls him, impregnates Celie twice, and in each instance he gives the child to a young minister and his wife. Trying to find a way to purge herself of the feelings of confusion, fear and distrust, Celie begins a series of letters which form the plot of the novel.

In the beginning, these letters are addressed to God. Perhaps it is because deep down inside she feels that only the person that she has been taught is God would in fact understand what she has gone through. Or, perhaps they are directed to God because already in her despondent youth Celie is trying to get in touch with the feelings which Shug Avery describes at a later time:

. . . God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It.

Eventually, the letters to God yield to letters to Celie's sister, Nettie, whom she discovers, quite by accident, is living in Africa with the minister, his wife and Celie's two children. Through this additional dimension, Celie explores and discovers information about her family history from her sister in the African motherland. In the

communications which pass back and forth between Celie and Nettie, Walker has drawn subtle parallels between the lives of the southern blacks (e.g. Celie and Mr. _____) and the Olinkas (sounds like "oh-link-us") an African tribe. These parallels exist particularly in the Olinkas futile attempt to sustain their "Roof-leaf god" and Celie's need to find her God and to bend his ear.

While it is the epistolary structure which moves the action forward, *The Color Purple* is also a love story. However, the love story is about two women. Shug Avery is the wild, aggressive, chanteuse and mistress of Celie's husband, Mr. _____ or Albert. Shug is taken to Celie's house by her husband because she is ill and has no one to care for her. After Celie nurses her back to health, Shug teaches Celie how to stand on her own and to become a woman. Unbeknown to Celie, this ability has always been within her power—all she need do is claim it. In addition, it is through her relationship with Shug that Celie also has her first fulfilling sexual experience.

In fact, it is the women in *The Color Purple* who dominate the work. It is the women who are the most memorable characters. It is the women who emerge from their positions of misuse and abuse to arise victorious in the end. Besides Shug and Celie, there is Sofia who is incarcerated for standing up to the white mayor and his wife and who eventually wins the affection of the Mayor's daughter Eleanor Jane. There is Squeak also called Mary Agnes, who like Shug, begins to use her voice to sing and become her own independent woman. There is Odessa, Sofia's sister who cares for Sofia's children in her absence. All of these women struggle to free themselves from the encumbrance of having their existence legitimized and defined by the presence of the men in their lives. They struggle to define their roles as woman, wife, mother, mistress or lover with or without their men.

On the other hand, the men in *The Color Purple* live lives of "quiet desperation." They rape their women when it is only their love that they are after, but they do not know how to ask for it. They beat their wives when it is only their respect that they need, but they do not know that respect demands respect. They give away their off-spring because it is a reminder and an affirmation of their own guilt. With the exceptions of Samuel, the minister and Celie's son Adam, the male characters possess few socially redeeming qualities. They are completely out of touch with their own feelings because the society which raised them to adulthood also taught them that men who show too much sensitivity are not considered men. Just as that society has carved out a "place" for its women, it has also devised a corresponding place for its men. Albert discovered this at a very early age and has attempted to conform to it ever since:

When I was growing up he said, I
use to try to sew along with mama
cause that's what she was always
doing. But everybody laughed at me.
But you know I liked it.

In the end, both Celie and Albert have conquered these social conformities and are revealed as characters with more clearly integrated personalities.

Unfortunately, *The Color Purple* is not without its flaws. It is not only an epistolary novel in which the language of the letters constitutes the action of the plot, but also the dialogue of the characters. Celie is a semi-literate character who is writing to a sister who undoubtedly has a greater exposure and awareness than she. The problem arises in determining how Walker is able to justify Celie's ability to express concepts and ideas which, even though spoken by other characters, are probably far beyond Celie's powers of cognition. Even when she manages to keep the language simple, the ideas expressed in that language require a precise articulation which, in this critic's estimation, more realistically is beyond the ken of the perception of the character. For instance, when Shug articulates the probability that God may be a lot more sympathetic to man's faults than men are themselves, she says:

. . . God love everything you love—and a mess
of stuff you don't. But more than anything
else, God love admiration.
 You saying God vain? I ast.
 Naw, she say. Not vain, just wanting to
share a good thing. I think it pisses God
off if you walk by the color purple in a field
somewhere and don't notice it.

Over all, *The Color Purple* is a powerfully moving novel which exposes the time-worn conflict between men and women. To focus on its shortcomings is to miss the huge efforts of Walker to explore waters that, until fairly recently, were mostly uncharted.

Although Walker has already claimed her place among black female novelists, *The Color Purple* reaffirms her prominence. It is a work which again shows the sensitivity of black female novelists. It also reiterates the dominant position of these novelists in the literary field since the early seventies. Though Walker's characters happen to be black, the focus of her theme supersedes, time, geography and yes—even race.

CAROLINE K. BARNARD HALL

Eileen Simpson. *Poets in Their Youth*. New York: Random House, 1982.

As we see John Berryman and several other poets "in their youth" (actually the early days of their careers) in this chatty and perceptive memoir by Eileen Simpson, we get an intimate view of literary and social America at the mid-twentieth century. Uniquely suited to give us this view, Simpson was Berryman's wife at the time, and she is now a psychotherapist and writer. It is through her eyes that we glimpse something of the personal lives, the professional concerns, and the poetry of several of our major writers.

Berryman, Robert Lowell, Delmore Schwartz, and Randall Jarrell are the book's main characters. The supporting cast, their wives, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, is no less distinguished, including as it does such figures as Jean Stafford, Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, R. P. Blackmur, Mark Van Doren, and Theodore Roethke. In this world of support and rivalry, intelligence and wit, we see the poets' youthful exuberance and hope for the future, their uncertainties and passionate dedication to their art. And we watch them and listen to them as their energy and fire turn subtly toward disillusionment and exhaustion.

If a reader were interested only in literary gossip interspersed with candid photographs, the book would be worth reading. We hear Berryman and Lowell discussing the great poets of earlier generations. We see Lowell and Stafford at home during a Maine summer. We watch Berryman and Schwartz struggling to succeed as new Harvard instructors. We witness the successes and failures, the triumphs and disappointments of Berryman's early career at Princeton. We observe what Schwartz called his "manic-depressiveness," Berryman's alcoholism, Lowell's periodic stays in mental hospitals. We see marriages begin and fail. And we view the shifting relationships, personal as well as professional, among all the characters. There is, certainly, enough gossip here to hold our interest. But there is more, for this book contributes to our understanding both of the literary climate of the time and of the specific poems of some of our best writers.

Once, Simpson tells us, when Berryman and Lowell and Jarrell "were discussing a new poem of Cal's [Lowell's] and disagreeing about one of his stanzas, which John argued was needlessly obscure and Randall claimed was not, John . . . said, 'Well, Eileen found it difficult.'" Eileen has plenty of company. One characteristic of the work of these poets (who came later to be called "confessional") is

indeed its obscurity, an obscurity that derives from the personal and private nature of the poems' images and references. Poetry of this sort offers special challenges to the reader who would understand it. Reading many, perhaps all of a writer's poems helps; in that way a reader can see images and phrases, cadences and colors as they appear and reappear in shifting contexts from poem to poem, and so induce their meaning. Reading a book like *Poets in Their Youth* helps, too.

This memoir enriches our understanding of the poems, especially Berryman's, partly through its depiction of the personal and social fabric of the poets' lives. But Simpson offers specific help as well; the book also serves as a gloss to the poetry. Simpson occasionally quotes lines and poem fragments in their appropriate social contexts, and she offers a list of references at the book's end. These lines, we learn, grew from that particular experience. Or those lines distort the situation as it really was for perhaps these reasons. Real and imaginary characters in the poems are filled out for us and given dimension. Simpson describes Berryman's relationship with their dentist, Henry Glickman, and suggests that Glickman inspired the more famous, fictional Henry, "one of the figures shadowing the protagonist" of Berryman's "Dream Songs."

Simpson's memoir, then, is engaging and useful, entertaining and instructive. It is also, given the course of many of the lives it chronicles, depressing. One tends perhaps to blame the messenger for the bad news, and indeed Simpson's analytic tone does occasionally slide toward preachiness. But in fairness it must be said that she must observe husband as well as poet; she is for the most part able to maintain this distinction, and the reader must maintain it as well. When we read Simpson's comments about Berryman's "defects of character," his "drinking, emotional turmoil, stalling about work, irresponsibility about earning a living," we can see perhaps his failure as a husband. But would a sober, organized, responsible, hard-working man have written what Berryman did? Are the poems worth the human cost?

Of course, this is not a choice which great poets have. The book's epigraph is from Wordsworth: "We poets in our youth begin in gladness;/But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness." In his youth, Delmore Schwartz revised those lines: "We poets in our youth begin in sadness/Thereof in the end come despondency and madness." The lines are prophetic; Simpson's choice of a title is fitting.

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Everette Maddox, *The Everette Maddox Song Book*. New Orleans Poetry Journal Press, 1982.

Martha McFerren, *Delusions of a Popular Mind*. New Orleans Poetry Journal Press, 1983.

Charles Black, *The Waking Passenger*. New Orleans Poetry Journal Press, 1983.

Three recent publications by the New Orleans Poetry Journal Press illustrate the rich diversity of poetry being written and performed by fellow travellers in the South, particularly in New Orleans. However, this eclecticism in approach and subject matter creates a baffling situation for the reviewer assigned the task of lumping together three such poets in the same review. The fact is, Maddox, McFerren and Black are just plain different, and one is hard-pressed to discover what their works have in common beyond their being poetry published by the same press, on the same paper stock, in neat, identically-sized volumes. Yet, after further reflection, a more subtle generalization comes to light: all are quite successful in the execution of their distinct poetic tasks. For instance, Black's verse in *The Waking Passenger* is sparse and sharply honed with a keen ear for the music of language. McFerren, on the other hand, writes in an expansive, less contrived idiom which, as her title suggests, is accurately described as popular. Maddox, who weds the raucous music of everyday speech to definite poetic structure, stands somewhere between Black's polish and McFerren's expansiveness. Now, the problem becomes evident. If judged in terms of what Black is doing, McFerren's work appears somewhat uncontrolled and, in places, downright sloppy. Her verse plainly does not hinge upon the pithy, well-crafted phrase, as does Black's. Conversely, Black fails indeed if one asks of poetry that it be written in the sort of easy, colloquial style that is a chief virtue of McFerren's book. Suffice it to say that each one of these poets demands to be read and appreciated on his or her own esthetic terms. To do otherwise is like comparing apples to oranges to avocados; all one can really say, in all fairness, is that they're, well . . . *different*.

With this caveat in mind, I would nevertheless like to expose my own poetic bias and admit openly (rather than disguising it in the more oblique language of the "third-person objective") that Maddox's *Song Book* is my hands-down favorite of the three. Maddox somehow

manages to keep the charm, clarity, and the plain fun of everyday language without sacrificing the rigors of poetic form. His volume is aptly titled, since Maddox crafts the colloquial into music without ever calling undue attention to the fact that his works are crafted, that his "songs" in fact are finely structured. This is perhaps why his poetry performs well orally, a fact which can be attested to by anyone who has heard Maddox read at the weekly poetry readings held at the Maple Leaf Bar in New Orleans, a Sunday afternoon tradition organized by the poet himself.

Yet, while his poems resonate with the colorful, funny, and at times scatological language of New Orleans bars and streets, Maddox is never trivial in subject or treatment. One does not have to read very far in the *Song Book* to recognize that here is not only a clever poet with an easy flair and familiar voice; here is a highly sensitive, irreverent human being whose poetic impulse is no luxury item, but rather necessary, a matter of life and death.

Like Everette Maddox, Martha McFerren's style is earthy and colloquial, and so her poems likewise perform well in public readings. Also like Maddox, McFerren for the most part avoids sounding *jejune* in her treatment of mundane subjects. Of particular interest are her acute insights into the nature of relations between the sexes; McFerren explores the human toll of sexism, especially on women, in several poems in the volume, and, remarkably, she does so without sounding in the least bit strident or diatribal. She simply presents, with clear-eyed honesty, many of the "delusions" spawned by cultural sex roles as they play out in the theater of the "popular mind." Also similar to Maddox, McFerren's *Delusions* makes for excellent reading for those of us who prefer to experience poetry as down-to-earth communication; one need not read McFerren's poems more than once, suspecting an obscure meaning to lie somewhere beneath the surface of the text. Happily, it doesn't.

Putting aside McFerren's *Delusions* and picking up Charles Black's tome can be a somewhat jarring experience for the reader. Whereas McFerren rambles on expansively on all sorts of themes drawn from popular culture, Black is a cerebral poet devoted to the tight compression of poetic image and to pure word-music. Reminiscent of T.S. Eliot, Black comes across as urbane, at times deliberately obscure, and always intellectual. For vocabulary-minded readers who do not flinch at poems jammed full of words on the order of "etheric," "liquescing," "arcanum," and "nullity," Black's *Waking Passenger* is certainly worthwhile. For those of us who prefer to read poetry *without* the O.E.D. at hand, Black's volume is still well worth the reading . . .

aloud. Rarely do poets delight so lavishly in the sheer music of the language. However, those above-mentioned readers who prefer to read poems once and, as it were, "get the message," should beware: *The Waking Passenger* is not intended for "popular minds."

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Ernest J. Gaines. *A Gathering of Old Men*. New York: Knopf, 1983

Ernest Gaines's latest novel, *A Gathering of Old Men*, has been praised by critics who have observed Gaines' rich sense of place, his sense of the past, his understanding humor, and his compassion. It has been called profound, unforgettable, and eloquent. And, of course, all of these praises are well-deserved. But the most compelling reason for reading this book is that Gaines once again achieves the standard he set for himself when he said, "I try to tell things honestly, the way it really is. I try to tell a good story, but I want to show the people as they really are." In *A Gathering of Old Men* Gaines tells a good story, and he shows people not only as they really are, but also as, in rare moments, they can be.

A Gathering of Old Men begins with the report that there has been a shooting on a Louisiana plantation. A white, Cajun farmer, Beau Boutan, is dead. This could set up a murder mystery, but this is not what Gaines intends. In writing a murder mystery, the author encourages the reader to keep an open mind to try to figure out who the murderer is. Gaines consciously closes the reader's mind from the beginning. In fact, it is not called a murder by the black men; it is a "shooting." Since we are sure that we know who really shot Beau Boutan, or at least we think we do, we can then attend to what Gaines is really dealing with—the tensions between the past and the present, the conflict between the whites and the blacks, and most important, the conflict and tension between each old black man and his former, younger self as he attempts to deal with why he has waited so long to settle his accounts. This technique is very effective since it sets up the framework for a gradual unfolding of the depths of character and courage of the men.

When Mapes, the white sheriff who traditionally dealt with the black people by the use of intimidation and force, arrives at the scene, he finds himself in the exasperating situation of having to deal with a group of old black men, each carrying a shotgun and each claiming that he shot Beau Boutan. In addition, Candy Marshall, the young white woman whose family owns the plantation, claims that she did it. There seems to be only one real suspect, Mathu, the old black man whom Candy is determined to protect whether he wants or needs her protection or not. All of the old men have a motive to kill Beau, but only Mathu is perceived as being man enough to have done it; he is the

only one who had ever “stood up” to a white man before. As each man tells why he shot Beau, neither the reader nor the sheriff regards him as a real suspect, but we are given an unforgettable image of that person in terms of ghosts from his past, ghosts that have not been buried. The old men gather to deal with a past that they had not laid to rest—that they had not, before then, found the collective courage to address. They are like an army of old men, as Miss Merle points out to Candy when she says, “You satisfied now, you and your army.” The enemy is shot and killed, not murdered, and each soldier heroically takes upon himself the collective blame and with it, the collective glory.

Gaines’ narrative technique, the use of multiple narrators, allows the characters to reveal themselves and their interrelationships with others. We hear the story through the narrative voices of the old men, a child—Snookum, and the white narrators, Lou Dimes and Sully. We see not only the conflicts of the blacks, but also the conflicts of their Cajun antagonists. The old world of Fix Boutan, a kind of Cajun “Godfather,” has come to an end, and they must come to terms with a new world symbolized by Fix’s youngest son, Gil Boutan, an LSU football player whose partner on the gridiron is black, the “Salt and Pepper” of LSU. As Fix’s friend, Auguste, says, “I’m an old man, Fix . . . I don’t know who is right and who is wrong, anymore.”

Gaines’ use of multiple narrators also makes possible the kind of marvelous understanding humor that we saw in his short stories, “A Lone Day in November” and “The Sky is Gray.” We see the old men as they see each other—Uncle Billie trying to aim a gun and shaking so much that it looks like a divin’ rod, and Johnny Paul trying to explain to Mapes that he had to be there then, for seventy-seven years, to be able to “Don’t see now” what they “don’t see now.” And of course we have Snookum, the little boy, putting it all into perspective in his world of tea cakes and “prarines.”

Most of the novel takes place in the course of one day, and as the events of the day come to a climax, an unexpected climax, we are moved along with the characters to a better understanding of the conflicts and changes that have occurred. *A Gathering of Old Men* is a warm, sensitive, honest novel that combines humor and compassion in dealing with people in conflict, and only a skillful craftsman who knew these people well could have written it. It is a beautiful novel and a beautifully written novel.

