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Tom Bonan
Bucknell University

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Personal Reflection
A Great American Novelist

Tom Bonan

W. H. Auden once wrote in the *New York Review of Books* that, in a civilized society, “nobody under the age of thirty would be permitted to publish any literary criticism.” There was too much in the world to be understood, he said, and the world of art and literature requires a certain amount of time to gestate in the mind before one is capable of understanding what it is all about.

As a reader—and a younger one at that—I find this quote both enlightening and maddening. Early in my life, the challenge of reading was never understanding the words on the page or even piecing together the requisite background knowledge necessary to understand a particular work of fiction. The real problem was always trying to be able to contextualize it amongst a greater number of things that one can scarcely know much about until much later in life. My early days of reading were characterized by an intense frustration of coming to terms with my own limited knowledge of the world and an often-chronic inability to understand what was really going on behind the scenes. It was only after years of being unable to find my way, purposefully gathering what I could while trying to overlook what I could not, that I began to see myself as a serious reader. Books fell into place not along thematic or genre-specific lines as was taught in school but along contours that emerged through my personal experience

of reading. And, like all readers before me, I began to construct a world built around that of the novel.

Rarely do we ever read every published work by an author; in my own life, I can only think of two instances where I have done so: with the works of two twentieth-century authors, John Williams and J. A. Baker. In both cases, it was the product of the fact that I thoroughly enjoyed what they had to say given that neither one produced more than 700 pages in aggregate. This output does not diminish the stature of these writers in my mind, and it may have actually helped curate the mythological image of the writer in my head—it is true, in writing as in biography, that the more one can dredge up about a person or topic, the more elusive the subject becomes. My favorite authors invariably carry a great, and sometimes mysterious, personal story alongside their writing and, in my experience, Baker and Williams share a similar narrative that complements their work.

I have been fortunate, then, to find in John Williams an author I have come to understand in depth, and that I cannot readily extend to others. Like all great authors, each new work I read imbues the lives of the others with greater intensity and complexity. Over his career he wrote four novels—along with some poetry and a few critical essays—the earliest of which he eventually disavowed and, as a kind of faith in Williams as a writer, I have not read. The other three scarcely seem to have any connecting thread at all, each one covering a distinct topic and point in time utilizing disparate language and style. Despite this divergence, there is a certain cohesive aura to the group—a unifying charm,

keeping in line with Camus' maxim that "every artist keeps within himself a single source which nourishes during his lifetime what he is and what he says."

Williams' most famous book, *Stoner*, was never successful in his lifetime (he died in 1994) and has only since become a mild literary sensation after the *New York Review of Books* decided to reprint it in 2006 as part of their Classics series that publishes little-known or forgotten works—the types of books "that people typically run into outside of the classroom and then remember for life." The eponymous character—William Stoner—is a bookish, solitary type and the novel follows his life from a rural dirt farm on "an arid patch of land that sustained the family from one year to the next" to the University of Missouri where Stoner was a student and later a faculty member. The plot traces Stoner's life as he rises up the academic ladder, never a brilliant student but nonetheless enthralled by the mythic world of medieval literature. He later becomes an honest professor and a good husband (to a needlessly cruel wife), living the role as a victim of circumstance with a substantive, though abstract, understanding of that primal fire that sustains him.

Set in the rural heartland of central Missouri just after the turn of the century, and then later into the First World War and beyond, *Stoner* harks back to an era that seems remote in its intellectual energy and moral discrimination. Stoner's life is a bridge between our world and the one that came before us—one in which a person's life was largely determined by history as much as it was by personal psychology or passion. Despite its original publication in 1965, Williams deliberately set

the novel decades before with the bulk of Stoner's adult life taking place during the Depression era, in the years when men "once walked erect in their own identities." The language throughout the novel is terse and detached, bringing forth a depth that resonates brilliantly despite its heavy subject matter. In it we find an unlikely existential hero—a man that struggles to overcome the dictates of the world around him but can take it all on with stoic resignation.

Butcher's Crossing, published just a few years before *Stoner*, might as well have come from a completely different author. Set in the 1870s, the novel follows William Andrews—both of his early characters share part of the author's name, no doubt because they are at least partially autobiographical—as he sets off to the frontier town of Butcher's Crossing, Kansas, after dropping out of Harvard. Energized by Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendental vision of nature, Andrews flees the comfort he knew in the east and eventually settles in with buffalo hide traders in the Midwest where he funds an expedition to a remote, unvisited valley in the Colorado Rockies that is said to be rich in the animal.

Andrews is an idealist of a uniquely American sort—a college dropout; a vision-seeker; and, ultimately, a solitary man seduced by a world of one's own design out west. The story is laid out along his development from an inquisitive boy—who attracts a local prostitute due to his soft, bourgeois features—to a hardened, laconic man of the frontier. This transformation is almost purely due to the harsh conditions he meets in the wilderness. Trapped in a sea

of grass on the Great Plains without any water; snowed in a remote mountain valley due to a blizzard; desensitized to violence because of the brutal, mechanized slaughter of the buffalo, Andrews comes to see not an enlightening impression of the natural world that one might comfortably envision in the western reaches of Massachusetts, but a natural world that is indifferent to the world of man. It is a world that kills without remorse, a world that hardens man until he is as tough as leather, lest he be driven mad by his pursuit of money and violence. The novel is one of the finest examples of the Western genre, comparable only to the masterpieces of Cormac McCarthy and Oakley Hall in its composition and vision of the west.

Although all of Williams' novels are historical in the sense that he never set one in his own time, *Augustus* stands alone among the three as historical fiction—almost every character was real or had a real-life counterpart. It also stands apart from the others because of how distant the subject is from the distinctly American settings of his first two novels and because it was the only one of Williams' novels to receive recognition in his lifetime. Of the three, *Augustus* is the most elaborate and easily the best written. It takes the form of documents—letters, memoirs, senate proceedings, and speeches—that loosely trace out the life of the Roman Emperor Augustus, though he is known first as Octavian, Julius Caesar's nephew and adoptive son. In writing this way, using each of these characters as vehicles for exposition and the development of the protagonist, Williams takes advantage of the fact that we know little about their day-

to-day lives. By assuming their political posturing, their reflective gaze back onto the days of their youth, and their letters to friends and relatives, he brings to life the sterilized and coherent portrait of history that takes form when we try to make sense of past events.

The purpose of this type of historical fiction was not to merely update the past but to imbue life in the parts of history that are more vague and uncertain. We know much about Augustus through contemporary art and biography, but given his stature in his day and our own, there is a certain liveliness and mystery of character that seems lost among the totemic fragments that we have pieced together. The challenge though, in Williams' eye, was not having to create a story from known history but to make sure that the work would stand on its own and not be contaminated by the world from which it was being written—published in 1973 during the end of imperial ventures in southeast Asia and the world of *realpolitik*, he said that he was firm “to not have Henry Kissinger in a toga.” In language and in style, he largely succeeded.

The result is an astonishing portrait of a man who, like Andrews and Stoner, is catapulted into a world he can scarcely understand or control. The novel follows Augustus' life—from his political successes at a young age to later tumult in his family and personal life as they clash with the public persona of the Emperor—as he is molded by, and ultimately resigned to, the world around him. Notably, Augustus' own voice is absent until the third and final section, forcing us to see him first only through the eyes of others until he can render his world through his own. On the surface it would seem that such

a glorious Emperor—whose name literally translates to the “one to be revered” and whose name still adorns our calendars two-thousand years later—could suffer at the hands of fate in the way that an insignificant boy of Boston or a man of the academy could is a remarkable feat. As in his earlier novels, the fact that we could see this conclusion as a satisfying one is a triumph of language, of allowing the story to unfold in a particular way to bring us to this sole point of reason. It this philosophy that informs all of Williams’ work—man is resigned to a solitary fate of change and loss, and he comes out on the other side bearing no resemblance to his former self.

In his preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Joseph Conrad said that any work “that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line. And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect.” That truth is both a truth that exists in the world and a truth that exists within the author, and rendering the two in a transparent, cohesive way is why good writing remains supremely satisfying but maddeningly difficult. The role of the artist is to bring to light some element of their subconscious, some sort of lyrical inner life, and render it in a world of their own design. Successful fiction creates a world that is so unified, so alive, that it takes the reader—and even sometimes the author—by surprise.

In his fiction, John Williams shows himself to be not just a writer of the world, but a writer that can bring to light all of the latent recesses that surround it. He cleverly disguises philosophy—a philosophy of life, a philosophy of the United States, a philosophy of individual and historical action—within the brilliant artistic images rendered on the page through text. These three novels—surprising and enlightening, lugubrious and ambitious—weigh in my mind as some of the best fiction of the twentieth century. They have a weird mystic charm on me, a strange blend of unique American character that is sublimated to a higher world of art in a way that is much stranger and much more elaborate than most of the fiction coming out of this country. This vision of the United States and its people permeates throughout the entirety of his works; these novels come together with an implacable unity that is nearly impossible to find in most great writers.

On top of Williams' artistic prowess, I was also struck by a deeper, much more subtle attraction that can hardly be described. There was something thrilling about reading an author who is unknown and who himself revels in the kind of obscurity that he gave his characters. Virginia Woolf once lamented that reading the classics because they were classics was, in some sense, a cop-out because other people were telling you what constitutes good writing and why you should enjoy it. It is obvious that beauty is held in certain books with hindsight—with the weight and prestige of critics and academics behind them—but how many of us would have recognized this in the moment when they were still unknown and unknowable? I have kept this in mind as I

became aware of, and later read, these novels; of all the things that have been revealed to me from reading John Williams, perhaps the most important was never explicitly stated in any of his writing. It was the serendipitous quality of discovering Williams that has held my attention, a little-known author that wrote great books that happen to resonate well with my intellectual and emotional life at the time that I read him. And in piecing together the life of his works on my own, I have found that—though a civilized society might not want to recognize it—I might in fact have something to say.

