

“COLD PASTORAL”: IRONY AND THE ECLOGUE
IN THE POETRY OF THE SOUTHERN FUGITIVES

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*The gesture falls short of its occasion, but I should like to dedicate this short piece to the memory of Professor Andrzej Kopcewicz. He had, in a deep sense that I am still grappling to comprehend, a fundamental understanding that the literary text was a text, and he could intuit the arabesque curve and the strange, migratory behaviour of the literary sign with a rare penetration. His affinities were for the great masters of the grammē, Joyce, Barthelme, Pynchon, Melville, and Riffaterre. Yet he combined this hyper-literate intellect with an unusual modesty and a sense of courtesy. He also had what might be called the unique Kopcewiczian humour, always playing delicately at the edges of the situation. One felt in the presence, as Henry Adams said of a friend, of a mind opaline with infinite shades and refractions of light. I should like to pick out just a single part of that shimmer, namely Professor Kopcewicz's interest in the literature of the American South. He wrote a book entitled *Poezja amerykańskiego Południa* (1972), the first extended study of the Fugitive and Agrarian poets in Polish. Its chapter on John Crowe Ransom contains a sustained and profound meditation on irony, that most literary of the tropes of language.*

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to analyze a shift in the ancient genre of pastoral in the poetry of the Southern modernists, Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom, a shift that seeks to account for the historical penetration of nature and that is often aestheticized as the ironical counter-text of the “cold” pastoral. Drawing upon the models of pastoral found in Lewis P. Simpson and William Empson, the article argues that the essential trick of the old pastoral – the implication, as Empson calls it, of a beautiful relation between rich and poor – does not work within nineteenth-century Southern literature because the black resists being turned into a gardener in the garden. The article then examines Tate's “The swimmers”, a poem that narrates Tate's discovery as a young child of the aftermath of a lynching, as an expression of this unworkability in an idiom of what Tate called “pastoral terror”.

Why should so many of the poems of the principal two Southern Fugitives, Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom, poems with titles such as “Pastoral”, “Cold pastoral”, “Eclogue of the liberal and the poet”, “Idyl”, and “Eclogue”, show the survival of the old pastoral, a formal genre that died out in the seventeenth century? One might argue that the pastoral is the proper literary extension of the agrarian impulse these two poets showed when, together with ten other Southerners, they produced their manifesto *I’ll take my stand* (1930)¹ and defended a traditionalist, organic South against the industrial values of the rest of America. What underlay the so-called Nashville Agrarianism, as Ransom’s introductory notes to the anthology show, was a near Kantian piety toward nature, and such piety might be thought to express itself in the archaic literary idiom of the pastoral. A characteristically subtle understanding of this literary inference of pastoral from agrarianism is found in the work of Lewis P. Simpson, a critic to whom all studies of southern pastoral are indebted. Simpson contends that the attempt of *I’ll take my stand* to reverse “mind and society as models of history” was not envisaged as a pragmatic possibility, but as a heightening of the pastoral tactic, one that aimed at conferring authority on the newly discovered vocation of the southern poet-critic of the 1920s (Simpson 1982: 86).

The seminal text in classical pastoral is Virgil’s *Eclogue* I (written about 37 B.C.), which opens with the Roman farmer Tityrus lying beneath a beech tree and teaching the woods to echo with the name of Amaryllis. According to Curtius (1953: 190), it was with the reading of this eclogue that all subsequent study of Latin literature began. One line of descent from the opening of the first eclogue was that leading to the self-conception of the antebellum South, a community made up to the core of its being by classical commonplaces – the *topoi*. It was a self-conception caught by Tate in the essay “A southern mode of the imagination”:

I can think of no better image for what the South was before 1860 ... than that of the old gentleman in Kentucky who sat every afternoon in his front yard under an old sugar tree, reading Cicero’s Letters to Atticus. When the hands suckering the tobacco in the adjoining field needed orders, he kept his place with his forefinger, walked out into the field, gave the orders, and then returned to his reading under the shade of the tree

(Tate [1959] 1968b: 587-588).

This is Tityrus reborn in a southern guise: the beech tree has become “an old sugar tree” and the master’s slaves (the “hands” as Tate calls them) are trans-

¹ This is an anthology written by “twelve Southerners” that appeared – both in its original form and as a reprint – without acknowledgement of editorship, although each of the twelve essays is identified by author. Its tone of regional defiance is apparent in its title taken from the Confederate marching song “Dixie”.

formed into pastoral swains.² The “essential trick of the old pastoral”, as it was called by Empson (1995: 17), is being played in this sketch: it is the trick of implying “a beautiful relation between rich and poor”. The trick works by taking the naivety and “oneness” of the humble and making it embody a truth about the more “complex” patriarch: his difference from the swain is being asserted and yet both are felt to participate in an integrated, simplified world. This sketch, of course, goes against the historical grain (the historian of slave revolts, Herbert Aptheker, and the Melville of “Benito Cereno” were closer to this grain) and Tate is careful to call it an “image”: it is the way that the Southern *rhetor* wanted to sum himself up in a epideictic sketch (“A southern mode of the imagination” argues that the antebellum mode of discourse was that of rhetoric, which was to hold sway in southern speech and letters until Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn* introduced a mode of discourse, the dialectic, that was more self-diagnostic). As Simpson (1975) demonstrates in *The dispossessed garden*, the history of nineteenth-century southern literature shows that the slave cannot be turned into a gardener in the garden, and plantation romances such as Kennedy’s (1831) *Swallow barn* and Simms’s (1854) *Woodcraft* show curious anomalies in trying to effect this pastoral reversal. Tate (1935) himself, in “The profession of letters in the South”, suggests the reason for the blockage. In Europe, “[t]he peasant *is* the soil. The Negro slave was a barrier between the ruling class and the soil ... The white man got nothing from the Negro, no profound image of himself in terms of the soil” (Tate [1935] 1968b: 525). The Empsonian conditions for the old pastoral do not prevail. It is this contradiction between the pastoral scene and the historical actuality of the black that is at work in Tate’s (1953) most compelling example of ironic pastoral, his late poem in terza rima, “The swimmers”.

In fact, the resistance of the historical points to another component of the formal pastoral, as Virgil codified it. Virgil, “the first world-historical poet”, complicates the pastoral genre that he inherited from the Greek Theocritus of the third century B.C., whose use of the genre reflects what Simpson calls a “cosmological” or undifferentiated society (namely one that considers itself an analogue of the cosmos: here Simpson is following Eric Voegelin) (Simpson 1997: 115, 116). This is immediately evident in the first eclogue, where Virgil shows the penetration of first nature by the historical event through the figure of Tityrus’s co-locutor and fellow pastor, Meliboeus. Meliboeus has been dispossessed of his lands by returning veterans who fought for the victorious Augustus in the civil war of the first half-century B.C. and is about to be sent into exile. Simpson (1997: 115, 116, 117) observes that in these eclogues Virgil tacitly acknowledges that “[t]he order of reality ... is empirical history”, and that for

² “Swain” is a term from the genre of formal pastoral meaning rustic or shepherd.

him the pastoral becomes “a symbol of the differentiated consciousness”; this has the consequence that “the submerged Virgilian conceit of the poetic consciousness as a cosmic garden dispossessed by history has ... largely governed the relationship between poetry and history in Western literature”. It is this essential doubleness of pastoral (its historical construction and its receding image of wholeness in memory) that made it an appropriate genre for mapping out the contradictoriness of the Old South, a region that was an offshoot of nineteenth-century international commerce and not an organic development out of a supposed feudal precedent. The more complex southern literary consciousness, such as that of Mark Twain or George Washington Cable, was attuned to this differentiation between the cosmological or compacted society – to which the original pastoral of Theocritus gave expression – and its displacement into a Virgilian version of pastoral that is troubled by historical contingency. The Southern modernists such as Tate, Ransom and Faulkner (especially in *The Hamlet*) work to intensify this ironic doubleness of pastoral. This is why the modern literature of the South contains so many “cold” pastorals (to use the Keatsian term), antipastorals, or, what might be called “baroque” pastorals.

One could put this in Empsonian terms and say that the essential procedure of the old pastoral of “putting the complex into the simple” (Empson 1995: 24) leaves a residue of the complex that is the ironic point of vantage of the dramatized poet-speaker. One can go further and say that this poet-speaker stands outside of first nature, and even cancels it out, by the very act of creating a stylised version of it. The mind of the speaker, in Andrew Marvell’s classic summary of the process in “The garden”: “[d]oes straight its own resemblance find / ... / Annihilating all that’s made / To a green thought in a green shade” ([1681] 1972a: 101). De Man (1983: 239) glosses this aspect of Empson’s pastoral by asking: “What is the pastoral convention, then, if not the eternal separation between the mind that distinguishes, negates, legislates, and the originary simplicity of the natural? ... There is no doubt that the pastoral theme is, in fact, the only poetic theme, that it is poetry itself”. In the antipastoral of Tate and Ransom this dissociative edge in the speaker’s voice often makes itself evident in the estranged erotic sensibility of the lover. In Tate’s “Pastoral”, for example, the lover is “plunged into the wide / Area of mental ire” as he lies at the “wandering side” of his mistress: the sexual, now isolated as a purely secular and historicized consciousness, also finds itself separated from the “originary simplicity” of the garden (the lover has said too easily “time is love’s fool” and gets his comeuppance by the end of the poem) (Tate [1936] 1977e: 90).

Empson’s model also affords a way of considering the irony in the so-called minor verse of John Crowe Ransom such as “Bells for John Whiteside’s daughter”, “Winter remembered”, “Vaunting oak”, “Eclogue”, and “Janet waking” (all poems published in the 1920s). Ransom’s verse, it needs to be said, is not

minor. It is rather writing that shows an exacting literary awareness, even to the point of preciosity, if one takes into account De Man’s argument that the literary is the interplay between a tendency toward an originary natural identification (a logic of substances) and an act of linguistic differentiation on the part of the sophisticated poetic mind (a logic of tropes). Ransom’s exquisite sense of the difference in word values – his counterpointing of the poetic and the prose term – marks out a variable movement on this border, at one time suggesting a pastoral merging with nature and then at another breaking off and inscribing the turn of irony. This verbal sensibility accompanies a recognizable pattern of development in Ransom’s verse. The poem begins with an “innocent dove” – a child, spinster, knight or friar (all recognizable descendents of the pastoral shepherd) – who is in untroubled possession of a mystified self or one in a blind identification with nature (Ransom [1925] 1952a: 39). There is then a fall or sudden distancing from this self through a confrontation with hard objectivity or the dark surge of time. One of the partners in “Eclogue”, for example, says:

We were spendthrifts of joy when we were young,
 But we became usurious, and in fright
 Conceived that such a waste of days was wrong
 For marchers into night

(Ransom 1952a: 38).

In several of Ransom’s theoretical remarks – for example, his “three moments” letter to Tate from the 1920s; his (1925) *Fugitive* editorial on irony as the most mature of modes; and his (1938) essay on the “mixed modes” of modernist verse “The tense of poetry” – this confrontation is projected as a potential narrative, a *seriatum* development in which the second or prose or ironical moment succeeds the first. It is significant that Ransom describes these movements as taking place in their “historical order of experience” (Young 1984: 339). He uses a personal, epistemic model, but it seems also to map out in aesthetic terms a certain pattern of historical change from the old to the post-bellum South. Here one might refer again to Tate’s notion that literature of the Southern Renaissance was marked by a shift in the mode of discourse from rhetoric, which celebrates the commonality of inherited habits of speech, to dialectic, the “give and take” between two positions (Tate [1959] 1968a: 583). One might also invoke Burke (1969: 512), who, in his essay on the four master tropes, compares irony to dialectic because in irony the various components offset one another without cancelling themselves out and are thus contributory to a “total development” (Burke further points out that in this interaction of components none of them is precisely right or precisely wrong: in reading Ransom’s verse the reader has the sense that he has a presumption in favour of his “innocent doves” and needs them for all their folly). In other words, the literary self-consciousness of

the South in such figures as Twain, Cable, and the major writers of the Southern Renaissance plotted out historical change as the working out of a dialectic within the isolate self (in such figures as Huck Finn and later in Lacy Buchan of Tate's *The fathers*) and as the aesthetic interplay of pastoralism and irony.

Tate, who in the 1920s wrote two Confederate biographies, had a more informed historical understanding of this nineteenth-century development than Ransom (who, when he turned to historical statements about the Old South in his essays, was often impressionistic). It is apparent that in Tate's work there is an extraordinary animus against the naïve pastoral and against a southern regionalism that might take the easy route of this form of expression. Tate's most famous poem, "Ode to the Confederate dead", describes the earth that holds the Confederate dead as an "insane green" ([1927] 1977d: 22). Only the idiot figure from the early poem "Idiot", whose uncoordinated gaze takes in all variety of regional sensation from magnolia to the backs of the field hands, is able to take flight into anything like an undifferentiated organic sensibility. Hence the idiot "greens the meadow with his eyes"; in a mock Marvellian manner he is "annihilating all that's made" to his particular and blind form of greenness (Tate [1927] 1977a: 17). It is "The swimmers", however, a poem in the Dantean stanza of terza rima and one of the few poems that he wrote after his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1950, that is Tate's most complex presentation of the ironic Southern pastoral. Robert Lowell called it the best example of a terza rima poem written in English (Doreski 1990: 111).

The poem tells of an incident from Tate's Kentucky boyhood when he and four "little friends" were on their way to bathe and came upon the aftermath of the lynching of a black man. For the newly converted Tate, writing in the medieval stanza-form of Dante, the shameful scene is a re-enactment of the Crucifixion – the "Corpse had died again in dirty shame" (Tate [1953] 1977f: 133). A transposed version of the Passion story gathers around the victim's body and seeks to lodge itself in the most provincial of details of Montgomery County, 1911. For example, the horsemen of the posse who come too late to save the victim are twelve; eleven "flee" the murder scene and return toward the town – "eleven same / Jesus-Christers unmembered and unmade" – just as did the eleven fleeing apostles; and the sheriff together with a "stranger", the equivalent of Joseph of Arimathea (Gospel of Luke 23: 59), retrieves the body.

In "The swimmers" strong Christian archetypes remould Tate's earlier segregationist opinions about race, which he only began to change in the 1950s. The child's shock at the episode – his "blue fear"; his leaping back to town among the rocks like a "panting toad"; and his solitary transfixion in the town square where the corpse is dragged – is a complex correlate of the adult's guilt. For Tate had much ground to traverse to arrive at his new understanding. In a notorious letter of May 1933 that has often been revived by the more recent

Tate critics, Tate is not so different from segregationist Southern writers of the 1890s in defending “the dogma of racial integrity” against miscegenation. There he argues that “social order” must take precedence in the South over “legal justice” because the call for justice has been traditionally been made by Northern liberals to overturn this order (Greenbaum 1966: 145-147). But in the last stanza of “The swimmers” it is the whole community who share the unspoken guilt and the dead man is not passed off as a catspaw of interfering liberals:

... Alone in the public clearing
This private thing was owned by all the town,
Though never claimed by us within my hearing

(Tate 1977f: 135).

As though countering the Agrarian use in *I’ll take my stand* of the pastoral genre as a metaphor with which to check the historicism of the modern consciousness, “The swimmers” is a version of the terror in pastoral and the survival of that terror in the adult memory. Indeed, in another poem of the same time, “The maimed man”, Tate calls this survival “[p]astoral terrors of youth still in the man” ([1952] 1977c: 130). In consequence, the greenery of this Kentucky childhood separates itself from the pastoral topos of the *locus amoenus* (stylized description of nature). Even before the boys hear the posse the overpoweringly lyrical beauty of this nature becomes irruptive, cruel, exploding into sensation. The lushness of the opening scene –

Long shadows of grapevine wriggle and run
Over the green swirl; mullein under the ear
Soft as Nausicaä’s palm ...

– soon becomes filled with an ominous surfeit of the sensuous:

Dog-days: the dusty leaves where rain delayed
Hung low on poison-oak and scuppernong, ...

(Tate 1977f: 132).

This summer is, to quote Tate’s early poem “Idyl”, “the eucharist of death” ([1926] 1977b: 10): it is the natural world as a profane sacrament. Prior to their discovery of the lynching, the children enjoy “sullen fun / Savage as childhood’s thin harmonious tear”, and the word “savage” here is a premonition of the later scene, an *entrée* word whereby the latent violence of the historical South insinuates a common truth with a childhood whose “green” innocence lies on the surface and which contains treacherous depths. Tate’s poem is recognizably a deviant version of Empson’s versions of pastoral, one filled up with tension and darkness rather than with the beautiful relation between disparate

classes. In Empson's pastoral a simpler consciousness (at first the swain and then, later, in the nineteenth century, the child) is placed within a larger adult or sophisticated scene and made to speak an unspoken truth about this context (Empson 1995: 17). For Empson, a more complex viewpoint is thus compressed into the language of the simple because this partaking of a deeper similarity cements a magical identification of the classes while at the same time preserving what Empson calls the irony of differences. "The swimmers" places the child in a situation that it does not understand and yet, for the mature poet looking back, the child's mute horror ("I could not run / Or walk, but stood", the speaker says of the child in the public clearing) is the right response in comparison to the town's disavowal of the "private thing" (Tate 1977f: 135).

"The swimmers", then, is a kind of historical pastoral. This anomalous hybrid is announced by the thrush early in the poem, which speaks with a historical voice rather than the lyrical one of, say, Shelley's skylark or Theocritus's owl:

When a thrush idling in the tulip tree
Unwound the cold dream of the copperhead

(Tate 1977f: 132).

The "copperhead" is a venomous snake and, like the serpent in the mulberry bush of "Ode to the Confederate dead" it stands for the "cold" knowledge of the *ouroborous*, a Benjamin-like sign of the infliction of historical finitude upon nature. To use Benjamin's temporal-aesthetic terms, its instruction is not of a symbolical nature, coincident with its lyric self, but of a successive or allegorical kind: for in this case there is an allusion to the pro-Southern sympathizers in the North during the Civil War who were called Copperheads (Benjamin 1977: 166). Later the sheriff's disengaged voice is "[b]orne on the copper air" as it announces the death of the black and therefore has the same culpable "neutrality" (Tate 1977f: 133). But Tate does not stop in his version of "pastoral as terror" with a fallen historical nature. The racial drama that merges into the natural images of backstate Kentucky is reshaped by what Tate called in this poem the "archetype of death and resurrection", which repossesses this profane, historical version of nature (Tate quoted in Labrie 1997: 68). Much of the poem's power derives from its wrestling these meanings out of a brutal nature, one that has the end result of subduing the violence of nature to ritual without losing the rawness of naturalistic image. The "blinding dust", for example, boxes the corpse in a "cloudy hearse" or the sun forms for it a "shroud" (Tate 1977f: 134, 135). A carapace from nature is beginning to be formed around the allegorical body. It is this purged and historicized nature that serves as the basis for the next stage in the order of development in medieval exegesis – an order that seems reflected in Tate's final poems – the move from history and the allegory of history to anagogy or the fulfilment offered by the future. In Tate's (1953) last major

poem, “The buried lake”, the anagogic images of redemption are grounded in this nature and through them the Dantean drama of a restored Eden (a higher pastoral) is enacted.

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