

SMITS MASTEN, SALLY L., Ph.D. *Reworking the Garden: Revisions of the Pastoral Tradition in Twentieth-Century Southern Poetry*. (2016).

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This dissertation illuminates how twentieth-century southern poetry revises the pastoral tradition. I argue that in its particular capacity to imagine a perfected world, the pastoral may delineate and advocate for our highest ideals—including genuine community, reverence for the land, and gender, racial, and socioeconomic equality. But the pastoral’s idyllic world may also reinscribe the South’s worst problems—including social injustice and exploitation of the natural world—by ignoring them altogether or by weaving them into a fabric of fictive nostalgia. These two possibilities create the central conflict that animates the pastoral, a conflict that the dissertation explores in the work of four twentieth-century southern poets—Anne Spencer, Jean Toomer, James Dickey, and Eleanor Ross Taylor. Each writer responds to specific historical iterations of the pastoral—including the potent southern myths of the plantation romance, the cult of the Lost Cause, and the Jeffersonian yeoman farmer—and each differentially transforms and revitalizes the pastoral tradition itself. Essentially, these poets create new pastoral works which fully countenance the South’s often divisive and problematic history while simultaneously seeking out restoration and redemption for and within the South. Thus, I assert that the pastoral tradition in the South is neither outdated nor mired in “moonlight and magnolias” nostalgia; rather, it enables twentieth-century southern writers to explore both a fraught history in a racially and socioeconomically divided region and a complex relationship to the natural world.

“*Reworking the Garden: Revisions of the Pastoral Tradition in Twentieth-Century Southern Poetry*” contributes to the fields of southern and American literature, ecocriticism, rhetoric, and poetics in three ways. First, building on the foundational work of William Empson and Frank Kermode, as well as more recent scholarship by Leo Marx, Annette Kolodny, Elizabeth Jane Harrison, Lucinda MacKethan, and Lawrence Buell, this project develops a clearer

definition of the pastoral in twentieth-century American and southern literature. However, I depart from these scholars in my claim that the twentieth-century southern pastoral represents not a set of *conventions* but rather a set of *beliefs* about the South and what it was, what it is, and what it could or should be. This project's focus on southern poetry after 1900 constitutes my second contribution. Despite the long history of pastoral poetry, studies of the pastoral in the twentieth century—in southern literature and more generally—focus nearly exclusively on prose. However, I argue that the pastoral's long association with poetry demands that we examine recent poets' renovations and critiques of the pastoral tradition; in so doing, this project not only expands our understanding of pastoral but it also paints a more comprehensive picture of southern literature. Finally, attending closely to two important southern voices, Anne Spencer and Eleanor Ross Taylor—heretofore mostly neglected in literary scholarship—makes a third contribution. Studying these writers broadens our understanding of southern literature and the South, as each offers viewpoints that have often been elided—particularly those of black and white rural women. Additionally, placing Spencer and Taylor alongside better-known male counterparts allows us to reconsider the bases on which canons are formed, to unveil biases and omissions, and to recognize diverse perspectives in southern poetry, the pastoral, and American literature more generally.

Overall, my project follows a chronological trajectory; the introduction provides a foundation for the later chapters by first tracing the history of the pastoral tradition, focusing especially on how American pastorals diverge from the European tradition, how slavery impacts southern pastoral, and how the Jeffersonian yeoman farmer becomes a rejuvenated symbol for the South in the Agrarians' 1930 manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*. Chapter one demonstrates how Anne Spencer uses pastoral idealism to imagine a more harmonious and just future for the South, while she simultaneously condemns the racial and gendered injustices of the present. Viewing

Spencer's work as pastoral provides a throughline for her diverse oeuvre and also illuminates her poetry's political edge. The second chapter focuses on Jean Toomer's reimagined pastoral in *Cane*. I contend that Toomer's overall structure, especially the interplay between poems and sketches, challenges traditional southern pastoral mythology, especially its willful blindness concerning industrialization and racism. However, Toomer also incorporates figures of connection throughout the book to reclaim pastoral values of community, communion with the land, and spiritual redemption. Chapter three begins by establishing James Dickey's early work as the foundation of his pastoral vision, wherein the southern wilderness provides a haven apart from war, loss, and grief. Subsequently I argue that while Dickey's later work revises his idealized vision, recognizing the violence and suffering that underwrite the region's history, he continues to build a new southern pastoral mythology of reconciliation. In the final chapter, I explore Eleanor Ross Taylor's significant contributions to the pastoral tradition, as she incorporates a thoughtful reconsideration of history, a caustic wit, and sharply drawn portrayals of her ancestors' lives—all of which challenge idyllic imaginings about the rural South. However, Taylor's pastoral also offers redemptive moments in images that foster empathetic community and genuine emotion. Throughout this project, then, I argue that the pastoral provides a vital key to understanding southern literature, both past and present, and a new way of examining both familiar poets and lesser-known but equally essential voices.

REWORKING THE GARDEN: REVISIONS OF THE PASTORAL  
TRADITION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY  
SOUTHERN POETRY

by

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: THE SOUTHERN PASTORAL TRADITION

Recreation of an idyllic rural memory is an option open only to the elite.  
Frank Einstein, “The Politics of Nostalgia: Uses of the Past in Recent Appalachian Poetry”

#### 1. Conflicts at the Heart of the Southern Pastoral: An Illustration

In 2002, Natasha Trethewey published “Southern Pastoral” in the *Greensboro Review*. In just fourteen lines, she illustrates what I believe to be the central conflict of the pastoral in twentieth-century southern literature, the conflict that this project will explore in the work of four significant twentieth-century southern writers. That conflict is this: in its particular capacity to imagine an idyllic and perfected world, the pastoral may detail and advocate for the highest southern (and human) aspirations and ideals—including an emphasis on genuine community, a reverence for the land, and a belief in gendered, racial, and socioeconomic equality. But that recreated idyllic world may also insidiously reinscribe the South’s worst images and beliefs by ignoring or reinforcing divisions between races, classes, and genders, and by weaving that willful oblivion or that overt white supremacist patriarchy into a fabric of fictive nostalgia. Trethewey incorporates all of these possibilities for the pastoral in one remarkable sonnet:

#### *Southern Pastoral*

In the dream, I am with the Fugitive  
Poets. We’re gathered for a photograph.  
Behind us, the skyline of Atlanta  
hidden by the photographer’s backdrop—  
a lush pasture, green, full of soft-eyed cows  
lowing, a chant that sounds like *no, no. Yes,*  
I say to the glass of bourbon I’m offered.  
We’re lining up now—Robert Penn Warren,

his voice just audible above the drone  
of bulldozers, telling us where to stand.  
Say “*Race*” the photographer croons. I’m in  
blackface again when the flash freezes us.  
*My father’s white*, I tell them, *and rural*.  
*You don’t hate the south*, they ask. *You don’t hate it?*

Again and again, in nearly every line and phrase, Trethewey establishes the many layers of the central conflict that animates the southern pastoral, particularly that version that the Agrarians’ revived in the late 1920s and early 1930s, which shadowed southern writers and critics for the rest of the century.

Trethewey, born in Mississippi to a white father and black mother who married before anti-miscegenation laws were struck down, inherited a paradoxical, fraught relationship to the South, and her position as a nationally recognized poet places her into a complex, difficult relationship with her southern literary forebears, the powerful cadre of the Fugitive poets, later termed the Agrarians, a group whose most well-known figures are Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren. Trethewey is a southern poet who is both heir to and excluded from traditional southern literary history. In her unrhymed, startling sonnet, she sorts through that southern literary heritage—specifically the inheritance of the southern pastoral genre, with its rolling green hills, its placid farms (or its *Gone with the Wind*-style plantations), and its idyllic and whitewashed imagination.

Beginning in a dreamscape, a reimagined scene from history, the poem’s speaker (who partly mirrors Trethewey herself) joins a gathering of Fugitive poets for a photograph. The photograph would preserve their memory, of course, and ensure their lasting impression, their legacy of proud poetic accomplishment. But the speaker points out quickly—by the fourth line—that this photograph is also falsified, embellished: the photographer’s chosen backdrop of “lush pasture” may be a painted canvas, or it may exist somewhere outside Atlanta’s city limits, but

Atlanta—that emblematic city of the “New South”—and its noisy progress intrude nevertheless on this idyllic setting. Thus, in Trethewey’s revision, the muted but ever-present opposite to the placid pastoral—its counterpart and “other,” the city—is made visible and audible in the pastoral landscape, so much so that Robert Penn Warren is nearly drowned out by “the drone / of bulldozers” (9-10). This poem vividly and plainly exposes the conflict between encroaching industrialism and dwindling natural landscapes, between industry and agriculture—the conflict with which the Agrarians were primarily concerned in their 1930 manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand*.

Trethewey’s poem not only disrupts the idyllic scenery, showing it to be a false or willfully blind Agrarian construct; it also rewrites and exposes the southern pastoral’s history of ignoring gendered, racial, and class tension. The dreamscape crumbles further when the photographer asks everyone in the photograph to smile, substituting “race” for the typical “cheese.” That this is a joke, a cue to smile, is implied by the photographer’s “croon” (a word much too close to a racial slur to be a coincidence); that the speaker of the poem—who was included comfortably among the Fugitives earlier, lining up to be a part of the photograph—is suddenly now excluded, on the defensive, belies her liminal and tenuous position. The line ends, “I’m in,” a seemingly resolute declaration of belonging with the Fugitives, a way of claiming her rightful place in southern literature and history. But the next line’s revelation undercuts that assertion: “I’m in / blackface again when the flash freezes us” (11-12). The permanent “frozen” image, then, is of the speaker’s difference from the group, of her caricatured as a racist stereotype, a minstrel rather than a poet. And the image—and its associations of belonging and exclusion—is yet more complex than that, as “blackface” implies a white speaker playing a black role, belonging, then, to neither group exactly.

In the sonnet’s concluding couplet, the speaker jumps in to reclaim her position of belonging, or perhaps to rebut the Fugitives’ and the photographer’s assumptions about her: “My

*father's white, I tell them, and rural*" (13). In other words, her father is the person the Fugitive-Agrarians imagined as one of their own, even their idealized (white) rural farmer. As his daughter, and as a southern poet, she should be "in." But the speaker, in "blackface" and as a woman, cannot belong as her father could have. William Ramsey notes that "the photography shoot renders her as...someone seen yet hidden" (131), a perfect exemplar of the conflict at the heart of the southern pastoral—that the efforts of a group like the Agrarians to portray harmony and tranquility often require disguise and suppression of inequity, conflict, and racial tension. Trethewey exposes those tensions and inequities, making them (as well as her out-of-place but very much in-place speaker) very visible. In the southern pastoral, Trethewey's speaker is both present, manipulating its elements and exposing its flaws, and absent, marginalized in the photograph and in the pastoral's history. In this poem alone, Trethewey demonstrates just how much she belongs to the powerhouse of southern literary figures—and not because her father is rural and white. After all, she is the masterful poet creating this concise and stunningly complex work. Additionally, she reveals and rejects the strains of racism and gendered inequality that run through the southern pastoral tradition.

It is compelling that Trethewey singles out Robert Penn Warren by name, the one Fugitive-turned-Agrarian who deliberated specifically over racial politics in *I'll Take My Stand*. (The other eleven authors in that collection mostly ignored the topic of race.) Warren's piece, "The Briar Patch," asserts that segregation is essential for maintaining harmony in the South. However, his piece also subtly works against the whites-only, white-supremacist tone of the rest of the essays, in that he insists upon racial equality before the law and viable economic self-sufficiency for the black community. As Steven D. Ealy argues, "Ultimately Warren lays down a challenge to Southern whites, and this challenge was, intentionally or unintentionally, aimed directly at his agrarian brothers" (127). Additionally, throughout the rest of his career, Warren

continued to revise his stance on racial issues, later publicly declaring his support for civil rights. And so, Trethewey's poem also challenges the Agrarian position on race, in that Warren is the person "telling us where to stand" (10). And yet, in this portrayal, the Fugitive-era Warren is also "drowned out"—not only by the decibels of encroaching industrialization, but also by the voices of impending social progress. Those voices will eventually "drown out" calls for segregation, even seemingly liberal-minded ones. Trethewey's inclusion of Warren in this poem points toward the fraught history of civil rights in the South, especially among its leading literary figures. In just a few lines, she highlights both the spark of hope that Warren's essay creates, as well as the fact that his Fugitive-era politics had not yet come far enough to call for complete racial equality. Like the speaker of the poem, Warren's position within the Agrarian cadre is both "in" and "out."

The final line of "Southern Pastoral" is wrought in ambiguity. "*You don't hate the south, they ask. You don't hate it?*" (14). At first, the Fugitives seem to insist that she must not hate the South; though the speaker inserts "they ask," the inflection of the line initially reads as a statement. It seems either a patronizing and instructive assertion, or perhaps a pleading one: "You don't hate the south." The quickly repeated question, "You don't hate it?" may reinforce the patronizing or pleading tone, but it also registers some surprise—as if the speaker has indicated that she does not, in fact, hate the South, and the Agrarians wonder how such a thing is possible. Indeed, how is it possible for a highly educated, talented woman of mixed race to live in the South—invited in while simultaneously shut out—and not hate it?

Further questions arise from this final line, as well. For example, which parts of the South does the poet want to be a part of, to reflect on, to keep alive, and which would she rather excise, or rewrite and transform? This tension is reflected earlier, in the sounds of the "soft-eyed cows" who seem to be saying "*no, no*" (6). Even the cows deny that this pastoral scene is the

perfected and idyllic environment the photographer (and those photographed) has tried to establish. But the speaker also counters those cows, holding onto the pastoral dream for a moment, following them with her own “Yes,” accepting the bourbon she’s offered (a gesture of inclusion in “the club,” as it were). And yet, of course, the speaker feels the sting of the racial jokes and marginalization shortly thereafter. The poem is structured around these polarities, these disparate answers to the unresolved questions about what kinds of landscapes and relationships are possible in the South, in its past and present, in its pastoral mythology and its reality of developing industry and strained, even violent, racial politics. “No, no,” the poem claims, the South is no longer an idealized landscape, but “yes,” we see the lush green pastures and forested hills and still desire them. “No, no,” the portrayal of the southern landscape is false, and “yes,” the truer landscape is all that loud disruptive progress behind us, also full of opportunity. And there are additional tensions and conflicts, too: “no, no,” the speaker suggests, I am not included in this group of poets and their legacy, but “yes,” I am in this photograph with them, I am fully aware of their work, and I should have my place among them. “No, no,” I don’t hate the South, but “yes,” I do.

Trethewey’s poem succinctly raises the questions that I will address throughout this project: what does the pastoral mean to southern poets of the twentieth century, and how do they use its elements in their work? What is the legacy of the Fugitive-Agrarians for southern poets? Does their vision still resonate, or is it only possible to take their position with a hefty dose of irony? Is the pastoral still a relevant genre, or is it one trapped in nostalgia and reminiscence, gradually decaying? Can nostalgia in the pastoral function as a redeeming, restorative force that imagines alternatives to our current reality, or is it always longing for a past that never existed, denying the tragedies and conflicts that did exist? Is it a genre that can ably argue for the preservation of the land against industrial and economic development without seeming irrelevant

in the face of those forces? In essence, Trethewey's poem highlights the central claim of this project: the pastoral is available to twentieth-century southern writers for the exploration of a fraught history in a racially and socioeconomically divided region, as well as for the examination of our changing and evolving relationship to the natural world, both our exploitation of it and our reverence for it.



## 2. Central Argument: Complex Possibilities for the Southern Pastoral

Essentially, the preceding questions about the uses of the southern pastoral break down into multiple dichotomies. For example, writers may use the pastoral to evoke an idealized, peaceful southern landscape; on the other hand, however, they may point toward the industrialization of the “New South” in order to undermine that idealized landscape or show it to be impossible. The pastoral may argue for the preservation of the natural world, but it may also turn a blind eye toward the exploitation of natural resources already well underway. Another binary occurs when we consider the pastoral genre's strong associations with sentimental nostalgia, as these associations may cut two ways: nostalgia may simply be a sticky bit of sap that tries to glue together what is otherwise a decaying, crumbling way of life, or it may provide a redeeming force that imagines alternatives to our current reality. Nostalgia, as Svetlana Boym defines it, can be broken down into two forms:

Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia,” on the other hand, “dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. (xviii)

Thus, restorative nostalgia used to evoke a “golden age,” to protect old traditions and hierarchies, may ignore (at its peril) current social realities, and it may glorify a revised version of history, gilding over very real conflicts and very damaging and damning divisions. The most apt example

of restorative nostalgia is perhaps the myth of the Lost Cause, in its glorification of and reverence for the antebellum South and in its paternalistic attitude toward slavery (or in its notable lack of attention to the issue of slavery at all). However, reflective nostalgia for the southern past may be used to illuminate important social values and alternative relationships that run counter to the injustices and abuses of land and people, both past and present. Again, Trethewey's "Southern Pastoral" provides an apt illustration of reflective nostalgia that both countenances the divisive conflicts in the southern past while also reimagining that past, writing herself into it in order to challenge and transform southern letters' lineage and legacy.

The relationship between past and present raises another significant binary found in the southern pastoral—and various southern poets of the twentieth century imagine that split very differently. Some writers, like Allen Tate in "Ode to the Confederate Dead," evoke the past as an unreachable but far more orderly, dignified, and glorious time. Others, like James Dickey, emphasize the continuity between past and present in the eternally salvific world of nature. Still others draw on both past and present, either to highlight the injustices of the past against the march of social and cultural progress, or to examine the wrong-headedness of the present world, so focused on industry and technology to the detriment of our relationships with nature and with one another. A modern pastoral, then, may be used to present an alternative set of values, to highlight the morass of the current social order, or to illustrate the ever-evolving relationships—between people, between people and the land, and between people, the land, and some sense of the divine—in the South (and/or the nation as a whole).

Of course, as with all binaries, the work of the twentieth century southern poets whom I've chosen for this study—Anne Spencer, Jean Toomer, James Dickey, and Eleanor Ross Taylor—never fits neatly on one side or the other. For example, just as in Trethewey's "Southern Pastoral," the work of these writers amply demonstrates that the pastoral can evoke not just

nostalgia but irony, and that it can reveal problems and conflicts as much as it may also stir up a bittersweet tinge of longing for the past (for things like innocence, order, and tradition). And that nostalgia is not necessarily wholly negative; it may provide redemptive moments, as much as it may also threaten to trap us in an objectless longing, a yearning for the “past that never was.” Finally, though it is set in the past, and though it reflects on the South’s literary and racial history, the pastoral may also point toward the future—toward evolving and transforming relationships between the urban and the rural, between the South’s literary forebears and contemporary southern writers, between races and genders. In this project, I will examine what Spencer, Toomer, Dickey, and Taylor have said about the southern pastoral and how they have deployed its tropes and ideals, whether they are directly connected to the powerful coterie of the Fugitive-Agrarians or positioned outside that group by time, space, experience, class, gender, and/or race.

Overall, I contend that the pastoral, for each poet, reveals a particular set of beliefs about the South, focused particularly on how the South uses and relates to the landscape, and its past and present relationships between races, classes, and genders. And so, to convey and support these beliefs, each of the poets selected for this study takes up the pastoral—its history (especially in the South), themes, traditions, and devices—and employs it toward varying ends and aims. These aims may include re-establishing southern traditions or mourning the loss of traditions; inventing the land as a safe haven apart from conflict; recovery and/or revision of southern history, reconciling the South with the larger world (the nation, world events, etc.); asserting voice and establishing agency in a region and genre where voice and agency were previously unavailable; highlighting the lives of people who were often ignored, left out of, or caricatured within the pastoral tradition, and reasserting their full humanity, vitality, and importance to the South; or reconstructing an image of the landscape, culture, and social relationships of the South in order to reveal the possibility of a more just and egalitarian world. Certainly this is not an

exhaustive list of the ways each poet uses the pastoral, but these aims and means are essential to these four poets.

Thus, the pastoral offers a necessary lens through which to view southern literature as well as the South in its past and present, and a new way of examining both well-known poets and lesser-known but equally essential voices, as well as a way of discovering previously unrecognized connections between them. For example, Anne Spencer and James Dickey, poets separated by time, literary categorization, race, and gender, both discover in the South the redeeming force of nature and they deploy its redemptive force against abuses of power, waste of life, and injustice. Similarly, Jean Toomer and Eleanor Ross Taylor, separated by many of the same factors, both employ an ironized pastoral in order to undercut southern mythologies about various groups of people, as well as to discover truer connections between people in ecstatic or consolatory moments. Thus, the pastoral, in the hands of twentieth-century southern writers, often goes far beyond a nostalgic mooning for a “past that never was,” a golden age in which all (white landowning men) were in harmony with the land and with one another, an idyllic and leisurely escape from the pressures of modernity, industrialization, capitalism, and social upheaval. Rather, the pastoral is available to and vital for southern writers in their explorations of those pressures, as well as for reflections on a fraught past, a violent history, and a region with sharp divisions and conflicts between races, classes, and genders.



### 3. Situating the Argument: A Brief History of the Pastoral

To understand why the pastoral is a key to understanding southern literature, we should perhaps begin at the beginning. In this section, I will provide the contours of how the pastoral has evolved throughout history and various literary movements, focusing particularly on what initially distinguished American pastoral from its European predecessors; on the development of

the idealized pastoral in the South, especially in Thomas Jefferson's vision, over and against the reality of slavery, cash-crop monoculture, and the necessity of domestic manufacturing; and on the revival of one particularly influential version of pastoral in the Agrarian manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*. Outlining this history, even briefly, will demonstrate the pastoral's evolution in American literature, especially southern literature, as well as defend my definition of the twentieth-century southern pastoral as a set of beliefs—rather than a set of generic conventions—about the South's highest ideals and possibilities, and its explicit or implicit representations of the South's worst problems and divisions. The pastoral, in the twentieth-century South, became what Raymond Williams calls “a way of seeing” (34) and a way of examining the values of their particular society, but even beyond that, the pastoral became a way of advocating for a particular vision of the South, a rhetorical exhortation holding the South to a higher set of aspirations (though of course the specific aspirations and aims varied for each author).

The long history of pastoral literature dates from the third century BCE, with Theocritus' composition of his famous idylls, continuing through Virgil's eclogues, which further formalized and allegorized the genre, and reappearing throughout European and American literature in subsequent centuries with varying emphases on maintenance of the social order (the pastoral serving as, occasionally, a “release valve” for social tensions and/or a model for class hierarchy), leisurely escape from the court or the city (see Marie Antoinette's golden shears), the superior virtues of the country life, or romantic connections between the individual and nature. David Baker, in his succinct overview of the pastoral tradition, explains that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poets revised that tradition, adding “further wit and richness, and more complex metaphoric density” (784). However, during Romanticism, the genre evolved again, becoming “considerably less playful or enchanted” (784). In part, the Romantic version responds to its historical context; “at the birth of the city, at the inception of the smoky Industrial Revolution,

nature—the pastoral—had never been more appropriate or necessary” (785). And indeed, in the present day, the pastoral is perhaps even more necessary, in response to our ever-increasing exploitation of natural resources and the subsequent mounting ecological crises we face. Thus, throughout the long history of the pastoral, these different rhetorical uses and shifts in emphasis create continuity in some elements of the pastoral but also inevitable divergence in content, form, rhetorical use, and interpretation.



The divergences between European and American pastoral are particularly noteworthy, as they help to explain the fierce longing for and the ferocious tenacity of the American incarnation’s idealized imagery, especially in the South. One particular difference relies upon the distance between the ideal world, conjured by the pastoral, and the social reality in which the writers, readers, and listeners lived. Most scholars agree that the pastoral always relies upon a distinction (whether explicit or implicit) between the ideal and the real; Frank Kermode, in his foundational study of English pastoral poetry argues that “pastoral depends upon an opposition between the simple, or natural, and the cultivated” (19). Other scholars, including Leo Marx, Annette Kolodny, and Jan Bakker, extend Kermode’s claim, noting that the simplified ideal pastoral world in European literature was always understood to be both imaginary and impossible to sustain—the gap between the ideal and the real was deep and wide and clear. The European pastoral generally depicted the lives of shepherds (and in different versions, cattle herders and farmers, in bucolics and georgics, respectively) as carefree and innocent, beautiful and marked by abundance and love and sunshine (a primary exemplar is Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to his Love”). And so, the audience of the pastoral might temporarily join those carefree people in their idealized landscape, Bakker claims, “for refuge, reorientation, and spiritual and physical refreshment among its orchards, meadows, and shade-dappled lands” (6). However, the pastoral

is only “a transitory experience,” and these visitors must eventually depart. Thus, the European pastoral offered only a brief respite—and certainly, the lives of the shepherds, cattle herders, and farmers were never so jolly and carefree as represented, and they, too, must return to work, to real and difficult labor (if indeed they ever really had time to loiter, flirt, pluck petals, play the lute, roll in the hay). And those who lived solely imaginatively in the *locus amoenus* must also, eventually, return to the court, to the markets, to the cities, to their hierarchical, conflict-ridden, far less simplistic or simplified world.

The earliest days of discovery in America, however, seemed to suggest the possibility of a permanent paradise, a pastoral never-ending, a world untainted by the sufferings and divisions of civilization, a total renewal and rebirth. Indeed, Kolodny highlights the frequent application of feminine and especially maternal imagery in defining the New World landscape, in order to convey this metaphoric rebirth: “at the deepest psychological level, the move to America was experienced as the daily reality of what has become its dominating metaphor: regression from the cares of adult life and a return to the primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape” (6). The explorers and pamphleteers and hawkers of the New World often describe it as the ideal world made attainable, the pastoral’s promised abundance and freedom and leisure and beauty all made tangible and possible. Thus, American pastoral takes the ideal, initially, as the real; initially, it refuses the distinction between the two, which changes the character of pastoral dramatically. In the European tradition, generally, the pastoral might serve, at best, as an escape from daily pressures and political and socioeconomic strife, and at worst, as a pacifier for the upper classes, assuring them that the lower classes do not suffer and that they prefer the life among the trees and hills. In America, however, the promise of the pastoral appears within reach; as Kolodny argues, “American pastoral, unlike European, holds at its very core the promise of fantasy as daily reality” (6). Due to this shift from fantasy to reality, Kolodny follows, the

American tradition pushed the imagery and tropes of the pastoral further than the European tradition ever even conceived of doing. The early European explorers imagined America as a new Eden, a literal Arcady, the pastoral's promised land realized.

And yet, the very act of settling the New World—colonizing, eking out a living, farming, building, cutting down trees, plowing the land, pioneering farther, and settling in a new place to begin the colonization process all over again—inevitably disrupted, even destroyed, this new Eden. And it not only disrupted the literal landscape, but it challenged the very heart of the pastoral vision of America. As Jan Bakker argues, John Smith's Jamestown was marketed as “the best farmland in the world,” but the settlers found their lives grim, difficult, and full of obstacles; thus, even the earliest accounts of European settlers are marked by a rift between the paradisiacal dream and the reality of poverty, ruin, sickness, and many other obstacles. These earliest European inhabitants, initially so certain that America might be Arcady, “did not find peace or revitalization at all. They brought their own disharmonies with them, the whole teeming, disappointing European world from which they had sought to flee” (Bakker 9). Even those settlers and subsequent generations who found a more satisfying or successful life discovered that the pastoral dream could not hold—especially *because of* their economic development and success. Kolodny highlights the “inevitable paradox” of the development of civilization: “the success of settlement depended on the ability to master the land, transforming virgin territories into something else—a farm, a village, a road, a canal, a railway, a mine, a factory, a city, and finally, an urban nation” (7).

Thus, the uniquely American pastoral dream—the possibility of a new, unspoiled and unspoilable Eden—almost from the outset is damaged in at least two ways. First, the beauty and abundance of the land itself did not, by some alchemy, fundamentally transform human nature, nor did it expunge the dreams of wealth and progress that competed with the pastoral dream; and

second, akin to the “observer effect,” simply by living on the land, and particularly by enacting their ideas of what civilization should entail (“a farm, a village, a road,” etc.), the settlers and their descendants fundamentally transformed the landscape itself. And though the pastoral in Europe had often been used as a way of depicting “nature improved,” it rapidly became clear that the American landscape was not being transformed into a well-manicured garden but rather, at first, into a large-scale agricultural economy, and later, into an industrial and technological one. Additionally, and no less importantly, from the settlement of the New World through the next centuries, America’s pastoral dream of harmony was marred by the violence against and exploitation of Native Americans as well as African people imported for slavery. This violence—encompassing dehumanization, cruelty, abuse, war, all the way up to genocide—set against the lush, green landscape of the New World paints the starkest and most heinous portrait of America’s ruined pastoral.

Thus, the key to understanding the uniquely American version of pastoral is that the American pastoral, and especially the southern pastoral, is defined by sincere anguish over the fact that America had the ideal world in hand, and America subsequently, and in various ways, destroyed it. We both received and ruined this gift—and the whole of the process happened before our eyes, within historical memory. This key shapes the literature and art of America throughout its history, whether the artist seeks to return to the lost idyllic world or seeks to investigate the mechanisms behind the ruin of that world.

And so, the pastoral impulse continued throughout America’s early years and even strengthened, despite the growing certainty that the pastoral’s promised land of abundance, genuine community, harmony, and peace was irrevocably ruined. And that impulse compelled Americans “both to continue pursuing the fantasy in daily life, and, when that failed, to codify it as part of the culture’s shared dream life, through art” (Kolodny 7). Additionally, American

artists and writers investigated the loss itself; how the destruction of the ideal world occurred, or what the most devastating aspects were, as well as how we might make amends, differs in various authors' versions of the pastoral. For example, the exploitation of nature as capital, rather than as spiritual pathway and salvation, features heavily in American Transcendentalists' writing (especially, of course, in Henry David Thoreau) and reappears in the Agrarians, who claim the spiritual and intellectual and communal superiority of the pastoral for the South exclusively, against northern industry. The genocide and exile of Native Americans, as well as the exploitation of African slaves, features heavily in other writers, including abolitionist literature. Still others cling dearly to the pastoral impulse itself, attempting to leap over lived history and re-gild the past to make it paradise once again—writers who glory in and glorify the Lost Cause and the Plantation Legend, for example, try to provide an escape route back toward the idyllic land.



This heartbreaking loss of the ideal world, as well as the desperate appeals to reclaim and reestablish Arcadia, plays out perhaps nowhere so clearly as it does in the literature of the South. One of the earliest and most striking examples of the complex southern pastoral—a text that espouses the pastoral dream as a plausible reality in America's economy, politics, and culture, but that also points toward those things that threaten the pastoral dream and have already begun to destroy it from within—is Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785). Initially, Jefferson's *Notes* appears to be the exemplar of the American pastoral, in contradistinction to the European pastoral—that is, it appears to depict America as Arcadia made not only possible, but literal and tangible. As Leo Marx notes, “Nowhere in our literature is there a more appealing, vivid, or thorough statement of the case for the pastoral ideal than in *Notes on Virginia*” (118). Jefferson establishes this plausible American pastoral reality in several ways. First, he details the bounty of his surroundings, describing its wildlife, natural springs, mineral resources, rivers, land

formations, and vegetation. Even his most rational, dry descriptions, in which he incorporates tables, lists, and figures, reinforce the land's overwhelming abundance. But occasionally, Jefferson shifts into rhapsodic tones, elevating the landscape even further toward the mythic ideal, as in this passage on the Blue Ridge Mountains, threaded through by the Shenandoah and Patowmac rivers:

It is as placid and delightful, as that is wild and tremendous. For the mountain being cloven asunder, she presents to your eye, through the cleft, a small catch of smooth blue horizon, at an infinite distance in the plain country, inviting you, as it were, from the riot and tumult roaring around, to pass through the breach and participate of the calm below. Here the eye ultimately composes itself; and that way too the road happens actually to lead....This scene is worth a voyage across the Atlantic. ("Query IV")

In these moments of enthralled enthusiasm, Jefferson steps into the role of guidebook writer, and the guidebook is for Eden rediscovered.

In addition to expounding on the landscape's abundance and beauty, Jefferson also differentiates the American economy, primarily agrarian, from the European industrial and manufacturing economy, again distinguishing America in pastoral terms and reinforcing the conception of America as the ideal world. In Jefferson's vision, America has been and must continue to be an agrarian land, a permanent retreat from (or rejection of) the crowded urban world of factories. Jefferson laments the fact that during the Revolutionary War, Americans had to turn to domestic manufacture, but assures his reader that they will give that industry over to Europe and return to farming because, in short, they can—the abundance of available land renders working for someone else in a manufacturing job unnecessary. "In Europe," he argues, "the lands are either cultivated, or locked up against the cultivator. Manufacture must therefore be resorted to of necessity not of choice, to support the surplus of their people" ("Query XIX"). But in America, "we have an immensity of land courting the industry of the husbandman."

Therefore, “while we have land to labor...let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff” and “let our work-shops remain in Europe” (“Query XIX”).

One of the primary distinctions between Europe and America, as Jefferson sees it, is the attainable possibility that everyone in America could be a self-sufficient, land-owning farmer—and so, the pastoral dream, again, is presented as reality, rather than as a temporary respite from city life, factory labor, a life under someone else’s thumb.

The corollary to self-sufficiency in farming is Jefferson’s ideal form of government, which also grows directly out of the pastoral. That corollary is the Jeffersonian democracy, a vision of government rooted in Aristotelian agrarianism, which postulates, according to Douglass G. Adair, that a “society composed of self-sufficient and economically independent farmers” would be the best society, because these farmers represent the “golden mean of virtue between riches and poverty,” and because of their virtue and stability, they would serve as the most capable governors for the nation (1-2). In deploying the independent yeoman farmer as the symbol of ideal economic, social, and political organization, Jefferson again transfers the pastoral dream of the uncorrupted and incorruptible shepherd (or neatherd or ploughman) onto the daily reality of American life—and he reinforces the belief that, through these farmers, there is a way to reclaim and reestablish the pastoral dream. In an oft-quoted passage, Jefferson defines “those who labour in the earth” as “the chosen people of God, if he ever had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue” (“Query XIX”). The yeoman farmer is not only a “model of independence” for Jefferson, as Mary Weaks-Baxter asserts, but he is also “the inheritor of a tradition that associated the pastoral with a utopia, or the Garden of the New World,” and he became, for Jefferson, “a symbol of the republic itself” (8). Thus, Jefferson emphasizes one particular aspect of the pastoral myth, that of the yeoman farmer who, it is presumed, is neither subject to the greed and slothful indolence of the very rich, nor to

the desperation and resultant envy and immorality of the very poor. This figure is essential, not only for agricultural production, but for the virtuous equilibrium he brings to the government. With the yeomen in charge not only of themselves but of the nation, the pastoral dream of America might yet live to be a complete and whole reality.

However, throughout Jefferson's *Notes*, the darker realities of the burgeoning nation crop up in unexpected ways which disturb and disrupt the otherwise idealized image he builds, and in these dissonant moments, we can see the ways in which the American pastoral dream, and particularly the southern pastoral dream, is already damaged and crumbling. The exile and genocide of the Native Americans and the stain of continuing enslavement of African Americans haunts Jefferson's *Notes*; indeed, the white settlers' brutality and cruelties, violence and inhumanity hover over the whole text, appearing sometimes in the oddest places, as if these crimes were insuppressible and demand to be countenanced. In other places, Jefferson reflects deliberately and at length on the invidious issues of "Indian Removal" and slavery, trying to wrestle the American situation, as well as his own views, back toward a defensible moral position.

For example, Jefferson is plainly rueful (though somewhat defensive) about the diminishing populations of Native Americans, as he does clearly admire them for their bravery, their keen sensibility, their "vivacity and activity of mind" ("Query XVII"). Amid his depictions of the overall character of Native American society—particularly the description of Native American women's ability to bear children—he quietly notes that "an inhuman practice once prevailed in this country of making slaves of the Indians" ("Query XVII"). Earlier, he recounts the dramatic loss of tribes and population, noting that "what would be the melancholy sequel of their history, may however be augured from the census of 1669; by which we discover that the tribes therein enumerated were, in the space of sixty-two years, reduced to about one-third of

their former numbers” (“Query XI”). However, after announcing this tragic, astonishing figure, he tries to recoup some higher moral ground, claiming that the idea that white settlers took the Native Americans’ land by force is overblown; most of their land, he claims, was purchased fairly from them. But then, the magnitude of the tragedy is revealed again, in Jefferson’s recognition of how much knowledge and culture has been lost: “It is to be lamented then, very much to be lamented, that we have suffered so many of the Indian tribes already to extinguish, without our having previously collected and deposited in the records of literature, the general rudiments at least of the languages they spoke” (“Query XI”). Thus, despite his overall portrayal of the South as a bucolic, bountiful, and tranquil place, Jefferson’s accounts of the suffering and devastation of Native populations—even just those in Virginia, not to mention the rest of the colonies—disrupt the pastoral veneer of the South, and his sorrow over these accounts is legible.

Perhaps the darkest and most odious disruption of Jefferson’s idyllic pastoral is his frequent wrangling over the issue of slavery. He vacillates between recounting the positive steps that America has taken to eradicate slavery and delineating the multiple ways in which the evil of slavery continues to undermine the morality and stability of the states, and he vacillates between calling for the restoration of the slaves’ dignity and revealing the extent of his own racist views, detailing the ways he finds black people inferior to whites. For example, in one of his early descriptions of slavery, Jefferson claims that the population of slaves continues to increase due to “mild treatment,” and he continues in an optimistic vein to explain that one of the first acts of the new republican government was to outlaw the continued importation of slaves. Thus, he concludes, “This will in some measure stop the increase of this great political and moral evil, while the minds of our citizens may be ripening for a complete emancipation of human nature” (“Query VIII”). Much later, however, Jefferson contradicts the idea of “mild treatment,” explaining that black slaves have, easily, “ten thousand recollections...of the injuries they have

sustained” (“Query XIV”). And in other sections, Jefferson dehumanizes the slaves further, making it plain just how far the “minds of our citizens”—including his own mind—are from the idea of “complete emancipation,” let alone equality. As a small but significant example, Jefferson places one description of Albino black people amid a section on wildlife, between a list of birds and a description of fish and insects (“Query XVII”). Earlier, and far more explicitly, he creates an extended series of racist generalizations about black people, making claims about their simple-mindedness, their uncontrolled ardor, their “strong and disagreeable odour,” and their “dull, tasteless, and anomalous” imaginative capabilities. He concludes (though he acknowledges the limitations of his own “study”): “I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind” (“Query XIV”).

But later the wrangling begins again; despite defending his racist ideas with his observations (which remind us, now, that Jefferson himself was not an independent yeoman farmer but a cavalier planter who depended upon slaves to run Monticello’s gardens and farms), Jefferson returns to the moral depravity that is slavery, and he reveals his deep-seated fears that slavery, above all other problems, will destroy—or is already in the process of destroying—the idyllic pastoral America he has envisioned. Here, too, in increasingly apocalyptic language, Jefferson vacillates between a more subtle racist idea—that slavery is bad for the white planters, as it will corrupt them morally and spiritually—and the out-and-out recognition that the rights of the slaves (whom he calls “citizens,” in perhaps a slip of the pen) are being “trampled,” and thus he demonstrates that, no matter his attempts to cover or deny it, slavery is the ruination of everyone, master and slave, politician and citizen, philosopher and gardener. In a climactic moment, Jefferson writes,

Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us. (“Query XVIII”)

Jefferson’s ideal solution to this problem is to emancipate and then immediately recolonize the slaves to a country apart from America entirely, to evade the race war that he sees as inevitable. And then, he wishes America to return to that idyllic, agrarian world run by self-sufficient farmers, with no need of slaves; they may not generate wealth as plantations do, but they will maintain their moral stature. Indeed, it is telling that this section, frantic and distraught over the injustice and inhumanity of slavery, is followed immediately by the section which claims the goodness and virtue of America lies in its independent, upright yeoman farmers, who are surely “God’s chosen people.” This adamant return to the tenets of the pastoral—with no further mention of slavery at all—represents a clear desire to escape from the moral quandary that is slavery in the South, to smooth over and turn away from such an immoral plague.



This conflict at the heart of Jefferson’s text—as well as the obvious fact that slavery continued a full century after it was written—remains at the heart of the antebellum southern pastoral, often so much so that one theory of southern literature holds that its authors devoted so much of their energy to the defense of slavery that they were unable to produce any high-quality, serious, and artful literature for the following century (Smiley 12). While that theory may exaggerate the South’s lack of complex literary achievement (and indeed, focuses primarily on white male authors, to the exclusion of others), it is true that the pastoral myth was often deployed rhetorically to protect and defend the southern economic system dependent on slavery. As Elizabeth Jane Harrison notes, by the early nineteenth century, “a pastoral tradition in

southern literature had been established as a means of perpetuating a myth of aristocratic origins and defending the slave system” (3). Lewis P. Simpson, in his influential and compelling study, frames the pastoral in southern literature, from its inception and throughout the nineteenth century, as “the dispossessed garden of the chattel,” arguing that the South, like New England, began as a kind of “errand into the wilderness,” a way of creating a moral, even utopic, society apart from European capitalist ventures and developing technology and industry.

But that moral and utopian garden was despoiled by the South’s growing emphasis on monoculture and cash crops, on exports and commerce, and by its dependence on the slave system in order to expand its wealth and commercial power. In order to cling to a vision of itself as a moral and idyllic retreat, a pastoral paradise, southern literature mythologized the plantation as an “improved paradise,” a harmonious, paternalistic, feudal society that worked toward the benefit of everyone and maintained a close relationship with the bountiful land. As Mark Malvasi explains, in a description consonant with Simpson’s claims,

From the perspective of the southern slaveholders and their spokesmen, slavery alone could ensure progress without the social dislocation, political upheaval, and moral confusion that tormented bourgeois society. For these men and women who too seriously the biblical injunction to be their brothers’ keepers, slavery seemed the best means of preserving a Christian social order in the modern world. (2)

Thus, throughout the antebellum South, writers, philosophers, politicians, rhetors, lawyers, and many other southern thinkers began to codify the South’s economic, cultural, and political systems within a pastoral framework that defended their agricultural economy and asserted the moral superiority of their class-, gender-, and race-based hierarchy, in order, in part, to expunge the moral guilt and spiritual corruption of slavery. The pastoral façade, though clearly damaged, was under reconstruction in much of the South’s antebellum literature.

And the building of that façade continued even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, despite the abolition of slavery after the Civil War and the near-ruin of the South's economy—or perhaps because of these factors. Indeed, the pastoral myth returned postbellum and took hold in the American imagination (both North and South, to be sure) with even more tenacity. These pastoral myths developed variously as the Plantation Legend or Lost Cause mythology, as well as the Agrarian return to Jefferson's symbolic yeoman farmer. The common thread between these versions is the evocation of a "golden age"—a more innocent, orderly, communal, and peaceful era in the South. "Postwar southern writing was suffused with nostalgia for a bygone era, and with romantic melancholy," as Robert Bone explains, and "pastoral was the ideal vehicle for these emotions" (10). Pastoral was also the ideal vehicle for a rhetorical reframing of the South—both past and present, and even future—and writers deployed its familiar tropes and devices toward multiple aims and ends. For literature that celebrated the Plantation Legend or Lost Cause mythology, one aim—perhaps surprising, given the emphasis on creating a separate and distinctive southern identity—was to symbolically reconcile the North and the South, usually through the trope of the plantation owner's daughter marrying a northern man. A second aim, more consistent throughout postbellum literature, was to defend the southern past against continuing critique, and to repaint that past as a noble, chivalrous, good, and just society. Bone writes, "These writers saw their work not so much as a defense of white supremacy as of a rural and patriarchal way of life which white southerners had inherited from their English forebears" (15). Thus, the underlying racism, sexism, and classism (though quite clear) are repurposed as a celebration of an orderly, neat, and tranquil feudal system, where contented slaves work for benevolent masters. Thomas L. McHaney sharply draws the outline of this reconstructed, crystallized myth of the Lost Cause:

According to the story, genteel large-scale farmers, gracious and hospitable, and their idle, adoring spouses and polite children lived in spacious mansions and [were] served by a worshipful agrarian peasantry and loyal house staff—both composed of childlike people of African descent who thrived under the protective custody of the ‘peculiar institution’ of slavery. (16)

This reimagined cast of characters in the patriarchal, paternalistic plantation not only attempted to persuade readers of the virtues and nobility of southern history, but it also worked to promote a conservative ideology in the present. More specifically, the postbellum “Lost Cause” pastoral serves as a condemnation of Reconstruction-era policies and growing calls for equal rights for black people and for women. Harrison explains that

the male pastoral became a more hysterical defense of the white patriarchy than a nostalgic idealization of a genteel society...[P]ostbellum southern pastorals became both a reflection of the dominant mood of the culture and a means of shaping and reinforcing racist and misogynist views. (5)

Not only does the plantation legend literature bolster and clarify the (white male) conservative values of the Reconstruction- and post-Reconstruction-era South, it also serves to gild over continuing economic tensions and problems and to justify the continuing subjugation of black sharecroppers and tenant farmers.

In short, the logic of the plantation legend is this: the southern past, with its feudal hierarchies, its happy slaves and benevolent masters, its chivalric codes and genteel manners, was the glorious crown of American history, and so the present would benefit from anything approximating a return to that glorious past. Thus, the glittering image of the plantation of the past became a kind of diversion, shifting attention away from the fact that the new agricultural economic model mirrored the very worst of plantation life, perpetuating its oppressive racial and classist hierarchies. In his depiction of the South in the early twentieth century, Thomas L. McHaney points out the parallels between the antebellum and postbellum economic realities: “As

in the slave-plantation era, Southern agriculture was once again practiced on a large scale, with hordes of laborers who, like millworkers, worked at backbreaking jobs for long hours regardless of age, gender, or condition and lived in cheap housing they could never own” (107).

Additionally, the pastoral ideal of leisure, supposedly so accessible in an agrarian economy, ignored the actual hardships many experienced. “The South had apparent leisure,” McHaney continues,

because most of its enterprises followed the seasonal rhythms of agriculture, but for the many who owned no land and could not even plant a kitchen garden, this meant being periodically out of work, on reduced incomes, or dependent on a ruthless system of finance capitalism that kept them poor and servile. (107)

Thus, the literary pastoral of the plantation legend returns postbellum, ignoring or covering over very real social and economic tensions, or arguing that those racial and economic tensions would dissipate with a return to the old aristocratic order.

In addition, the pastoral plantation legend emphasized the centrality of agriculture in the South, resisting the intrusions of industry and manufacturing, sometimes by denying that they existed at all. The counterpart legend of the South, the myth of the Jeffersonian independent and virtuous yeoman farmer, grew up alongside the plantation myth, and it, too, takes the resistance to encroaching industrialism as its launching point. It, too, denies the oppression and violence of slavery, not by rewriting it into an idyllic feudal hierarchy but by denying its power and/or its existence at all. Many twentieth-century southern authors claim that the South was, in fact, rooted in a Jeffersonian agrarian democracy, thereby deftly skipping over the past century and a half of slavery and subjugation, while others acknowledge the plantations but either assign them solely to the Deep South, as though part of a separate region entirely, or claim that the planters’ political, cultural, and social power was never as great as it was imagined to be. In searching for

a “viable or usable past,” as Mary Weaks-Baxter highlights, several writers shift their focus away from the plantation and toward “the recreation of an even older myth founded on the American ideals of Jeffersonian democracy” (14), a myth which has the distinct advantage of being “an American ideal with southern roots” (7). In the twentieth century, the primary proponents of this myth of the yeoman farmer were the group of Vanderbilt writers who first call themselves the Fugitives, and toward the end of the 1920s, term themselves the Agrarians.



The Fugitives began as a group of students and professors at Vanderbilt University, a literary-minded coterie who held salons and readings, discussed literature and politics, and edited and commented on one another’s poetry. The core members—those who remained together or corresponded throughout the 1920s and rose to prominence on the national literary scene—were Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and, a slightly later addition, Robert Penn Warren. They published the first issue of their literary magazine, *The Fugitive*, in 1922; in that issue’s introduction and selected poems we find the first germs of the agrarian myth they would later embrace. In the foreword to the first issue, for example, Ransom claims that “the Fugitive flees from nothing faster than from the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South” (i). In decrying the blue-blood tradition of the plantation legend and its “moonlight and magnolias” romanticizing, the Fugitives seemed to take their first steps away from the nostalgic, Victorian-esque tales of nobility and noblesse oblige and the postbellum poetry of Timrod and Lanier, and to move toward the modernist poetry that many of the Fugitives—especially Allen Tate, a devoted reader of T. S. Eliot—had begun reading and discussing.

In a particularly telling moment which reinforces the Fugitives’ focus on departing from old, decayed southern mythologies, Tate and Davidson respond to Harriet Monroe’s characterizations of southern poetry, published in 1922 and 1923. In a 1922 special issue of

*Poetry*, Monroe depicts the poetry included as a kind of creative awakening in the South; however, her description of the southern material from which those writers draw sounds quite nostalgic and arcane. She characterizes the poetry as featuring

romantic episodes of early history and legend...a landscape of languorous beauty, melting into the vividly colored tropical ocean along white stretches of sand; and a proud people who have always commanded life a bit cavalierly, contrasted with the sweetly indolent, humorous, more or less loyally subservient African. (32)

Later, in 1923, in a review of DuBose Heyward and Hervey Allen's *Carolina Chansons*, she advises southern writers to focus on the "soft silken reminiscent life...of a region so specialized in beauty, so rich in racial tang and prejudice, so jewel-weighted with a heroic past" (qtd. in Stewart 38). It may be that Monroe's depiction of southern literature is meant to be read as hyperbolic; her word choice is certainly a bit over the top. And Tate and Davidson were quick to castigate her for it. In a letter of response, printed in *The Fugitive*, Davidson condescends to her, writing, "Undoubtedly the Old South is literary material to those who may care to write about it. But many may not...and what business of that is Aunt Harriet's?" Allen Tate seconded: "We who are Southerners know the fatality of such an attitude—the old atavism and sentimentality are always imminent" (qtd. in Stewart 38).

And yet, the Fugitives *do* define themselves as adamantly southern, and perhaps they are not so far removed from the "old atavism and sentimentality" as they imagine themselves. John L. Stewart, in his comprehensive study of the Fugitives and Agrarians, notes that "the Fugitives fled from the professional custodians of the Old South and all their gift-book phrases about moonlight and roses; yet the idiom and attitudes of their poetry were closer to the manner they repudiated than to that of the aggressively avant-garde journals" (27). Their attachment to the southern past is yet another germ of the Agrarian movement to come. In part, they could not

detach from all those old southern clichés so easily because they, too, romanticized the South and themselves as poets (several of them were college students, after all), but also because shortly after they began publishing their work, they took up the task of defending the South from its detractors. In 1925, just three years after the first issue of *The Fugitive*, H. L. Mencken and several other members of the national media descended upon Dayton, Tennessee—not so far from Vanderbilt—for the Scopes Trial and began to excoriate the South as a redneck, ignorant backwater (or, in Mencken’s earlier and perhaps more famous insult, “the Sahara of the Bozart”). These nationally-publicized attacks—in addition to the continuing industrialization and urbanization of the South—turned the Fugitives’ thoughts homeward rather than abroad, and these precipitating events turned them, over the course of the next four years, toward their theory of Agrarianism. They sought to discover a “usable past”—one that would enable them to explain, defend, and advocate for the South and its traditions, as well as push back against what they saw as the dehumanizing capitalist industrialization of northern cities. They landed, then, not on the plantation legend, with its accompanying complications of slavery and commercial export, but rather on the myth of the independent yeoman farmer, the Jeffersonian emblem of the edenic pastoral South.

The culmination of their redefinition of the South as a rural haven of self-sufficient, contented, intellectual, and virtuous farmers—a far cry from both the plantation legends of the South and the image of the soulless, mechanized North—is *I’ll Take My Stand*, a collection of essays by “Twelve Southerners,” including Ransom, Davidson, Tate, and Warren, as well as Andrew Lytle, Frank Owsley, and several others. And yet, their turn toward Agrarianism had begun even in their Fugitive days, as Daniel Cross Turner illustrates in his summary of Fugitive poetry’s themes, which include

a distinctively (white) southern voice, the rhythms and language of the Bible, an emphasis on community and family ties, an attention to the past (sometimes rising to the level of ancestor worship as well as remembrance of the Lost Cause of the Civil War with its glorified pathos of defeat), and an unparalleled devotion to place. (xv)

The Agrarians built upon these earlier themes and crystallized them in their essays, essentially rebuilding and reinventing the South as an alternative vision of what America was and could be again. The essays take up diverse subjects and slightly different viewpoints (as mentioned earlier, for example, Warren's essay is the only one to focus specifically on race relations, and despite its overall conservative stance on maintaining segregation, Davidson initially tried to exclude the piece on the grounds that it diverged too far from the collection's stance<sup>1</sup>), but on the whole the collection builds toward one cohesive vision of the agricultural South. Thus, the collection consciously works to establish Davidson's "autochthonous ideal" of the South—the southern heritage so deeply ingrained as to be a kind of unconscious knowledge and collective memory, drawn from the very land itself.

In many ways, then, *I'll Take My Stand* reinvents the South as a pastoral world, and it carefully shapes the southern pastoral as a set of beliefs about what the South was, is, and should be. There is some scholarly debate, however, about how to categorize *I'll Take My Stand*, whether to consider it as strictly literary or predominately rhetorical and political, and even whether it should be considered a pastoral work. Louise Cowan, for example, fundamentally denies that the book is a pastoral work, dismissing the pastoral as "a kind of play-acting in a world apart from everyday life, a world in which one can cut oneself off from the court and assume quaint costumes and pretty names and recite fanciful lyrics" (195). Instead, she categorizes the collection as epic, reviving and renewing traditional values, and creating "a vision

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<sup>1</sup> Steven D. Ealy thoroughly describes the conflict over Warren's essay in his article, "'A Place for the Negro' in the Agrarian Scheme: Robert Penn Warren's Contribution to *I'll Take My Stand*."

of the permanent and undying lineaments of a society toward which the human enterprise has tended and toward which it can still aspire” (200). Brand Short, on the other hand, defines the work in its cultural moment as rhetorical, and only with the passage of time as “timeless,” universal, and poetic. He argues that “there is little doubt that *I’ll Take My Stand* is a rhetorical response to a given exigency in a particular historical context” (116). However, these views on the collection are not quite as far apart as they initially appear, especially if we accept what I have argued throughout this introduction about the role of the pastoral, especially in the South. I believe the pastoral is always both literary and rhetorical, in that it draws on literary traditions and tropes in its attempt to persuade readers of a particular vision of the South. Additionally, the pastoral exhorts its readers to create that idealized South not only imaginatively but in reality. Thus, though Cowan and I disagree on our terminology, we do align in interpreting *I’ll Take My Stand* as advocating for a return to a particular set of values; in some ways, certainly, this advocacy is akin to the Bakhtinian role of the epic, but it is nearly impossible to read *I’ll Take My Stand* without noting its heavy emphasis on traditional American pastoral themes and images. Andrew Lytle’s essay, “The Hind Tit,” for example, fully revives the pastoral myth, using its images and devices to portray the happy, simple, rustic country folk on their mythical, ever-pleasant farm. Additionally, the distinction between poetics and rhetoric is much blurrier than Short allows, as *I’ll Take My Stand*, even eighty-five years later, still presents clear ideological goals, and its attempt to convey a “timeless statement affirming the importance of nature in human life” (116) is very much a part of its rhetorical aim.

Still other scholars, like Daniel Cross Turner and John L. Stewart, categorize the collection of essays as a fable, with a fable’s typical moralizing underpinning. Stewart’s portrayal of the tenets of this fable is succinct and brilliant:

Agrarianism had its Adamatic hero, the yeoman farmer; its lost Garden, the bountiful subsistence farm of the past; its Satan, the Northern scientist-industrialist; its Hell, the modern city. Implicit everywhere in it was a narrative of fatal knowledge, a fall from grace, a defiance of the supernatural, and after suffering, a quest for salvation. There was even a body of the Elect: the Southerners who might yet reenter the kingdom. (205)

Agrarianism's parallels with the story of Adam and Eve's ouster from the Garden of Eden certainly align it with the conventions of a fable—but they also fundamentally align it with pastoral mythology.<sup>2</sup> It seems to me, then, that *I'll Take My Stand* is best categorized and analyzed as a pastoral—specifically, the southern pastoral which, at its heart, is a set of beliefs about the South and an attempt to persuade readers of those beliefs. Additionally, the pastoral provides a framework under which each of these other categories—epic, political tract, and fable—fits easily.

Analyzing Ransom's "Statement of Principles" only affirms a reading of the book as a rhetorically-motivated pastoral creation. Ransom's "Statement" opens the book with a loose outline of the major claims of the collection to which "every one of the contributors subscribed" (xx), and it is worth delving into, even briefly, in order to more explicitly draw the connections between the collective Agrarian vision and the pastoral. Very early in his essay, Ransom sets out the overarching argument of the collection, claiming the central conflict the authors address as "Agrarian *versus* Industrial" (xix). This binary is, of course, a familiar one for readers of the pastoral; it sets up the terms for pastoral authors from Marlowe to Jefferson and beyond. Ransom, of course, attaches each of these dichotomous terms to a region of the United States—

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Bone, citing Larry Taylor's definition, also identifies the pastoral's roots with not only Greek and Roman literature but also the biblical story of Eden. He writes, "The major pastoral conventions...include '(1) people of a low socio-economic class, (2) living in simplicity and harmony, (3) against a background of rural nature. In the classical pattern, this subject emerges as (1) Corydon, Lycidas, and Amaryllis, (2) tending their flocks, weaving garlands, and singing songs, (3) out among the fields, caves, and brooks of Arcady.' In the Christian-Judaic pattern, it is Adam and Eve, spinning and gardening in Eden" (xvi-xvii).

the South holds fast to its agrarian way of life, while the North continues its expansion of industry throughout the country. The rest of the essay is structured around this dichotomy, highlighting the moral, artistic, and spiritual virtues of the agrarian way of life against industrial labor and its counterpart, capitalist consumption, together characterized throughout as dehumanizing, mechanized, and soul-deadening (and even Communist, perhaps to frighten readers into flocking to the South and its apparently more democratic, Jeffersonian values). Additionally, Ransom draws on the familiar opposition of ideal versus real, though he does not acknowledge, necessarily, that the idealistic vision he sets up of the South does not actually partake of the real; he seems, rather, to claim that the idealized South he depicts *is* reality. He does not, therefore, include or comment on the hardships of sharecropping, tenant farming, or general poverty which were, in fact, rampant in the South in the 1920s. As an illustration, one of Ransom's first key points is that industrial labor "is hard, its tempo is fierce, and his employment is insecure," and that this way of working runs contrary to humanity's best interests. The best and most humane occupations should permit enjoyment and fulfillment: "The first principle of a good labor is that it must be effective, but the second principle is that it must be enjoyed. Labor is one of the largest items in the human career; it is a modest demand to ask that it may partake of happiness" (xxii). The labor which partakes of happiness is to be found, of course, in growing crops and gardens and tending herds.

It is not hard, reading this excerpt, to call to mind how the pastoral evokes the pleasant occupations of the shepherd, the neatherd, or the Georgic farmer. And so it becomes clear that the Agrarians' drew much of their agricultural imagery and ideals from past literary pastorals, as Stewart confirms:

By the time they wrote *I'll Take My Stand* most, probably all, of the Agrarians had become city men who looked at life in the country through eyes weary of the ugliness and

disorder to be found in even so agreeable a place as Nashville....Moreover, their vague notion of the good life of the past, of the pre-industrial 'Europe' to which they liked to refer was probably much influenced by literary conventions established over the centuries by city men who, as members or dependents of privileged classes, did not have to endure the heavy labor and narrow confinement of farming. (199-200)

Indeed, a few of the Agrarians themselves had grown up on rural farms (Warren is one), and a few others later tried their hand at it (Tate and Caroline Gordon's experiment at their Benfolly farm did not last a very long time<sup>3</sup>), but on the whole, the Agrarian vision of an agricultural life is based on literature rather than on the realities of farming.

It is especially important to note the roots of the Agrarian vision in pastoral conventions, as it helps to understand some of Ransom's later embellishments of farming life in the "Statement of Principles." For example, Ransom argues that an agrarian culture provides not only a more fulfilling occupation but also a richer inner life, with time to contemplate religious mystery and spiritual connections between people, the land, and the divine. The spiritual life, he claims, withers in an urban and industrialized world that is centered on work, earnings, and consumption, but religion flourishes when humanity has the time to create a right and harmonious relationship with nature—not dominating, excavating, exploiting, and clear-cutting the natural world for the development and profit of industries. Connecting to God through contemplation of nature is, of course, a fundamental tenet of pastoral, especially the pastoral of the Romantics (it is very difficult not to hear echoes of Emerson and Thoreau, in particular, in this argument). Stemming from this right relationship with nature is a stronger affinity for and understanding of the arts; Ransom writes, "Art depends, in general, like religion, on a right attitude to nature; and in particular on a free and disinterested observation of nature that occurs only in leisure" (xxv). In this particular case, Ransom seems to add a few flourishes to the farmers' lives, drawn from the

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<sup>3</sup> See Mary Weaks-Baxter's chapter, "The Agrarians: Taking Their Stand," for a fuller account of the Agrarians' agricultural efforts.

plantation legends. Especially if one takes “arts...and the sensibility which attends it” to include familiarity with the classics, time for practicing and performing music, recitations of Shakespeare, painting, and so forth, then many of these details seem more a part of the aristocratic tradition than the stereotypical country life.

Additionally, Ransom stresses that the rural life privileges community and good relationships—but again, not so much in the vein of helping neighbors plow their fields or raise their barns, but more in the vein of chivalry and etiquette. Among the “amenities of life” available and developed in rural societies, Ransom cites “manners, conversation, hospitality” and “romantic love” (xxv). Of course, without doubt many rural people do create all of these amenities within their communities; however, again here, Ransom’s depiction seems more drawn from literary works than from lived reality. Finally, this development of the inner life is dependent upon ample time, of course. And so, here is yet another direct connection to the pastoral; Ransom’s ideals for the farmer’s inner life—the cultivation of his spirit, sensibility, and intellectual development—rely upon available and frequent periods of leisure, and leisure is a significant component in the pastoral tradition. On the whole, then—in its emphasis on fulfilling and even leisurely labor, on the righteousness and spiritual understanding of farmers, and on the aristocratic embellishments of artistic study and manners—the “Statement of Principles” for *I’ll Take My Stand* is founded directly on the pastoral binaries of idealism versus reality, and on the tenacious belief in the American tradition that the pastoral world is yet attainable.

Of course, Ransom’s and the other eleven essayists’ critiques of American capitalist pursuits and the grind of manufacturing and industrial labor are on point; those claims about the soul-deadening monotony, the frantic scramble for survival, the low wages and often painful strain of industrial labor still ring true today. But it is important, too, to see that the contrast these authors draw—which is in line with much of pastoral literature throughout American history—

not only serves to indict the capitalist goals of American corporations but also to depict a South that does not, truly, exist, and perhaps never did. (Even a cursory review of the conflicts at the heart of Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* illuminates that as far back as 1785, that rural, leisurely, bountiful and purely pleasant South did not exist in all its gilded perfection). And so, the peril of a text like the Agrarian manifesto is that it ignores the very real problems of division between races, classes, and genders that had been unfolding in the South for over a century—and continued to do so, even as they were writing. It is one thing to create a fictive utopia that draws attention to our higher aspirations; it is another thing altogether to make claims that such a utopia very nearly exists, without clearly countenancing the distinction between the ideal and the real. By painting the southern agrarian and rural life as a pastoral panacea for the societal problems America faced, the Agrarians—in the tradition of American pastoral, dating back to the first explorers—portray the idealization of the South for reality, and ignore or dismiss the fraught and problematic realities the South in fact faced (e.g., deforestation, monoculture, poverty, malnutrition, lack of accessible and strong education, segregation, political oppression, the Ku Klux Klan, etc.).

Despite its flaws and oversights, the Agrarian vision possesses surprisingly lasting power, and their vision must be reckoned with. One of my central claims for this project is that several authors *do* reckon with this pastoral vision of the South, so enthusiastically revitalized by the Agrarians, and they do it very differently, pointing out both the South's highest aims and its worst problems, using that contrast between the ideal and the real to critique its failures and to illustrate a world where such failures have been addressed, amended, and overcome. As Daniel Cross Turner points out, the Fugitives' "remembered meaning of the southern landscape," their vision of the South, "is no longer a cultural given, but subject to challenge," especially by contemporary southern poets (xvi). I would add to his argument that it was not only later twentieth-century

authors who challenged the Agrarian vision of the southern landscape and history; indeed, various authors who were contemporaries, friends, and colleagues of the Fugitive-Agrarians were also challenging, ironizing, undercutting, transforming, and refashioning their ideas about the South, including those poets who are the focus of this book: Anne Spencer, Jean Toomer, James Dickey, and Eleanor Ross Taylor.



#### 4. Contributions to the Scholarly Conversation: Defining the Pastoral and Studying Poetry

Before detailing why I selected Spencer, Toomer, Dickey, and Taylor for this project and why I classify their poetic work as pastoral, I must explain this project's significance and relevance. This project is relevant to southern and American literary studies, ecocriticism, rhetoric, and poetics, especially in three particular ways: first, it provides a clearer definition of the pastoral in twentieth-century American and southern literature; second, it studies how poetry, rather than prose, deploys and transforms the pastoral in twentieth-century southern and American literature; and third, it recovers and spends much-deserved time and attention on two important southern voices heretofore mostly neglected in literary scholarship.

First, the pastoral's long history means that the genre's definition (and even whether it can still be called a genre with a specific set of conventions) has continued to evolve. Thus, one goal of this project is to more closely and accurately define the term "pastoral" and what it means for twentieth-century southern literature. In working toward this goal, I have built upon the work of several scholars who have already tackled the question of what pastoral means in more recent American literature, how the term "pastoral" shifts when American writers begin to use its conventions, and how southern pastoral in particular demonstrates a different emphasis in its concerns and content. The following paragraphs provide an overview of that scholarship.

Definitions of American pastoral vary in their flexibility and inclusiveness, but most emphasize an idealistic dream of simplicity and harmony in the natural world present in the texts. For example, Elizabeth Jane Harrison takes a very inclusive view, explaining that while pastoral may conjure “the image of shepherds in a bucolic landscape,” in modern and contemporary literature, “‘pastoral’ is used more loosely to suggest any literary work, poem or prose, that idealizes the rural world” (1-2). Laura Barge provides a similarly broad definition: “In Southern literature, nothing surpasses the importance of the land, the landscape, the homestead, the rural place, the plantation, the garden. These terms coalesce in the motif of the pastoral” (30). For Barge, the pastoral is an essential, definitive genre for southern writers—but it is a genre broad enough to incorporate all literature about land, whether it be wild or cultivated, open field or enclosed estate. Lawrence Buell, reviewing recent scholarship on primarily nineteenth century pastoral writers in his article, “American Pastoral Ideology Reappraised,” provides a more focused definition, reflecting how several scholars have sought to define it:

“Pastoral” is used in an extended sense, familiar to Americanists, to refer not to the specific set of obsolescent conventions of the eclogue tradition, but to all literature—poetry or prose, fiction or nonfiction—that celebrates the ethos of nature/rurality over against the ethos of the town or city. This domain includes for all present purposes all degrees of rusticity from farm to wilderness. (23)

These three scholars, on the whole, cite the idealization of the landscape, the celebration of a simpler life, the frolicking in green fields, as the foundation of the pastoral mode.

In this focus, these three scholars follow many of the earlier definitions of American pastoral—especially in the most well-known considerations, including Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*. Implicit in Marx’s definition is the celebration of the rural and rustic, the idealization of the landscape, and the use of that landscape as a kind of “social conscience” for writers who would be “critics of corruption in the name of a purer American vision of a society

founded on the order of nature” (Buell 2). In Marx’s recent afterword to the thirty-fifth anniversary edition of his book, he again holds fast to the dichotomy between the pastoral and the industrial, and once again asserts the pastoral’s moral high ground over the technological industrialization of America, claiming that the image of the ideal pastoral held power longer than he thought it could (384). Indeed, even some feminist revisions of the pastoral canon have continued to envision the pastoral as celebratory and unifying, the unspoiled landscape written once again as the site of potential fulfillment for utopian community. Harrison, for example, makes important distinctions between the traditional American male pastoral—the romance (and domination) of the wilderness-as-feminine, deftly and thoroughly exposed by Annette Kolodny—and the female pastoral. Harrison acknowledges that the southern white patriarchal version of the pastoral is undoubtedly oppressive and exclusive, but she counters that southern women have created an alternative female pastoral, with the following differences: the landscape becomes “an enabling force for the woman protagonist,” the protagonist takes up “active cultivation or identification” with the land, and, for black women writers in particular, the protagonist views nature as something to be respected as “an overriding force” rather than something to be “overcome or tamed as it is in the white version” (10-11). She also notes that the southern female pastoral is no elite genre—this pastoral renegotiates class and gender and emphasizes cooperation rather than conflict.

A few writers have challenged the definition of southern pastoral as redemptive social critique and/or celebration of simpler values, natural order, and empowerment through communion with nature. One powerful critique of pastoral idealism comes, of course, from Kolodny, as she describes the power relationships established between male explorers and the New World landscape imagined as female and continued all the way through the 1900s. Her emphasis on the often-disturbing “pastoral impulse,” which yearns “to know and to respond to the

landscape as feminine,” highlights the darker sides of the pastoral imagination, with its parallel metaphors of rape and exploitation, even as it continues to insist upon the landscape’s virginity, innocence, and maternal care. Lewis Simpson also points up the reality of pastoral exclusions and problems, asserting that the South’s pastoral garden (as opposed to New England’s “garden of the covenant”) was tainted from the beginning by its unprecedented economic system of slavery, and so was never a pure, spiritually fulfilling, innocent wilderness to begin with (2). Thus, the southern pastoral always contains traces of “the garden of the chattel,” no matter how hard the writer may try to suppress them (2). The southern pastoral, much as it may celebrate the ideal, is, in Simpson’s view, always undermined by the “real,” and even if it does so silently, it must wrestle with social reality not just as something threatening outside the bucolic landscape but always already fully present within it.

The work of all these scholars clarifies that pastoral may have multiple underlying motivations and meanings, and they outline what those motivations and meanings (immediately present or latently revealed) may be. For example, pastoral writing may tend toward nostalgic takes, restorative visions, the longing for an idealized past founded upon a pure relationship with nature, uncorrupted by technology and industry. At the same time, the pastoral is not necessarily escapist fiction; it may not reflect a deliberate blindness to contemporary social and cultural conditions (though it is certainly susceptible to such). Scholars have pointed out that writers can use the pastoral, certainly, as a tool to critique contemporary conditions; it may posit the “past that never was,” as Frank Einstein argues, as the “germ of an alternative sensed in the imagination if not yet realized” (38). And it may also serve to reveal the inherent contradictions between the ideal and the real, between an imagined idyllic South and a very real, divisive, oppressive, or industrializing South.

In this project, then, I focus on what I find to be the most compelling aspect of the pastoral in twentieth century southern literature: that it must contain elements of both the ideal and the real, both centripetal and centrifugal forces, and that even intentions to escape into an ideal world must at some point give way to what Lucinda MacKethan calls “an awakening.” Even the Ashley Wilkeses of the world must awaken at some point to the South’s wreckage and progress, the reality and upheaval, the *Scarletts* and the *Rhetts*. And indeed, that awakening may be to recover some value in the past that has been overlooked or deliberately excluded from the literary canon, as Spencer, Toomer, Taylor, and Dickey discover particular strengths and rich complexities (alongside failure and suffering) in their southern heritage and in the natural world that previous versions of pastoral would not or could not consider.

MacKethan, in her consideration of pastoral in post-Reconstruction and twentieth century southern prose, makes this more complex definition of pastoral clear by characterizing its inherent contradictions, incorporating the pressures of reality and the irony that inevitably results from the juxtaposition of the ideal and the real:

They have in common a concept of Arcady for which some aspect or image of the South operates (albeit, for some, only ironically) as an idealization of order....There is to be seen in [these works of fiction], for instance, a quality of innocence, often embodied in a rural or village personage who serves to emphasize not so much the state of innocence itself but the larger world’s loss of it. Then, too, a persistent nostalgia pertains which is, like the innocence, ironic: Arcadia at its most glorious is an entrapment which if never abandoned can never be honestly explored. Two more assumptions of the pastoral mood that we meet frequently are an assertion of the superiority of rural virtues and, more importantly, a reverence for the natural order of nature itself. And lastly, we encounter in all these works the significant oscillation between dream and reality. (6)

I align with MacKethan’s arguments, in that the definition of the pastoral as a celebration of the ideal over the real, or the esteeming of rural values over urban survival, is not quite satisfactory for describing the southern poetry of the twentieth century. Often in twentieth century poetry, the

machine is already in the garden of the poem; often, too, the complexities of race, class, and gender are found on the farm, in the garden, out in the woods. Twentieth century southern poetry neither ignores nor single-mindedly dismisses industrialization, social upheaval, or a conflicted past. In Jean Toomer's *Cane*, for example, even amid the second section's urban setting, the communities and "roots" of the rural and wild South haunt those who have migrated to the cities as well as the cities themselves. Eleanor Ross Taylor also encapsulates the interdependence of urban and rural in her first book's title, *Wilderness of Ladies*—here, wildness and societal expectations exist together, neither repressing or obliterating the other, and simultaneity is exemplified in the poems themselves, where ostensible ladies holler wildly at each other, where the rich exuberance of nature is only just contained in carefully cultivated gardens (and in Taylor's tight, spare poetic forms).

Thus, I contend that the pastoral can no longer be defined by a set of conventions (unless one takes Paul Alpers' very broad definition of "conventions," which returns us etymologically to "convene," and thus "conventions" are familiar tropes that bring us together and foster a common understanding), but rather the pastoral in twentieth century southern poetry must be defined as a set of beliefs about what the South was, what it is, and what it could or should become, especially regarding our relationships to the natural world, to a divine or spiritual entity, and to one another.



An additional contribution this study makes is perhaps its simplest but also one of its most important: it deals with how twentieth-century writers use pastoral elements in southern poetry. Despite the pastoral's long history as a primarily poetic genre, scholarship on the use of pastoral in poetry—both in southern literature and more generally—mostly ends with the beginning of the twentieth century; pastoral is then mainly examined where it appears in fiction (especially in works by southern writers like William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Ellen Glasgow,

and others). For example, William Empson's definitive work, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, spans centuries, but its focus remains on British literature before 1900. Similarly, Frank Kermode's essential study, *English Pastoral Poetry*, also focuses on British uses of the pastoral up to the seventeenth century. The classic study of American pastoral, Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, investigates the use of pastoral primarily in the prose of Hawthorne, Melville, and Thoreau, ending with a discussion of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The pioneering feminist studies on pastoral in American literature by Harrison and Kolodny both focus exclusively on prose. MacKethan, whose focus on southern literature in her book *The Dream of Arcady* is invaluable for this project, also remains strictly in the realm of fiction (she does devote a chapter to Toomer's *Cane*, classifying that difficult-to-categorize book as prose, whereas I classify it as a collage of lineated and prose poetry). One of the most recent considerations of pastoral is Buell's "American Pastoral Ideology Reappraised," and his overview of the scholarship is also enormously helpful; however, his emphasis returns us to Thoreau and then incorporates several fiction and nonfiction writers from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as contemporary novels from non-Western countries. Barge's "Changing Forms of the Pastoral in Southern Poetry" is a notable exception; she covers a wide swath of twentieth-century southern poets in a short span, and yet she leaves room for further exploration. The poets she mentions cannot be considered in much depth, due to space limitations, and so my study expands on her work and also includes other poets she does not mention.

Why study poetry in particular? For one, the long history of pastoral as a poetic genre raises the question of how that legacy has continued into the twentieth century, in what ways it has changed, and how its elements are employed by more recent poets. For another, the very particular brand of southern pastoral poetry, shaped especially throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, begs that question even more stridently—how do southern poets in the

twentieth century deal with the legacy of Thomas Jefferson, or, more to the poetic point, with the legacy of Henry Timrod, crowned the “Laureate of the Confederacy,” for example? His work, along with that of Sidney Lanier, Paul Hamilton Hayne, and several other Confederate and Lost Cause poets, invoked that mythical antebellum civilization discussed in the previous section, and helped to enforce the South’s image of itself (and the nation’s image of the South) as the setting for America’s pastoral. That mythologized setting incorporates the patrician values, the aristocratic luxuries of leisure and culture, and harmony between the rich and the poor, so often pronounced in pastoral. Even Mencken, that acerbic critic who often turned his ire on the South, has his nostalgic moment about the legacy of the South, in his famous 1917 essay, “The Sahara of the Bozart.” He writes,

But in the South, there were men of delicate fancy, urbane instinct and aristocratic manner.... A certain notable spaciousness was in the ancient Southern scheme of things. The *Ur*-Confederate had leisure. He liked to toy with ideas. He was hospitable and tolerant. He had the vague thing that we call culture. (158)

Mencken wistfully, if exaggeratedly, muses on the bygone bucolic South, valorizing its ideas of honor and high culture, and southern poets, too, by and large (as shown by the historical review of the southern pastoral above), continued to wax nostalgic for a culture that was immersed in the classics, mimed a golden-age pastoralism, and prided itself on aristocratic values. In 1883, Mark Twain, with typical acumen, criticizes the South and its writers for their mythologizing, claiming that they had “Sir Walter disease,” an unhealthy obsession with decay and feudalism, “phantoms” and “shams” (qtd. in Horton). And yet, that insistence upon the stability, the *rightness*, of traditional values continued long after Twain’s remark, even and especially in the Southern Renaissance with the Fugitives and Agrarians. And so poetry, which had long been the genre of the cultured and literary elite, is inextricably tied to this vision of the “felicities” and “stability” of

the Old South, as well as to the vision of the sturdy, virtuous, independent farmer (who, the myth runs, could have been a gentleman if he wished, if he weren't so devoted to a life on the land). And these visions of the South—which are directly connected to and reinforced by the pastoral tradition—endure and are revitalized in twentieth century southern writing. It seems, then, a logical choice to study the continuing and evolving uses of the pastoral in twentieth century southern poetry. It is a little surprising, considering the historical connection between pastoral, poetry, and the South, that American literary scholarship has only sporadically addressed such a project.

The very nature of poetry itself provides further reason for this project: poetry's formal possibilities, economy of language, and techniques provide a different canvas for pastoral, one that can emphasize image over narrative, that can create collisions between worlds more rapidly and without the "connective tissue" of prose, and that can generate a sense of simultaneity and contrast with a single line break. Poetry's formal techniques cast a different light on the social, cultural, political, and environmental issues at stake in the pastoral tradition. Undoubtedly, too, poetry offers the possibility of lyric meditation—a reflection on ideas and images themselves from the past, the present, or an imagined future—without the encumbering necessity of moving a plot forward (even in a postmodern age, I would argue that readers of prose still anticipate a sequence of events that can be lined up and understood, even if that expectation is shown to be absurd, à la Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*). As contemporary poet Lynn Emanuel laments in her tongue-in-cheek prose piece: "God, what a horror: getting Raoul into the elevator. And that's why I write poetry. In poetry, you don't have to do that kind of work" (19). Emanuel's musing points to a relevant connection between poetry and pastoral: poetry, in its history, has been under fewer constraints than prose (fiction and especially nonfiction) to be realistic or mimetic. The pastoral, in its history, has fixed on the ideal rather than the real; the pastoral's most suitable

form, then, was poetry, wherein a polished artifice and perceptible attention to craft—rather than an emphasis on realism or verisimilitude—take precedence. The idealism of the pastoral was best matched with the elegance of poetry; content finds its form. Thus, though we certainly find elements of pastoral in prose, it seems natural and even necessary to look more closely at how those elements have been perpetuated or challenged in their original genre.

Additionally, southern poetry from the twentieth century offers a different perspective on American modernism and the poetry that followed that movement. Too often, southern poets are considered as a separate category, as though they remained strictly isolated from the modernist currents of poetry in a larger world (and certainly the backward-looking poetics and politics of the Fugitive-Agrarian movement, as well as the distinguishing label of “Southern Renaissance” they gave that movement has something to do with this conception). And it is true that many southern poets continued to write in a vein that is far closer to nineteenth century sentimental, romantic, or nostalgic lyrics and their elevated, formal structures than the innovations of, say, “In a Station of the Metro” or *The Waste Land*. One only needs to browse through the pages of *The Lyric South*, a 1928 anthology, to find evidence of this preference. Lizette Woodworth Reese’s poem, “A Pastoral,” included in that collection (which directly follows several poems from John Crowe Ransom), is a case in point: it opens, “Oho, my love, oho, my love, and ho, the bough that shows / Against the grayness of mid-Lent the color of the rose!” (195). Light, lovely, formal, sometimes stilted, sometimes didactic, with soothing images of flowers and love in the springtime, this poem would not be out of place among eighteenth or nineteenth century pastorals (though, it must be said, this particular poem is not indicative of Reese’s entire oeuvre). And, of course, Harriet Monroe’s commentary in the 1922 special southern edition of *Poetry* underscores the expectations of southern writing as retrograde and Victorian, rooted in legends of plantations and cults of chivalry.

And yet, despite these assumptions about the South's separation from national and international literary currents, it is also true that the poetry and the criticism of modernism did take hold in the South, creating ruptures and innovations, experiments and transformations. Clearly, the writers of the Southern Renaissance (and their successors) were as influenced by the changing currents of poetry as they were by their need to defend the South; their interest in T. S. Eliot's work is central to their poetry (especially to Tate's) and to their later work in *New Criticism*. Further proof of modernism's importance in the South comes from several black southern writers, like Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston; though they create a modernism that differs from "high modernism," their work is vitally modernist nonetheless. (Mark A. Sanders' "American Modernism and the New Negro Renaissance" is a thorough and thoughtful consideration of these multiple strands, or what he calls "heterodox modernism.") Though these writers are generally considered as part of the Harlem or New Negro Renaissance, rather than as part of southern literature (for multiple reasons, including their own decisions about how to classify their work), it is still true that their work often unearths, invokes, or recreates southern history, landscapes, and voices. Indeed, drawing on a different history transforms the modernist emphasis on polyvocality—different voices are heard in the southern poetry of the Southern Renaissance and of the Harlem Renaissance, and therefore the southern voices of the Harlem Renaissance (like Anne Spencer and Jean Toomer, in this study) transform and expand our understanding of the South itself and its literature. Additionally, drawing from a different landscape also shifts and expands the modernist emphasis on the urban and cosmopolitan, reincorporating rural and wild regions. These are only a few of the possibilities and perspectives examined in this project. Overall, it is important to note that southern poetry, and particularly southern poetry in the pastoral tradition, broadens our conceptions of what modernism is and means in America, and it enriches our understanding of how modernism inflects twentieth

century southern writing. Additionally, maintaining an awareness of the South's connection to national and global movements—especially as the twentieth century progressed—allows us to see how not only modernism but other global movements and events (e.g., World War I and II, postmodernism, environmentalism, feminism, the Civil Rights movement, globalization, and many others) influenced and shaped the South and its literature.



Finally, this project works to recover two poets I find to be of remarkable quality and artistry: Anne Spencer and Eleanor Ross Taylor. Studying these poets' individual efforts is inherently rewarding; additionally, studying these poets contributes to our understanding of southern literature and the South more generally, as each brings an often elided perspective on the South. For example, Spencer's experiences as a black woman fighting for both racial and gender equality certainly inflect her poetry, and her work expands our understanding of the political, social, and legal inequities black people in the South (and in America more generally) faced, as well as the many strategies—including literary ones—employed to fight for civil rights. Taylor's work, too, expands our understanding of the South; her poems that focus on the simultaneous turbulence and confinement of rural white women's experiences very often undercut and ironize the Agrarian vision of the tranquil farm and contented rural household.

Additionally, placing Spencer and Taylor alongside more well-known male counterparts, Jean Toomer and James Dickey, allows us to reconsider the bases on which canons are formed, to unveil biases and omissions, to paint a more comprehensive picture of southern literature, and to incorporate multiple perspectives on southern poetry, the pastoral, and American literature more generally. It also allows, for perhaps the first time, these poets to “talk to each other.” In this conversation and juxtaposition, we may begin to see the work and world of each more clearly, as certain poems from one author seem to run counter to another's, or as they highlight similar

themes and concerns, or both and more. This recovery also enables us to ask new questions about the more well-known poets; for example, Toomer has long been linked to the Harlem Renaissance, but he is not often studied as contributing to and revising a southern tradition of letters. I hope that this kind of “recovery” of Toomer, so to speak, opens new windows onto the depth and meaning of his work. Dickey, too, is often noted for his individualist, man-alone-in-nature approach, but once we recognize the fuller social and political implications of the work of other poets in this study, we can begin to see more clearly that Dickey, too, is working within and against that sociopolitical world; for example, his poetry about war, which might before have been seen as somewhat anomalous to his usual themes, comes to be seen as connected to the “nature poems,” as the latter’s impetus and reason for being.



## 5. Outline of Chapters

As I have asserted throughout this introduction, it is my overall contention that each of the poets in this study employs the pastoral as a set of beliefs about the South. They conjure up and critique what the South was, in both historical fact and in mythic recreations and legends. They also portray what the South is, presently, both its reality of racial violence, gendered oppression, class inequality, and industrialization and ecological destruction, as well as its ecstatic and idyllic moments of natural beauty, human connection, and spiritual restoration and redemption. And each of these poets insists upon what the South could or should be, according to their highest aspirations, their sense of justice and equality, and their brightest hopes for a world redeemed and made harmonious, bountiful, and blessed.

In addition, I have chosen these four poets for various key reasons; first, these poets provide us with a broader and more diverse perspective on southern poetry in the twentieth century, and therefore, they challenge the persistent conception that southern poetry in the

twentieth century bloomed and died with the Fugitive-Agrarians in the Southern Renaissance. In fact, these poets redefine the boundaries and meanings of the Southern Renaissance, expanding its temporal borders and its thematic concerns. The poets in this study provide very different perspectives on what it means to live in the South, as well as what the South itself means. They confront and challenge various southern myths and legends, juxtaposing the lived reality of the South with those myths and legends; at the same time, they, too, build their own mythologies out of the raw materials of familial history, personal experience, the southern terrain, and their ultimate ideals for human relationships. Thus, this project maps the South in a different way, through four poets' ideals, arguments, memories, and myths, as each reveals, after all else, that the South continues to be a land of conflict and a reservoir of hope. Finally, I have chosen these poets because, though they are all "outliers" or "outsiders" in one way or another, they also draw on, revitalize, and transform one of the most significant southern literary strains—that of the pastoral—which therefore connects them directly to the heart of the South's literature and traditions. In short, these poets alter the familiar terms and terrain of southern literature, and I believe we should change our conversation about southern literature to acknowledge and include these divergent voices.

In chapter one, I will discuss Anne Spencer's poetry as a revitalization of the pastoral. Spencer's writing resists classification in many ways, as both her subject matter and her formal choices range widely, and because her writing spans much of the twentieth century, never fitting neatly within any literary movement. She threads together elements drawn from Romanticism, American Transcendentalism, the Harlem Renaissance, modernism, and the Southern Renaissance, as well as themes of gender, racial, and class equality. But the most important throughline for her work is the pastoral; studying her work as pastoral reveals her cohesive vision which unites all of these influences and ideas in her work, and it connects even such diverse

poems as “White Things” and “Before the Feast at Shushan.” Additionally, understanding the pastoral in Spencer’s work enables us to see her connection with and divergence from the Agrarians’ vision of the South, as well as the multiple and significant poetic strategies she uses to work against inequality and oppression. And, of course, the pastoral is very well-suited to Spencer, who was famous not only for her poetry and her political advocacy work (and for being the first woman in Lynchburg, Virginia, to wear pants in public), but who was also famous for her beautifully constructed, carefully tended, and visually stunning gardens.

Spencer’s pastoral vision is unique and comprehensive; I have divided my study of her pastoral into three parts, in order to provide a sense of both her range and her work’s continuity. First, I focus on what I have termed Spencer’s “idealized pastoral”; these poems create an idyllic world of harmony with the land, with God, and with other people. These poems are in part a haven, like her gardens at her Lynchburg home, away from the daily realities of racism, sexism, violence, and division. These poems also evoke and call us to remember our highest aspirations of equality, harmony, beauty, and connection. In her emphasis on racial and gender equality, Spencer shows herself to be well ahead of her time in her political thinking and certainly a step ahead of other voices of the Southern Renaissance who focused primarily on a return to the land, with far less consideration of social and political relationships. Second, I examine Spencer’s poems that focus more directly on racial, gender, and class inequality, as well as ecological destruction; these poems I have termed “damaged pastorals,” as they countenance the obstacles and problems that stand in the way of her imagined ideal pastoral world. These damaged pastorals portray Spencer’s strongest political and social critiques, and though they are sometimes subtle in their criticism (and sometimes adamant and forthright), these poems also work to disprove any claims that her work was apolitical. Finally, I discuss Spencer’s pastoral as a sustaining spiritual vision in the face of awful tragedy and loss. Overall, Spencer transforms the

pastoral tradition, using its idealistic possibilities not to dwell in nostalgic longing but to imagine a more harmonious, abundant, and just future, while simultaneously countenancing and working against the very real injustices and suffering of the present.

Jean Toomer's *Cane* is the focus of chapter two. Of course, many scholars, including Lucinda MacKethan and Robert Bone, have studied the pastoral design and elements of Toomer's modernist and Harlem Renaissance classic, but none have yet thoroughly considered the interplay between the poems and the sketches to fully understand the book's structure and its competing visions of the ideal and the real. Understanding the connections between the various pieces in *Cane* not only leads to a deeper appreciation of Toomer's extraordinary complexity, but it also reveals a very different vision of the South and a powerful challenge to traditional southern pastoral mythology. I argue that Toomer's overall structure creates multiple layers of meaning; those layers both undermine the traditional trappings of the pastoral and rebuild a rejuvenated vision that establishes the absolute necessity of pastoral values. Thus, Toomer does away with previous (white supremacist patriarchal) iterations of the pastoral, revealing their impossibility, while rescuing the pastoral values of community, connection to the land, and spiritual redemption.

That complex approach to the pastoral is found, in particular, in the relationship between the sketches and the poems. In the first section of *Cane*, for example, Toomer's sketches attempt to hold onto a nostalgic vision of the southern landscape as lush and beautiful, and the lives of black people in the South as simple, perfected, communal, and uninhibitedly spiritual. I have termed these sketches "the pastoral of the averted gaze," as they attempt to look away from racial disparity, gendered violence and inequality, and destruction of the landscape through encroaching industrializing and urbanization. However, the poems undercut the nostalgic sketches and plainly reveal those disparities, inequalities, and devastations in disquieting images; thus, I have

termed the poems “the crystallized images” of realities in the South. The dialectic interplay between the sketches and poems eventually, it seems, forces the narrator to face these disturbing realities, and as the sketches progress, the narrator is less and less able to avert his gaze. However, Toomer does not relinquish his hopes for a better world; if anything, the crystallized images of suffering and devastation in the poems underscore even more clearly the need for restoration of pastoral values, including community, harmony with nature, and spiritual fulfillment.

Toomer continues this strategy of dialectic interchange between prose sketches and poems in the second section, as the book shifts to an urban setting. In this second section, Toomer transfers the pastoral values of community, abundance, and connection into the cities, revealing that the nostalgic “trappings” of the traditional pastoral (rural scenery, country life, agrarian occupations) are unnecessary and may even hinder or damage the characters who cling to them. The sketches again focus on characters and narrators who, to their detriment, avert their gaze from the world around them, and who keep their gaze fixed on an imaginary southern homeland, a pastoral façade. Meanwhile, the poems of the second section again present crystallized images which resituate and regenerate the heart of the pastoral, combining pastoral images and values with the energy of the city. I contend that in this second section, Toomer illustrates that pastoral values are not dependent upon traditional settings or tropes or images; rather, those values are immediate and palpable in an urban world, in its art, music, dance, and theatre, as well as in the people themselves and their relationships to one another.

In the third section of *Cane*, Toomer returns to the rural South, and this section binds together the themes of the first and second sections. Kabnis, a well-educated northerner, comes to the South with a nostalgic longing to find his roots and to be “the voice of the South.” However, he encounters what the crystallized images of the poems of the first section presented:

elitism, false piety, violence, and isolation. He does not find, in short, the idyllic pastoral South of myth and imagination. But the essential, life-giving pastoral values are all around him, as Toomer illustrates time and again, in the characters of Halsey, Lewis, Father John, and Carrie K. Thus, while the ruined heart of the pastoral is on full display in this section, so too are the ultimate values of the pastoral which reconnect the characters to each other, to the land, and to the divine, and in that reconnection is redemption and emotional and spiritual restoration. Overall, then, Toomer provides a significant revitalization of the pastoral in *Cane*, dismantling old mythologies and musty traditions about the South in order to bring the pastoral's most hopeful and inspiring values to light. Additionally, Toomer resituates black people as central and complex characters in a tradition that historically marginalized, ignored, or caricatured them, thus significantly reshaping conceptions of the southern pastoral. Finally, Toomer expands our understanding of the Southern Renaissance, as he, like Tate, takes a "backward glance" at southern history, but his glance encompasses a much broader cast of characters and a more complex southern culture that includes violence and disillusionment as well as hope and rich beauty.

In chapter three, I discuss a later twentieth-century poet, James Dickey, a quintessential southern poet whose work reflects the ultimate values of the pastoral—connection to the landscape, harmony with the natural world, and revitalized community. Additionally, Dickey's studies at Vanderbilt University and his poetry's concentration on the southern landscape connect him directly to the Agrarians. His poetry does reflect their pastoral concerns, though his work also rejects their idealized rural farmer and cozy home; Dickey's poetry ventures much further into the wilderness, searching not for a way of taming the landscape but rather for a way of immersing himself entirely in wildness, rediscovering the cyclical rhythms and order of the

natural world—including the violence of that world—and separating himself from the constraints and destructive tendencies of civilized society.

In this chapter, I focus first on Dickey's early work, especially his first book, *Into the Stone*, in order to establish the foundations of his pastoral vision. *Into the Stone* seeks out restoration and redemption through connections to the natural southern landscape, as well as in connections with animals and other people, both dead and living. Throughout the book, Dickey asserts a belief in the unity of all things, in the reconciliation between the natural and the human, between the earth and the divine, and many of the poems depict a union first between the speaker and the natural world, and then eventually between the speaker and other people, both of these unions leading to a metaphorical rebirth, and, ultimately, salvation. Often, too, these pastoral poems use the cyclical violence of nature—the cycles of hunting, killing, and eating, of life, death, and rebirth—in order to accomplish or imagine restoration and redemption. These poems I have called Dickey's "perfected pastorals." And yet, many of Dickey's early poems also complicate this salvific pastoral mythology. The most obvious complications—even oppositions—to Dickey's pastoral are found in the sections titled "War" and "Death, and Others." The violence Dickey portrays in "War" clearly runs in opposition to the cyclical, redemptive violence of Dickey's pastoral, and those poems cry out for rescue, reconciliation, and transformation. The poems in "Death, and Others" also mourn the losses of those taken too soon, unjustly, and the speakers in those poems attempt to trade places with the dead, to understand the loss from every angle, to eventually, imaginatively, redeem those losses. In these poems, the hunger for union, for wholeness, for connectedness becomes clear and central—the need for a redemptive pastoral vision is fully established. Thus, darkness, blindness, suffering, loss, and death take center stage in several of the poems, but they do not negate Dickey's pastoral vision. Rather, they render that vision entirely necessary. Consistently throughout the book, the

imagination of the speaker strives toward perfecting what is ruined, reconnecting what is broken, revitalizing what is dead. Imagination in this book, then, is the reconciliatory force; it is the core of Dickey's pastoral vision. And that reconciliation happens, again and again, in the wild landscapes of the South.

Later in the chapter, I focus on some of Dickey's most well-known (and most controversial) later poems, which initially seem a far cry from the early work; Dickey's formal innovations, his expansive and kinetic structures, his "shimmering walls of words" are very different from the tight, polished stanzas of *Into the Stone*. Additionally, Dickey takes up ever more disturbing and horrifying subjects in his later work; indeed, the landscapes of the South are no longer a haven from injustice, suffering, and excessive violence, but rather they are the site of those problems. The poems which take up these subjects I have termed the "corrupted pastorals," as Dickey reveals the corruption within his previously pure and edenic southern landscape. And yet, I contend that Dickey's pastoral vision persists, even in these later poems, because they affirm the necessity of pastoral values—particularly of restoration, reconnection, and reconciliation. By presenting us with the most extreme, most corrupted, most distorted, most disconnected versions of human experience, these poems drive us to seek out the restoration of Dickey's pastoral vision; they *necessitate* it. And thus, that pastoral vision is never absent, even in poems where it seems most unlikely or impossible.

One of the most important contributions that Dickey makes to the southern pastoral tradition, I believe, is his inclusion and complex portrayals of violence and how it operates. Dickey's use of violence is a nuanced approach to the pastoral's juxtaposition of the ideal and the real, and it is a significant key to understanding his pastoral vision in its entirety. Violence in Dickey's work has many facets and many uses—some of which are central to pastoral harmony, and some of which destroy that harmony. The violence of hunting and the death of animals (or of

humans) in the natural world, which is very much a part of the natural cycle of life, death, and rebirth, is integral to Dickey's pastoral. But the violence of war or slavery, for example, which involves domination, alienation, lack of respect or ritual, and excessive use of force and waste of life, is a corruption of pastoral values. The latter type of violence—soulless, brutal, and unjust—is what creates such extraordinary need for the pastoral values of spiritual reconnection. In early poems, Dickey relegates excessive violence to the realm of war alone, outside the South. The South itself serves as a haven from excess violence and domination. But in his later work, Dickey begins to explore excess violence in the South's culture and history, as well, especially in the exploitation of nature, in the history of slavery, and in situations of domestic violence and abuse. The later work provides a far more complex vision of the South, but even there Dickey consistently attempts to right the wrongs encountered in the poems, holding fast to his belief in the pastoral's possibilities for a return to nature, to relationships, and to the divine—in short, holding fast to redemption and restoration. Thus, Dickey's "corrupted pastorals" transform the tradition by countenancing some of the worst aspects of the South, while he continually works to reframe and redeem those aspects, always exercising his imagination in the direction of a "perfected pastoral" world.

Finally, chapter four examines the poetry of Eleanor Ross Taylor, focusing primarily on her first collection, *Wilderness of Ladies*. Taylor's work, like Spencer's, has not received as much critical attention as it merits; indeed, her work is stunning in its linguistic play, its complex irony, its obvious attentiveness to craft and precision, and its enormous emotional range. Beyond its own merits, her work also makes significant contributions to the southern pastoral tradition, bringing a new perspective, a caustic wit, and a sincere desire to accurately portray the lives of her rural ancestors—especially the women in her family—to challenge the southern pastoral mythology of both the genteel plantation and the Jeffersonian yeoman legends. On the surface,

Taylor would seem to be the ideal candidate for upholding the Agrarian/Jeffersonian vision of the South. She grew up on a farm, just outside the quaint, small town of Norwood, North Carolina, and she clearly adores those places; additionally, Taylor had close relationships with several of the Agrarians.

And yet, Taylor's poetry continually challenges and undermines the Agrarian vision of the idealized South, even as she holds Norwood dear. In fact, her poems, complex and chilling, disturbing and sweet, provide a much more complicated set of meanings for the rural South. For example, her work is especially concerned with the rural South as it was for *women*—something that often goes unremarked in the Agrarian writings. She speaks from the perspective of rural, lower-class farm wives and mothers, and these perspectives, in themselves, challenge the elitist, patriarchal, and paternalist viewpoint typical of many southern pastorals. Additionally, she challenges the myth that farm life permits leisure—the women portrayed in her first collection, especially, are always working, ever worried, even on the days of their deaths. Her work, finally, speaks back not just to the Agrarians' recreated legends of the South, but to other problematic and nostalgic myths of the South, especially the pastoral tradition and the Lost Cause tradition that rewrote the antebellum South. Thus, Taylor's poems—from those that speak through and for the women in her family, to those that consider the strictures and demands of domestic life, to those that reevaluate the legacy of the antebellum South and the Civil War—consistently challenge idyllic imaginings about the South. And that challenge is a significant contribution to our understanding of the southern pastoral, particularly, and literature about the South more generally.

This chapter examines how Taylor confronts these various myths in four sections. First, in her pastoral elegies, Taylor counters the idyllic Agrarian image of farm life, portraying it instead as a paradox—a life that is simultaneously beautiful and painful, family-oriented and

duty-bound, fulfilling and suffocating. In addition, she challenges the pastoral elegy's traditional images of sturdy, pious yeoman; her own elegies highlight not only the courage of the people who work the land, but also their foibles, errors, missteps, and the mundane details of their reality. Not least, she subverts the traditional pastoral elegy by including memorials for women, who are so often left out or ignored by that genre. Second, I will study the way in which in many of her poems challenge the southern pastoral's and plantation romance's mythologizing of the southern white woman. Taylor examines the lives of her female ancestors, revealing not only beauty and sweetness but also fear, hardship, loss, grief, and anger. Additionally, she presents gentility and femininity as paradoxical, double-edged swords: the strictures of refinement are suffocating, but the arts they are expected to perform do provide glimmers of beauty. Third, I will analyze the poems in which Taylor examines her inheritance from her ancestors and considers her life and the lives of her female contemporaries. In a poem like "Sister," Taylor encompasses both her upbringing on the farm and her current life as mother and wife, finding that neither really live up to their mythical promises. In these poems, too, she lays out the tension between the desire for art and the demands of family, following—but also rejecting—the path laid out for her as a proper southern lady. And finally, Taylor works against the prevailing tropes of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. For example, in several poems in her second book, *Welcome Eumenides*, she undermines the typical discourses around war more generally, which often engage patriotism, chivalry, nobility, righteousness, or freedom as rationalizations for war. Instead, Taylor focuses intently instead on the gritty reality, the hardships, the suffering, and the losses war creates. More specifically, she dislocates the Lost Cause's southern-centric view of the Civil War, speaking instead, in one of her most impressive and complex poems, as a Yankee father who has lost his son. In this poem, particularly, the myths of the antebellum South and the

Civil War lose their luster quickly, against the cruel image of a mass grave and the agonizing experience of losing a child.

Overall, then, I argue that the pastoral in Taylor's poems is never purely idyllic; the shadow, a darker anguish and anger, is always present at the same time as the idyll. And yet Taylor's pastoral is also beautiful—not only because the poems are so carefully crafted, so ingeniously phrased, so musical, but also because Taylor highlights the images of beauty, resilience, and sweetness to be found in the rural South. Her contribution to the southern pastoral tradition is, in short, to continually ironize it and make it more complex; she undermines the standard, traditional myths propagated by writers like the Agrarians, but her pastoral is also redemptive in that it conveys more authentic momentary consolations of the physical world, including genuine emotion and empathetic community, and she locates the beauty of the pastoral in very different places (as in the lives of women) than the Agrarians or other myth-makers thought to look for it.

In each of the following chapters and all together, then, this book offers a different map of the South's pastoral landscape, providing different highways through its rural and urban centers and different pathways through its farmlands and wild forests. In drawing together these different reflections on what the South was, is, and should become, this book offers a way of exploring and challenging the old myths and standard literary conceptions about the South that are still perpetuated today—in literature, as the Agrarians' vision remains one of the central tenets of southern studies (though it certainly does not remain unchallenged in southern literature or scholarship), and in popular culture, as in Paula Deen's infamous dream of a "southern plantation wedding," in the wealthy Robertson family feigning redneckery on *Duck Dynasty*, or in the glossy images of a leisurely and luxurious life in the pages of *Southern Living*. Additionally, this book reconceives of the pastoral not as a worn-out and threadbare genre filled with obsolete

shepherds playing lutes or old-fashioned stoic and virtuous farmers ploughing their acres behind their teams of oxen. Instead, this book redefines the pastoral as a vital, dynamic, evolving literary tradition that enables various authors to assert their beliefs about the South—their deepest concerns about its problematic past and not-yet-egalitarian present, as well as their highest ideals for what it might yet become. These poets, too, respond to the question Trethewey poses—*You don't hate the South... You don't hate it?*—in varying and complex ways. In essence, this book opens up again the age-old question of what the South truly was and is and could be, and perhaps more importantly, it attends carefully to the answers given throughout the twentieth century by four vital, thoughtful, visionary, brilliant poets.

CHAPTER II  
A GARDEN APART: ANNE SPENCER'S PASTORAL RESPONSE  
TO RACIAL AND GENDER INEQUALITY

1. Introduction: Anne Spencer's Transformation of Southern Pastoral

Anne Spencer (1882-1975)—famous gardener, civil rights activist, librarian, powerful writer—was a well-respected poet in her lifetime; her poems were published in several notable magazines and anthologized in some of the most important Harlem Renaissance collections of the 1920s. And she was equally well-known in her hometown of Lynchburg, Virginia. Much of Spencer's life was devoted to activism for racial equality in Lynchburg—a town she hated, she said, but the town she remained in for almost all of her life. She spoke out frequently and withstood the backlash that invariably came her way. J. Lee Greene, Spencer's biographer, notes that Spencer was “well known, if not notorious” for her “unconventional behavior—whether waging a boisterous and ferocious battle against the town's Jim Crow practices or defying social decorum and sporting avant-garde fashions” (87). In addition, her fame grew because her home, with its beautiful gardens, was a frequent stop for civil rights leaders on their way to or from Washington, D.C. She was especially close to James Weldon Johnson, with whom she worked to establish the Lynchburg chapter of the NAACP, and he encouraged her from the first to continue writing poetry and sending it out for publication (Greene 48).

Spencer's is an essential voice, though she is difficult to classify as a poet. The content of her work demonstrates enormous range; she draws from current events and biblical stories, from Emerson's philosophy and Browning's dramatic monologues, from the blooms and creatures of her garden and the history of colonization in America. Her forms are equally diverse.

She writes in strict sonnets, in expansive free verse, in witty rhymed couplets, in fragmented lyrics that have been compared to Emily Dickinson's poems and to Imagist works, or in various combinations of the above. Additionally, Spencer doesn't fit neatly within generally accepted time frames for canonical literary movements; she begins writing at the very end of the nineteenth century—certainly after the Romantic era and slightly before the Harlem Renaissance, and, as she continued writing into the 1970s, she also far outlasts these periods. In many cases, she is ahead of her time in her subject matter. For example, she advocates for gender equality before the word feminism came into vogue. In other cases, her style, subject, and chosen forms seem too much a part of the past to be firmly a part of contemporary literary movements; her verse (like the poetry of contemporaries like Georgia Douglas Johnson and Angelina Weld Grimké) was often dismissed as too conservative or traditional to belong to either modernism or the Harlem Renaissance.

Perhaps because Spencer's work challenges so many traditional boundaries, scholars have analyzed her work as part of many different movements. Charita M. Ford, for example, names her as a black feminist forerunner of such writers as Alice Walker; Spencer's literal and literary gardens situate her poignantly as one of the "mothers" to which Walker refers. Gloria T. Hull (now Akasha Hull) restores Spencer to the Harlem Renaissance, while Holly Karapetkova and Melissa Prunty-Kemp examine Spencer's work in light of a white male Western literary tradition, noting Romantic and modernist influences and parallels from Robert Browning to W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot. And, of course, Greene's thorough and attentive biography of Spencer reveals even further layers of influence in her work, including her study of Transcendentalists of the nineteenth century. And each of these claims for Spencer's work rings true; Spencer's poetry often carries very clear Romantic themes and traces of Transcendental philosophy, evident connections to the tradition of women's nature writing and lyric poetry from the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

early modernist experimentation in form and subject, and strong stances for racial and gender equality. And yet, Spencer's work does not fit exactly or easily into any of these classifications.

Each of the previous analyses follows one or more tributaries (to use a natural metaphor, of which Spencer might have approved) of Spencer's poetry—her (sometimes) traditional forms, her calls for racial or gender equality, her modernist concerns, and so forth. However, it is my contention that these tributaries meet in a larger river that runs through much of Spencer's work—and that river is the pastoral. The currents of this river carry all of these themes and ideas, sometimes eddying to focus on one more clearly than another, sometimes widening to pull together multiple influences and ideas—but always the pastoral runs through the work. This pastoral idea provides a throughline that unifies poems as diverse in content and form as “White Things” and “Before the Feast at Shushan,” or “1975” and “Lady, Lady.” It also provides a unifying vision for the multiple ways in which her poetry has been analyzed and classified; the pastoral in Spencer's work is as much a feminist response as it is a modernist one, as much a call for racial equality as it is a Romantic or Transcendentalist view of our relationship to nature and to the divine.

Additionally, understanding Spencer's work through a pastoral lens allows us to consider her work as part of a southern tradition—one that she partly embraces and partly rejects and revises. It is my contention that Spencer's work is best understood through the lens of the pastoral, and that this lens allows us to see how Spencer, paradoxically, fits squarely within the Southern Renaissance—in particular, within the Renaissance's emphasis on a return to a pastoral world—and simultaneously stands opposed to it. Spencer has not yet been considered as part of the Southern Renaissance, and yet, she, like other southern writers of the early twentieth century such as Allen Tate and Donald Davidson, took the pastoral's ideals very seriously. Indeed, her poetry demonstrates a sincere belief in the spiritual fulfillment that emerges from a nurturing

relationship with the land. She extends that belief to show how that fulfillment affects all other relationships: being in harmony with the earth is directly connected to being in harmony with one's God, and those spiritual relationships with nature and with God generate wiser, kinder, more intimate, and more egalitarian relationships with other people.<sup>4</sup>

However, Spencer stands apart from other Southern Renaissance writers—and, indeed, implicitly criticizes their pastoral visions for the underlying racism and sexism therein—because her poems also underscore her belief that when desire for power is stronger than desire for harmony and spirituality, all relationships—between God, people, and the earth—suffer, and the pastoral vision is ruined. These latter poems I refer to as “damaged” pastorals, and not surprisingly, they are also the poems where Spencer's political voice comes through most clearly, as she tackles racial and gender discrimination and violence.

Thus, Spencer writes within and against the southern pastoral tradition, simultaneously. In so doing, her poetry reveals facets of the pastoral and of the South that remain buried or obscured in other versions, from the plantation romance to the Agrarians' influential idyll of the yeoman farmer. Spencer's pastoral does not allow for the same kind of selective vision of these other versions; her pastoral demonstrates the need to create a kind of haven *because of* the industrialization, corruption, racial violence, gender inequities, and classism she sees every day. Spencer's “garden apart”—the garden created in her poetry—neither masks nor denies the intrusions, violence, frustrations, and sorrows of the outside world (the urban, racist, sexist, classist outside world). Rather, her garden (both her literal and her literary garden) function as a reminder of what beauty, harmony, bounty, and unity can be; as described in her poetry, the garden is a place of spiritual solace and relational fulfillment, a place rendered so necessary

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<sup>4</sup> In this belief, Spencer anticipates the later twentieth-century turn toward ecofeminism, and particularly ecofeminist theology; her understanding of the harmonious balance of relationships between God, people, and the earth especially resonates with such womanist writers as Alice Walker and Audre Lorde, as well as with such feminist theologians as Susan Griffin and Carol P. Christ.

because of the disunity and despair outside the garden walls. This approach is different than previous and contemporaneous iterations of pastoral: while other versions (like that of the Agrarians or earlier writers focused on the Lost Cause) blot those images out, doing their best to cover them up with emphasis on the nobility and harmony of the past or to erase the present realities altogether, Spencer's pastoral works to point out that both exist, and both must exist in poetry for it to matter. She brings up the present realities, while also buffering those realities with hope, beauty, love, and praise—in other words, she presents those realities while also reaching to transcend them.

The chapter will take the following path through Spencer's work: first, I will provide a more detailed overview of the scholarship devoted to her poetry, in order to gather insights from previous studies and to demonstrate that the pastoral is the most compelling lens through which to read her poetry. Then, I will dig even more deeply into Spencer's poems, especially those that have escaped much notice thus far. My analysis of many of Spencer's poems will provide a detailed overview of her pastoral vision; the structure of this analysis is broken into three parts. First, I study Spencer's poems that represent her idealized pastoral, the pastoral of harmony with the land, with God, and with others. Second, I examine the poems that show racial, gender, and class inequities, as well as ecological destruction; these poems I have termed "damaged" pastorals, and they present Spencer's strongest political critiques. And last, I discuss Spencer's vision of the pastoral as a sustaining force, even in the face of great tragedy and loss. Throughout this extended analysis, I will unify and combine some of the previous studies of her work as I identify the intersecting attitudes and influences in her poetry, including feminism, Romanticism, modernism, and the Harlem Renaissance. This analysis will also enable us to see her as a poet who works within and speaks back to the ideas of the Southern Renaissance—particularly the ideas that emerge from the southern pastoral vision.

Overall, I argue that Spencer's work is a transformation of the tradition of pastoral—her work is not so conventional or sentimental as some have claimed, and her redeployment of pastoral themes and ideals demonstrates her careful rhetorical positioning, as she uses familiar poetic tropes to clearly establish her worldview and advocate for racial and gender equality. Understanding the pastoral in Spencer's work is essential because it connects many of the other analyses of her work, it brings her spiritual and political principles to the fore, it establishes connections between poems written at multiple points during her long poetic career, and it enables us to see the underlying currents and essential beliefs presented in her poetry as a whole.



## 2. Critical Overview: Scholarship on Spencer's Work

One particularly obvious reason that the pastoral lens is useful in reading Spencer's work is that metaphors drawn from nature—specifically from her garden—appear in nearly every poem. Of course, “nature writing” does not belong exclusively to the pastoral tradition; as many critics discuss, natural metaphors (and especially domestic garden metaphors, the heart of much of Spencer's poetry) are an essential part of environmental literature, Romanticism, and the long history of women's public and private writing. Paula Bennett points to the use of natural imagery by 19<sup>th</sup> century women poets as a precursor for the Imagist lyric, noting that these small, floral, and wild images served as a code for both female sexuality and a demonstration of concern for the environment. However, I would still claim that the use of natural imagery over and against images of the city (usually as a chaotic, soulless, urban mess) is a distinct and essential part of pastoral writing.<sup>5</sup> And Anne Spencer's poetic edge—her condemnation of societal injustices, ecological damage, and political corruptions in even the most idyllic poems and simplest lyrics—

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<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Buell's definition of pastoral, discussed in the introduction, underscores this point, as he argues that in American literary studies, pastoral refers “to all literature...that celebrates the ethos of nature/rurality over against the ethos of the town or city” (23).

point to her understanding and employment of pastoral devices. She often sets up this juxtaposition between rural (or garden) and urban, innocent and corrupt, haven and danger explicitly. J. Lee Greene describes this contrast beautifully:

[W]hether in her own garden or in the garden as symbol of a perfect world in her poetry, through the creative, life-giving process Anne Spencer managed to substitute a more perfect world to compensate for the imperfect society in which she lived. This was her motivation for writing poetry. (101)

This kind of substitution (perhaps most clearly illuminated in her poem titled “Substitution,” discussed later) is an indication of Spencer’s adherence to the foundations of the pastoral genre.

Additionally, Spencer’s claim to the Romantic tradition also aligns her with the pastoral. While the pastoral tradition reaches back before Romanticism, the Romantics pick it up in important ways—especially as an instrument of personal expression and industrialist critique—and, as Karapetkova argues, Spencer identifies herself clearly as an inheritor of that Romantic tradition: “She proclaimed Robert Browning as her favorite poet without conceiving of her affinity for him as a contradiction, and she wrote herself comfortably into the company of white men (as she did in one short lyric): ‘Chatterton, Shelley, Keats and I—/ Ah, how poets sing and die!’” (228). Spencer shares this inheritance of the Romantics with Harlem Renaissance writers, as Maureen Honey makes plain:

The Romantics saw art and truth as connected, a viewpoint that echoed [Renaissance poets’] own sense that the ills of modern life stemmed from a coarsening of the human spirit due to acquisitive, aggressive domination by a white ruling class. Nature offered an Edenesque alternative to the corrupted, artificial environment created by “progress.” (7)

Anne Spencer’s poetic garden, rendered imagistically and imaginatively (her garden is called her “soul of love” in one poem), is her truer, nobler, more spiritual world—a Romantic version of pastoral. Spencer thus uses the pastoral to build a bridge between the two periods.

Also, I believe it is important to recognize the pastoral in Spencer's work because her use of this tradition repositions authorial control of that genre. The authorial control of the pastoral had nearly always been—and continued, often, to be—in the hands of white, upper-class, urban men. John L. Stewart, in his comprehensive study of the Fugitives and Agrarians, notes that “it is axiomatic that pastoral literature is written by city men” (199). And yet, almost thirty years before the Agrarians publish their celebration of an imagined idyllic South, Spencer—a black woman from a small southern town, who is actually growing plants—is already writing a competing narrative, and she continues writing that strikingly different version long after the Agrarians gave up on their project. Her version complicates or contradicts other versions of pastoral developed and written in the South—notably, Lost Cause mythology, plantation romances, nostalgic longings for antebellum life, and the myth of the yeoman farmer. Spencer reconceives and revamps the pastoral tradition—a tradition that either portrayed black men and women as happy, simple, loyal folk, content on the antebellum plantation, or a tradition that wrote them out of the South's history, literature, and culture altogether. In her work, Spencer not only writes herself (along with other black men and especially black women) into that tradition in an entirely different way than they had been written about (Spencer portrays her speakers, addressees, and personae as powerful, sensual, sophisticated, ironic, philosophical, deeply private), but she also positions herself as the gardener of the pastoral world, the creator and controller of that world.

As such, she determines what comes through the garden gates and what is locked out; she can create a haven, closed off from the injustices and inhumanities of the larger worlds of Lynchburg, the South, or the nation, or she can allow that border to open, addressing those larger worlds and demonstrating how imperfect they are in comparison to the brilliant, bright Eden she creates (both literally and figuratively). As many scholars have noticed, Spencer's garden and her

poetry are closely aligned—they are both the scenes of tranquil reflection and political debates and discussions. And the name of Spencer’s garden house? Edankrall – “Ed” from Edward, her husband’s first name, “An” for Anne, and “Krall” or “kraal,” a word of South or Central African origin referring to an enclosure around a village or for sheep or cattle (OED). [See Fig. 1]. If the independent yeoman farmer is the ideal of the Agrarian vision, Spencer usurps that position and translates it into a domestic gardener—but one who is connected to both the earth and society, one who works to regenerate “Edan”/Eden with the full knowledge of how far the outside world has fallen from grace. Thus, Spencer redefines the pastoral tradition from the inside out, challenging some of its darker assumptions or underpinnings (i.e., what Lewis Simpson termed “the dispossessed garden of the chattel”) and refocusing it on its promise of spiritual fulfillment.



Figure 1. Anne Spencer's Garden and Edankraal. [Photo by Sally Smits Masten, July 2015]

In this reconstruction of the pastoral, Spencer also establishes a different relationship between people and the land, particularly between women and the land. Her landscape is not the “wild bosom” or the “virgin land” of previous American pastoralism that Annette Kolodny describes as the typical American pastoral from the 1600s forward—that land, essentially, is viewed as something to be possessed or conquered while it nurtures and sustains innocence and leisure. Neither does Spencer portray black men and women and white women as simply property of the white author/landowner/farmer or as mere tools for reconciliation between the North and South, as they had been depicted in previous iterations of the southern pastoral (which Elizabeth Jane Harrison amply demonstrates). Rather Spencer’s pastoral is akin to the “alternative pastoral” Harrison notes in the work of other women writers:

Their explorations of ways of achieving female autonomy and changing interactions among characters of different class, race, and gender depend upon the invocation of land not as ‘property’ but as an empowering life source. This alternative pastoral questions the motivations of a society that ignores exploitation of others for the sake of land ownership. Respect for the land enables respect for all human life. (15)

In Spencer’s idealized pastorals, she illustrates the “empowering life source” that comes from a close union with the earth and all its creatures, and which leads to a closer connection with God and stronger relationships with other people. In other poems, Spencer specifically questions the plausibility and morality of owning land, and she insistently compares that immoral ownership to the immorality of slavery and gender inequality. Thus, her authorial control over this genre contributes to its revision—a revision more whole and spiritually fulfilling than its exploitative and domineering history allowed.

Additionally, it is essential to understand Spencer’s authorial control and her revisions of tradition in order to reestablish her place in both the Southern Renaissance and the Harlem Renaissance. Spencer did not fit easily into earlier canonical definitions of the Harlem

Renaissance, and that is one of the reasons that she slipped from critical view for a long while, even though she was a respected poet in her lifetime. Spencer's work and the work of many of her female contemporaries was viewed as outside or lagging behind the revolutions of the Harlem Renaissance—their poetry was read as not political or not “racial” enough, not freewheeling or experimental enough, not making those “leaps” that Alain Locke described many male poets making. Too often, these women writers have been overlooked or dismissed because their work does not fit neatly within the literary definitions of the Harlem Renaissance, and because these writers did work more often and more closely with received forms and traditionally recognizable themes—so much so that they have often been written off as “sentimental” or “conventional.” As Hull points out,

Since the overwhelming majority of the women wrote aracial or quietly racial works in traditional forms, they are never taken to represent the period. Their poetry is usually described as ‘personal’ and this adjective, as applied, becomes a synonym for female/feminine, and thus connotes a devaluing or dismissing of the work. (11)

Of course, several scholars, including Hull, Prunty-Kemp, and Honey, have demonstrated that the boundaries of these canons may be too strict or too much based on male writers' works to have any meaning for female writers in the early twentieth century. They have also pointed out the double-edged sword for black women writing during the Harlem Renaissance (and we might easily add the Southern Renaissance): participating in the developing black aesthetic of the Harlem Renaissance could be dangerous for black women, pigeonholing them to an exotic/erotic stereotype, while sticking to traditional forms was not recognized as an illustration of their skill or talent but rather got them labeled as stuffy or unoriginal. Holly Karapetkova succinctly explains this double bind:

The alternative to writing in accepted forms—an attempt to forge a new literary aesthetic from the black folk forms of spiritual, jazz, and orality—was not always more desirable, for it fed racist notions of exoticism and primitivism. Such notions were particularly dangerous for black women because they recalled a tradition of sexual abuse and images of black women as licentious. Either way black artists turned they were criticized, and while black men could occasionally garner praise for their skillful use of traditional poetic forms...or for their innovation with new forms...black women invariably suffered disapproval at either end of the spectrum. (228)

Karapetkova and a variety of other scholars have worked to recover the writing of black women so often overlooked, to understand their poetic choices in context, and to expand the boundaries of our understanding of what constitutes particular literary periods, showing that women's writing offers us some new definitions and foundational criteria for those movements. What they have found is that, though black women writers like Spencer often made different formal and aesthetic choices than male writers, very often their work evinces the same concerns (for example, though sometimes more muted, Spencer does call for racial equality), and very often they deploy traditional forms far more subversively than may appear at first glance.

Spencer, certainly, deployed the traditions of the pastoral not simply to repeat the past or to remain within the bounds of a predominantly white, patriarchal, elitist tradition, but rather to revise that tradition from the inside out. In so doing, she establishes her own authority within the pastoral tradition—and, as other scholars have noted, within various literary movements, including Romanticism, modernism and the Harlem Renaissance—not a particularly easy thing to do for a black woman in Lynchburg, Virginia, living through the ongoing turmoil of segregation and violent racism. Spencer uses that authority to critique both societal injustice and ecological damage; in this, she stands as a prophetic voice calling through the difficult social and ever-industrializing wilderness of the South. What is perhaps more amazing is that her prophetic voice also creates a renewed vision of the South as a place where harmony between races and genders, as well as restoration of the land and the spirit, is possible. In the following section, I will

examine Spencer's revitalized vision, what I have termed her "idealized pastoral vision," through analysis of several poems, focusing especially on short lyric poems including "[God never planted a garden]" and "1975," and on the sonnet "Substitution."



### 3. Spencer's Idealized Pastoral

"[God never planted a garden]"  
God never planted a garden  
But He placed a keeper there;  
And the keeper ever razed the ground  
And built a city where  
God cannot walk at the eve of day,  
Nor take the morning air. (182, 1-6)<sup>6</sup>

In these six lines, which seem both whimsical and witty, mournful and sharply critical, Spencer lays out nearly the whole scope of the pastoral tradition and genre. As discussed in the introduction to this project, the conventions of the pastoral tradition have evolved and expanded since Theocritus and Virgil, but some elements remain essential. A pastoral still evokes a strong bond between humanity and nature; the poem's portrayal of the natural world—whether farmland or wilderness—is idealized, salvific, and pure; and that portrayal demonstrates the beauty and spiritual fulfillment of the natural world in direct contrast to the soullessness of chaotic, immoral, vice-ridden cities. (Whether this contrast is explicit or implicit changes, of course, depending on the poem's intent.) This contrast is, in fact, at the very heart of the pastoral and the motives for writing in this tradition. For example, the pastoral genre has functioned, in the English tradition, to provide a kind of release for people in the court and city, creating an imaginative retreat to a world of green lush hills and leisurely goat-watching and woman-wooing. It has also served to

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<sup>6</sup> All poems quoted in this chapter, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the appendix of J. Lee Greene's biography of Spencer, *Time's Unfading Garden*.

critique corruption and destruction in urban industrialization by opposing them to idealize rural scenes, landscapes, and people.

But it may also valorize the urban, complex society and subtly downgrade the stature of the rural, simple life; it may indeed justify the “conquering” of “virgin land,” as Kolodny demonstrates. It has served, even, to justify certain untenable economic systems, including slavery in the South, generating a branch of southern pastoral writing that Lewis Simpson titled “the dispossessed garden of the chattel,” which depicted this system as a harmonious social and natural arrangement. Perhaps Lucinda MacKethan defines the evolution of the pastoral in southern literature best, explaining,

To the extent that many southern writers have developed their images of the South as a dream of Arcady, they seem most often to have retained the trappings of that golden land primarily as a device by which they might expose or rebuke, escape or confront, the complexities of the actual time in which they have lived. (3)

In “[God never planted a garden],” a poem from her notebooks likely composed in 1928, Spencer sets up this very contrast between Arcady (or here, Eden) and present reality, between nature and city, and she does so explicitly. She opens with a glimpse into the pastoral’s heart: the keeper’s spiritual relationship with the land. Both the garden and the keeper are planted by God, and we have an image, then, of belonging, of rightness, of the caretaking and spiritual relationship; the alliteration of “planted” and “placed” creates a subtle harmony in these lines, as does the visual balance in the lines’ lengths. In this Eden, the keeper has a “right relationship with nature” and with God—this is the kind of relationship the pastoral tradition emphasizes, the simplest, best, most natural relationship.

And then, abruptly, those relationships are torn— the keeper suddenly “razed the ground” and “built a city.” Though the poem keeps and even strengthens its even iambic rhythms in these

lines, those rhythms start to sound more like the march of industry and progress than the harmonious relationship of the first two lines, and the visual balance of the lines is thrown off for the rest of the poem, with the third line much longer than the fourth, the fifth longer than the sixth. These lines might seem, still, to establish a sense of order and hierarchy—at least, if one reads “keeping” as “domination.” But Spencer’s choice of “keeper” is illustrative—a keeper keeps, or maintains, sustains, protects. A keeper doesn’t raze and build, destroy and create. And so, the right relationship between God, the keeper, and the garden is skewed, wrecked. Spencer paints the keeper’s destruction as so entirely complete that he not only razes everything above the ground, but the ground itself—“the keeper ever razed the ground”; one can imagine even the crabgrass and the smallest plants ripped up, the topsoil dug up and blown away, everything covered now in concrete and asphalt in the newly-built city. And Spencer makes it clear that this sequence of events has happened before: the poem quietly insists that this pattern of razing creation and building nothing worthy in its place has gone on for centuries, implied by the words “never” and “ever.” God has never created a world but God has also placed a keeper, and that keeper has ever and always razed the ground he or she is given.

One of the most awful results of ripping out the garden and building a bunch of skyscrapers, of course, is revealed in the final two lines: God can’t even be present in that city. And Spencer emphasizes that this is true no matter what the time: evening and morning are both impossible for God’s walking. For many in the Christian tradition, separation from God is equivalent to death and hell, and godlessness is certainly associated with spiritual emptiness and despair. Therefore, Spencer once again underscores the element of spiritual fulfillment in the pastoral landscape, the “divine triangle” between God and humanity and nature, the Emersonian “oversoulness” of it—and she does so by highlighting the devastating consequences of destroying the natural world. The ramifications, these final two lines assert, go beyond dullness or

lifelessness—they create soullessness, spiritual desolation. This point is reinforced by another of Spencer’s poems, “He Said,” wherein the opposite is true—the “garden at dusk” is the gardener’s “soul”—in fact, it is “the soul of love” itself (183, 1-2).

It is significant that Spencer ends “[God never planted a garden]” on “morning air,” as morning is often interpreted as the promise of renewal, the rebirth of hope. In this case, without that “morning air” in God’s lungs, without that divine breath that gives life and spirit at the conclusion of the poem, there is, genuinely, nothing. Spencer’s last line leaves us seeking hope, seeking the garden again, and so it draws our attention back to the first line: “God never planted a garden.” But that first line, upon re-reading, is desolate. It seems, at the end of the poem, that such must be true: if there is no garden for God to walk in, no presence of God on earth, then God might just as well have never planted such a garden in the first place. Thus, Spencer’s critique of our destruction of nature and our creation of worthless things, even in lilting rhyme and sweet cadence, is devastating.



Spencer picks up these pastoral themes—the spiritual fulfillment of living in harmony with nature, and the bleakness of living without—from different angles and in varying tones in other poems. A far more hopeful and restorative poem, the undated “[Thou art come to us, O God, this year]” innovatively combines traditional hymn-like language with Spencer’s original coinages and distinctive imagery. This combination drives home the theme of God’s necessary presence in and on the earth for the speaker, and the spiritual renewal that God’s presence, revealed in nature, provides for an aging speaker. The first four lines present both reverence and down-to-earth phrasing in tandem:

Thou art come to us, O God, this year—  
Or how come these wisteria boughs

Dripping with the heavy honey of the Spring  
Art here. (182, 1-4)

“Thou art come to us,” of course, takes up the language of biblical address, while the beginning of the question, “how come these wisteria boughs,” is much more plainspoken. The voice of the poem seems to address God as both king and friend, superior and intimate. The speaker, while in awe of the astonishing loveliness that surpasses language, that goes “beyond all / Our words for prayer,” can also “decode” the emotions of God from that loveliness. The natural world carries spiritual meaning for the speaker; God speaks through creation to the speaker’s soul. This kind of connection and communion reflects many of Spencer’s influences—Romantic, Transcendental, Christian, and certainly pastoral—and it demonstrates her close attention to the ideal relationship between the natural and spiritual worlds. The blooming wisteria, “dripping with the heavy honey of the Spring,” gorgeous, rich, and full, is the reflection of an “illimitable” soul, even amid the speaker’s deepening sense of mortality. The poem’s final lines reflect those dual senses of eternity and temporality:

We thank Thee great God—  
We who must now ever house  
In the body-cramped places age has doomed—  
That to us comes Even the sweet pangs  
Of the Soul’s illimitable sentience  
Seeing the wisteria Thou has bloomed! (10-15)

The speaker lives in a “body-cramped place,” a body that seems to be collapsing in on itself, or at least a body that is too confining for a soul, and it becomes more cramped and confined with each passing year. Additionally, this spring season, outside of the blossoming wisteria, is full of darkness—“shadows,” “ochre,” “tears,” and “grief.” However, the wisteria, the “sweet pangs” of those fragrant lavender clusters, is made even sweeter by the fact that it is God’s gift to the

speaker, the reminder—amid the speaker’s intimations of death—that there is wholeness and fulfillment in this connection with nature, and that the natural world is God’s way of communicating with people. Throughout the poem, the speaker builds that bridge, that relationship, to God through a rich combination of tones both simple and elevated, and images both elegant and plain. And that relationship reestablishes the idealization of the pastoral. Perhaps of all Spencer’s pastoral poems evoking the spiritual relationship to be uncovered in the natural world, this one is the most explicit and the most traditional.

In other, more fragmentary lyrics, Spencer makes the relationship between the speaker, the earth, and *language and poetry* more explicit, more prominent. In some ways, these brief, almost mystical poems delve to the source of the idealized pastoral—they claim that language itself arises from the natural world, and that language from the earth, overheard or recognized by the speaker, generates the miracle of poetry. The deeply spiritual relationship between the earth and the speaker—including her body, senses, mind, language, soul, and life—is perhaps made clearest in the untitled poem that begins, “Earth, I thank you.” In this undated poem, the earth speaks—indeed, births—language, and so the earth is kin to the poet, struggling to make the words that make life:

Earth, I thank you  
for the pleasure of your language  
You’ve had a hard time  
bringing it to me  
from the ground  
to grunt thru the noun  
To all the way  
feeling seeing smelling touching  
—awareness  
I am here! (197, 1-10).

This poem, in the pastoral mode, recognizes a connection between land and poet, a relationship of giving and gratitude and giving back, and that relationship creates a genuine kinship between the speaker and the earth. Much like the poet, the earth grows its language with no small effort—it “grunt[s]” in its labor of bringing up “the noun” to give to the speaker—and then that gift multiplies into sensory active verbs: “feeling seeing smelling touching.” Those gifts continue to expand to give the speaker a whole grasp, a consciousness, an “awareness” of her own presence and her integral relationship with this earth.

The magic of this poem’s pastoral, though, goes beyond even the recognition of the earth’s gift. Here again, as elsewhere, Spencer underscores the *mutual* relationship between earth and humanity: that if humanity destroys the earth, then humanity itself cannot survive physically or spiritually, but if humanity tends to and protects the earth as it grows its gardens and gives life, then humanity thrives, lives, in the fullest sense of the word (underscored by Spencer’s enthusiastic and joyful exclamation point at the conclusion of this poem). Much as in “[God never planted a garden],” “[Earth, I thank you]” is a poem that resists the concept of the poet (as well as the farmer, the planter, the gardener, etc.) in a position of dominion over the earth; rather, it asserts that the poet has power—even life and awareness—only because of and from the earth itself. This mutuality is rendered so completely in this poem that by the end of it, we can’t tell who is “you” and who is “I” any longer. The earth, initially the addressee of the poem, gives its language from noun to verb, but the speaker shares that language, those nouns and verbs, and assuredly shares that final moment of full awareness of the richly sensed present moment. If, as I’ve claimed, the heart of the pastoral is the spiritual relationship between speaker and land, then this poem adds further dimensions to that relationship—the relationship is not only spiritual but also physical, emotional, and intellectual. It is a relationship “all the way,” complete, whole, continual and present. Spencer’s poem imagines the earth as alive, thinking, making language,

nourishing the poet, just as she nurtures the earth, thinks, and makes language—their merging on every level in this poem goes beyond reciprocity to interdependence and mutuality.



Spencer’s poem “1975” reiterates this pastoral theme of interdependence not only in physical terms (we feed the earth, the earth feeds us) but again in terms of spirit, emotion, and language. In this poem, the earth, and especially one of its tiny hidden creatures, a “curly worm” under a “shaley rock,” gives the poet a secret, an insight, a flash of wisdom and eloquence. Here again, Spencer reveals the heart and source of the pastoral, with the unexpected twist that something so seemingly insignificant, the littlest and most hidden and even despised creature, could be the source of knowledge, the connection to spirituality, the fine thread that binds the world and the poet together:

Turn an earth clod  
Peel a shaley rock  
In fondness molest a curly worm  
Whose *familiar* is everywhere  
Kneel  
And the curly worm sentient *now*  
Will *light* the word that tells the poet what a poem is (175, 1-7)

Because of its use of the imperative throughout, this poem reads as a kind of set of instructions for the pastoral mode—how to begin, where to look, how to understand our right relationship to the world around us, how to find complexity and even a whole world of wonder in simplicity. And, as it is one of the last poems that Spencer wrote, it seems also to be a reflection, or summation, of her poetic principles. According to J. Lee Greene, Spencer explained that she completed this poem in June of 1974, looking ahead to the year that she believed she would die (172). In this poem, Spencer leaves instructions for poets who follow her—and, in a Whitmanesque turn, she seems to ask us to look for her (or, if not her, then her familiars, her

garden, her poetry, her insights) under our boot soles, under the “earthy clod,” with the “curly worm,” and there we, too, will find the source of all language and the soul’s fulfillment.

That the poem uses earthy, even clunky language in its first three lines—“earth clod,” “rock,” “molest,” and “worm”—does not seem a promising beginning for understanding the depths of the soul or the magic of poetry and language. But that seems precisely Spencer’s point—her reinvention of the pastoral mode here seems to sweep away any grand illusions, any false pretensions to romance or legend or myth. This poem runs counter to the tradition of plantation romance or embellished yeoman farmer mythology, in that it actually gets down in the dirt, puts its hands on “earth clods” and “shaley rocks” and “curly worms.” And from there, the poem explodes into a spirit-filled world—the worm, it turns out, is not just writhing around all by itself but instead it has deep spiritual connections to everything—its “*familiar* is everywhere.”

The word “familiar,” italicized for energy and for emphasis, may mean “family”—and so, once we notice that curly worm, we start to see these previously overlooked but enormously important creatures everywhere; the worm has family everywhere, under every rock and clod. And the cultivation of the land, after all, is dependent upon these worms and even tinier creatures. And so, Spencer highlights again that gardeners, planters, farmers—anyone who works with the land—are dependent upon these creatures, too, and they are a part of the creatures’ family. But the word “familiar” has other dimensions, too, and these matter equally as much (especially to someone as precise and well-read as Spencer). Greene, for example, contends that Spencer’s assertion that the familiar is everywhere “borders on the mystical, for the sophisticated manner in which she approached these familiar observations of her environment allowed her to explore their meanings in uncommon depth” (99). And indeed, Greene’s commentary is supported by some further definitions of “familiar.” A “familiar,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, may refer to a “member of a person’s household or family, esp. a servant of a person of high rank,” or

“a close friend or associate; a person whom one knows well.” Both of these definitions are relevant to the poem, I believe, because they demonstrate the close kinship between all the living things on the land—including even those that are often dismissed as “servants” in the “we-shall-have-dominion-over-the-earth” reading of Genesis. In Spencer’s poem, the curly worm is no less essential to the “household” of the garden than the gardener herself. And the close relationship between the gardener (and poet) and the worm is underscored by the word “fondness” in the third line—the worm is not just employed to do aerating work, nor is it stomped on or trampled, but rather it is treated with real affection. The worm is a familiar, a friend and fellow in the garden. But even beyond the sense of “familiar” as “well-known,” or “well-loved,” or “part of the family,” the word “familiar” also infuses the poem with a mystic, even daemonic spirituality—one further definition for “familiar” is “a spirit, often taking the form of an animal, which obeys and assists a witch or other person,” or, in a slightly more relevant description, “something (material or immaterial) likened to such a spirit; esp. something which is always with a person.” Thus, the worm itself functions as a familiar for the speaker—it is always *with* the gardener of “1975.” The worm is, after all, “sentient *now*,” a sensing and sensitive spiritual companion that leads the poet to the poem, to meaning and insight. In addition, the worm’s familiar is everywhere, and so it, too, has spiritual companions and is linked (one is reminded of Whitman’s spider) to everything surrounding it.

The final few lines of “1975” deserve even closer attention, then, since Spencer opens so many planes and possibilities with her fourth line. It is, for example, quite important that she follows the revelation of her multivalent relationship with this wee curly worm with the simple, single-word command: “Kneel.” This word, on a line of its own, carries a lot of weight in the poem—and it reflects that the proper posture for a true pastoral is humility and reverence for the complexity and wisdom of the natural world. Of course, kneeling also brings one “down to

earth,” so to speak—again, out of the realm of legend and fantasy and into the living, breathing, physical world as well as the present moment. And the present moment is also key to this poem—Spencer italicizes “now” to emphasize the importance of being alive with all of one’s senses (similar to the series of verbs in “Earth, I thank you”). The worm, “sentient *now*,” wriggling, responding to light, digging deep into the earth, is the teacher of the poet. The worm’s vital responses to the earth’s movements, to the speaker’s fond molestations, to the connection between itself and all other living things—these responses are what will “light” the way for the poet. And this final line—where the worm reveals to the poet the essence of what makes a poem (though it remains ineffable, perhaps too sacred or too ephemeral to be spoken aloud, it seems, as that essence isn’t defined for the reader)—is loaded with spiritual referents, as well. The “worm,” sentient and connected, becomes the “word”; Spencer changes one letter to demonstrate how closely connected the worm is to language and, perhaps more importantly, to its divine creator. Spencer’s brilliant small shift in spelling (made nearly impossible to miss by the proximity of “worm” and “word” in the final two lines) makes a clever play: the worm makes the word—or God’s presence—come alive, as it lights the word from within. And those connections—between creation and creativity, between nature and divinity and language, between the poet-gardener and the worm—show us again the very source of the pastoral genre, here made immediate, living, and present in the most unexpected, wriggly creature.



These many poems discussed here—from the whimsical but deadly serious “[God never planted a garden]” to the psalmic “[Thou art come to us, O God],” to the joyful and mystical fragments of “[Earth, I thank you]” and “1975”—approach from varying angles the difficult problem the pastoral attempts to solve: the problem of the ugly and violent hierarchies and divisions in the world that lead to destruction and devastation. And they also present the solution

the pastoral attempts to offer—rediscovered harmony between the natural, spiritual, and physical worlds, created, in part, through and by language. Perhaps Spencer’s most complete rendering of this pastoral harmony—indeed, this *transcendence* created in the pastoral mode over and above the unjust and violent world—is in her masterful, complex sonnet, “Substitution.” The title belies the poem’s intent—to substitute a more perfect, more beautiful, more harmonious and intimate world for the one in which we now live. And the poem generates that substitution on two levels: first, in the octave, the speaker ponders how God thinks the world and all life into being,<sup>7</sup> and then in the sestet, the speaker follows God’s lead and thinks her way out of a “noisy peopled room” into an “absurdly easy,” intimate, beautiful “sacred place.” Unsurprisingly for Spencer, that sacred place is a garden.

In the opening of the poem, Spencer establishes the question on which the poem is based: “Is Life itself but many ways of thought” (176, 1). And the rest of the poem is spent demonstrating how the minds of God and the poet create realities that are multi-dimensional, fiercely alive, wonderfully loved—and so the reality of destruction, division, cruelty, or injustice is not the only possible reality. Initially in the poem, God’s thought—perhaps just God’s smallest whim or “slightest convolution”—produces a very real “tropic storm or lambent breeze” in our

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<sup>7</sup> “Substitution” was originally published in 1923 in Countee Cullen’s anthology, *Caroling Dusk*. In that initial version, the first five lines read:

Is Life itself but many ways of thought,  
Does *thinking* furl the poets’ pleiades,  
Is in His slightest convolution wrought  
These mantled worlds and their men-freighted seas?  
He thinks—and being comes to ardent things: (Cullen 48)

Spencer revised these lines in 1973, according to Greene, in part to clarify pronoun ambiguity and to make plain God’s presence, his mind, as the creative force in the octave (otherwise, as Greene notes, the poem “concern[s] primarily the poet and the speaker as creators”). I include this earlier version to underscore the connection Spencer makes between poetry and creation; this first version mentions poets specifically and connects their constellated poems (“pleiades”) to God’s created world. The revision in the later version shifts its lens away from poets and expands to incorporate a wider world—from sky to storm to breeze to seas. Both versions speak to Spencer’s poetic approach and beliefs—but the difference between the versions is helpful to illuminate different aspects of her outlook.

“mantled world and men-freighted seas” (2-4). Next, with a more direct or focused thought (the intensity and intentionality of the thought represented by the ellipses that separate “God thinks” from “and being comes”), God creates glories—sunsets, love (5). In idler moments of God’s dreaming, creation orbits all of God, which is all of time and all of space—the “All-Mind” Spencer includes in the final line, in an echo of Emerson. In the sestet, the poet answers these creations, not by equaling their grandeur, but by establishing that any mind—perhaps because all minds are included in and are part of the “All-Mind”—holds the possibility of creating a different reality, one filled with beauty, ease, and intimacy:

My thought leans forward...quick! you’re lifted clear  
Of brick and frame to moonlit garden bloom,—  
Absurdly easy, now, our walking, dear,  
Talking, my leaning close to touch your face...  
His All-Mind bids us keep this sacred place! (10-14).

(Note that the parallel between God’s mind and the speaker’s is reinforced by the ellipses in both lines—“God thinks...and being comes” and “My thought leans forward...quick!” Both lines create a deliberate pause *after* the thinking and *before* the newly-made reality springs into being. Thus, the way that the speaker-poet thinks and invents mirrors God’s way of thinking and inventing.) One of the most important capacities we have, Spencer seems to say, is this godlike capacity to create a world of love and beauty—and language is as much a part of that world as physical land and spiritual meditation.

It is no accident that Spencer situates “talking” amid “walking” and “leaning,” and thereby claims language as a necessary connection between the speaker and her “you,” as a necessary part of their “sacred place.” In this poem, then (as in the others aforementioned), intellect, language, divinity, body, intimacy, and the natural world merge perfectly to create a holy space—a substituted holy space that takes the place of other realities. And so, the final line,

as with so many of the poems discussed in this chapter, again draws the speaker, language, the divine spirit (“All-Mind”), and the earth together to make what is perhaps the strongest and most affirmative assertion of her beliefs about the redemptive, creative possibilities of the pastoral, and indeed, the redemptive possibilities found in the nurturing of the land itself and of the loving relationship between the poem’s “us.” And, of course, in the word “keep,” included in that final line, there is a distinct echo of the keeper in “[God never planted a garden].”

Several of the scholars who have delved into Spencer’s work discuss “Substitution” directly, which is perhaps a further indication that this poem stands as one of Spencer’s strongest or clearest declarations of her poetic intent—indeed, it seems to function as a kind of *ars poetica*. Greene notes that this poem “is a good schematic example of the plan and themes of her poetry, as well as a partial explanation of why she wrote poetry” (100). The sestet, surely, demonstrates the power of the poet (or any person, really) to create alternate worlds outside of the noisy, violent, “convoluted,” “brick and frame,” claustrophobic reality she encounters in those lines. Greene concludes that

whether in her own garden or in the garden as symbol of a perfect world in her poetry, through the creative, life-giving process Anne Spencer managed to substitute a more perfect world to compensate for the imperfect society in which she lived. This was her motivation for writing poetry. (101)

Cheryl Wall seconds Greene’s understanding: ‘The desire to invent another world in poetry is the topic of the aptly titled ‘Substitution’....Neither racism nor any other problem will invade this idealized world where beauty and love flourish. The principle of substitution is central to Spencer’s aesthetic” (16).

In these comments, Wall and Greene explain precisely why it is important to understand the pastoral elements in Spencer’s poetry. The various poems covered in the chapter thus far set

out Spencer's idealistic vision of what is possible when all relationships between God, humanity, and earth are aligned, right, and mutually nurturing. And this perfected pastoral backdrop enables us to more clearly see Spencer's intent in poems where all things and all relationships are not right—and it enables us to see the political bent in Spencer's poems that has so often been overlooked. As pointed out earlier, Spencer and her contemporary female poets were often criticized for not writing out-and-out political poetry, and their verse was often dismissed as conservative, unoriginal, or maudlin. Maureen Honey summarizes these critiques nicely, noting that while “scholars who lived through the [Harlem] Renaissance” including Sterling Brown and James Weldon Johnson “wrote favorably” about their female contemporaries, others who came later looked at their work in a far less favorable light:

Later critics...have tended to see women's verse as conventional and sentimental, out of step with the militant, rebellious race consciousness of the period. Those who accord it some artistic value nevertheless agree that most women poets remained with the genteel school of 'raceless' literature, having largely confined themselves to the realm of private experience and the natural world. (1-2)

Very few critics have read Spencer's work as explicitly pastoral, and yet, the poems discussed in this section demonstrate her very strong pastoral impulses. And I would argue, against the kind of criticism that Honey describes, that the pastoral is an entirely appropriate model for her work. And I would add that Spencer goes *beyond* the model, reshaping the pastoral and making it her own. It suits her themes and work beautifully for many reasons. First, of course, is her love for her own garden, evinced in her poetry again and again. Second, and more broadly, it connects her directly to the Romantic and Transcendentalist vision of nature, which she studied, admired, and adapted for her own ideology. And third, it offers her a perfectly apt way to salvage the parts of the South she loved (the natural world, in particular) while simultaneously speaking back to and

destabilizing the southern pastoral tradition that had reiterated racist and sexist power dynamics throughout its history.

In the following section, I will discuss Spencer's "damaged pastoral"—in contradistinction to her idealized pastorals like "1975"—which she uses to more clearly illuminate the racial and gendered oppression in the South. The damaged pastoral presents suffering and cruelty, racial hatred and violence, whereas the idealized pastoral offers the vision that allows us to transcend them. It is vital that we recognize both strains in Spencer's work. Only then can we see how often Spencer weaves her commentary on gendered and racial oppression into poems that, upon first glance, seem to deal solely with faith, relationship, or the natural world. Thus, understanding Spencer's idealized *and* damaged pastorals offers us a fuller picture of her political and aesthetic achievements.



#### 4. Spencer's Damaged Pastoral as Political Critique

Spencer uses many of the tropes and linguistic traditions of the southern pastoral tradition and she takes many of its fundamentals very seriously, but at the same time, she explicitly and intentionally disrupts some of its most denigrating and damaging stereotypes and hierarchies. Of course, simply by virtue of writing as a black woman and speaking about her own experience, Spencer challenges the southern pastoral tradition, which often silenced all but white men and caricatured most everyone else. But quite often, her choice of subject matter—from her own garden (a space under her own control) to the history of colonization in America, from a biblical-figure-turned-feminist-symbol to a struggling but self-possessed black washerwoman—also challenges the simplistic, tranquilized narratives of plantation romances, Lost Cause mythology, and other previous iterations of the southern pastoral, as she introduces the disruptive themes of gender, class, and racial inequality and oppression. Therefore, while Spencer's idealized pastoral

creates a peaceful, safe, and harmonious world apart from racial and gender stratification, Spencer also uses the pastoral to directly address and critique those very inequalities. In short, Spencer uses the very tropes and traditions of the southern pastoral—which in the past often served to reiterate and promulgate social inequality—in order to challenge, critique, and dismantle the southern pastoral tradition from within. Thus, her pastoral verse is far from conventional (her range and scope and depth of understanding of the pastoral’s multivalent possibilities far exceed any humdrum recitation or deployment of an old form); neither is it apolitical or sentimental. In fact, if we understand the pastoral mode in Spencer’s poetry—which I am defining as her creation of a far more perfect and harmonious world, an Eden and “Edankraal” created in language that binds together the spiritual, physical, intellectual, and natural worlds in right relationships—we can then also see far more clearly her sharp critique of the imperfect and the unjust in poems where various pastoral elements are absent, incomplete, suffering, or destroyed. The poems which present such a critique I am calling “damaged pastorals.”

When we understand Spencer’s pastoral approach, many of her poems take on a much stronger political cast—and it becomes far more difficult to see her poetry as “raceless,” “genteel,” or “conformist.” When Spencer presents her damaged pastorals, we should pay attention, as those poems often directly point toward racial or gender disparity—and they are a kind of commentary on the injustice of the world the speaker of “Substitution” wants to do away with. Certainly, in some poems, the political is quite apparent, even without recognizing Spencer’s pastoral approach (for example, it would be hard to miss the condemnation of racism in “White Things,” a poem discussed later in this chapter, even in the most cursory reading). But in other poems, after we “dig up” their pastoral source and focus on the relationships between people, the land, and the divine, we can see how a split or break in any of these relationships

affects all other relationships—a broken relationship between races, for example, poisons the earth, and broken relationship between genders turns a whole beautiful garden to a pit of despair. The despoilment of the land, of course, also turns people against one another and separates them from their spirit and their God, as demonstrated clearly in “[God never planted a garden].” Throughout her poetry, Spencer keeps pursuing the perfection of the pastoral, but in her poems that focus on the injustice of the world in one form or another, she demonstrates very clearly just how impossible that perfect world is to attain if any relationships are tainted by cruelty, tyranny, inequality, or injustice. Much as in Spencer’s life, so in Spencer’s poetry—her garden, like her pastoral poetry, are cultivated to perfection, but just beyond the walls of the garden or the pastoral, Spencer finds plenty to rail against, to try to set right.



The aforementioned “White Things” serves well as a guide to Spencer’s use of the damaged pastoral as political commentary about the divisiveness and violence that racism creates and its disastrous effects on everything—not only people—in the world. Much as “Substitution” may serve as the crown of her idealized pastoral vision, “White Things”<sup>8</sup> is the masterful display of what happens when the pastoral vision breaks down because of racism and violence. The first couplet of “White Things” connects us directly to Spencer’s pastoral vision—in its scope, it takes in all of what the eye can see, “the sky, earth, and sea,” all united in their list: “Most things are colorful things—the sky, earth, and sea. / Black men are most men; but the white are free!” (191, 1-2). Indeed, this first couplet seems to have a bit of whimsy, a charming rhythm; the repetition, the generalizing tone, the end-rhymes, and the exclamation mark at the end of the second line all generate a tone that sounds, at first, a little like a playful categorization game for children. But the second line demonstrates the division and power differential between “color” and “white.”

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<sup>8</sup> “White Things” was first published in *Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, XXV (Mar. 1923), 204.

Beyond the clear assertion about race made in this initial couplet, there is also a more subtle argument about value, about alignment and harmony between people and the earth. The parallel created in this first couplet via repetition aligns “most things,” “colorful things,” and the most basic components of our world—“sky, earth, and sea”—with “most men,” who are “black men.” This alignment is reflective of Spencer’s pastoral vision—that we should be in harmony with the earth, a complement, an integrated part of the world. “The white,” though they are free, are set apart and away from this relationship between black men and a colorful world. Of course the word “free” in this couplet conjures the usual connotations—freedom is a positive thing, a thing worth striving for, a valuable and powerful thing. But “free” here also carries the implication of “unmoored” or “disconnected”—if the white are not part of “most things,” not part of the most essential elements of earth, the value of being “free” (and “white”) comes under scrutiny.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in these first two lines alone, Spencer quietly raises the question (and the rest of the poem will answer it) of the cost of being free—or what freedom (and/or whiteness) truly means.

The abuse of freedom becomes clear throughout the rest of the first stanza, wherein the “white things” drain the “colorful things” of all their vitality.

White things are rare things; so rare, so rare  
They stole from out a silvered world—somewhere.  
Finding earth-plains fair plans, save greenly grassed,  
They strewed white feathers of cowardice, as they passed;  
    The golden stars with lances fine  
    The hills all red and darkened pine,  
They blanched with their wand of power;  
And turned the blood in a ruby rose  
To a poor white poppy-flower. (3-11)

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<sup>9</sup> J. Lee Greene argues, too, that this poem calls into question the archetypal symbolism of “white” and “black,” and in fact reverses it. “White” in this poem is no representative of goodness or purity, and neither is “black” or any other color representative of sin or evil. Color, in this poem, is vitality and life, whereas white is associated with ghoulishness, horror, and apostasy.

A gorgeous array of colors keeps appearing throughout this stanza: “greenly grassed” plains, “golden stars,” “hills all red and darkened pine,” and “the blood in a ruby rose.” Spencer offers up this rich and rainbowed world in nearly every other line, suggesting, perhaps, the colorful things’ will to survive, their clinging to life. And yet, each color is eventually extinguished. The white things that “stole from out a silvered world—somewhere” keep trampling out the colorful things (and again, here, Spencer makes it clear that the white things are not naturally a part of this colorful world—they arrive mysteriously, not from the place of this poem, and they do not blend or harmonize with the world around them). “They strewed white feathers of cowardice” over the “greenly grassed” plains; they “blanched with their wand of power” those “golden stars” and “hills all red and darkened pine,; and finally, they “turned the blood in a ruby rose / To a poor white poppy-flower.” Spencer keeps tying the color white to negative language in this stanza, even in subtle ways—rather than saying, for example, that the white rare thing left or departed from “a silvered world,” she writes that they “stole out.” They are also associated with cowardice, with abuse of power, with destruction, and with death. Meanwhile, the colorful things are positive, even associated with wealth—“fair,” “golden,” “fine,” “ruby.” If we have Spencer’s ideal pastoral in mind, it becomes quite clear that the desire to have power over nature and others, to turn the world “white”—which is, certainly, the opposite of living close to the earth, listening carefully, seeking intimacy—is an injustice not only against other races, but against all of nature and God himself. It is exactly the opposite of righteousness, wholeness, harmony, and spiritual fulfillment. Akin to razing the ground itself, it is destructive, malicious, and death-dealing. The damaged landscape of the first stanza presents an idealized pastoral in decline, slowly dying.

And if her point weren’t clear enough in the first stanza, Spencer only makes it more terrifyingly sharp in the second stanza. Greene explains the transition and link between stanzas, noting that white people’s “violation of nature prefaced their destructive campaign to subjugate

human nature and deprive other men of the human right to be free” (132). And assuredly, the destruction of nature in the first stanza is intimately and overtly tied to the violence and murder, the lynching and burning, in the second:

They pyred a race of black, black men,  
And burned them to ashes white; then,  
Laughing, a young one claimed a skull,  
For the skull of a black is white, not dull,  
    But a glistening awful thing;  
    Made, it seems for this ghoul to swing  
In the face of God with all his might,  
And swear by the hell that siréd him:  
    “Man-maker, make white!” (12-20)

Spencer makes the fear and terror generated in this stanza acutely worse by the bleaching out of all other colors but white. The “black, black men,” like the “ruby rose” and the green grasses in the first stanza, are overtaken by violent, soulless whiteness; they are turned to lifeless “ashes white.” The word “black” appears one more time in this stanza, in the line, “For the skull of a black is white, not dull.” But “black” is immediately erased by the word “white.” Whereas in the first stanza, the “colorful things” could exist momentarily in their own lines, in the second stanza any color is immediately drained. The tension between “colorful things” and “white things” reaches its climax in this line—and the result of the erasure of color is not purity or goodness but instead “a glistening awful thing.”

In this grisly depiction of the lynching’s aftermath, Spencer paints a hellish anti-pastoral. The scene is without color and without life, without any natural harmony; everything is replaced instead with ghoulish laughter and the sheer evil desecration of men’s remains. The ironies in this stanza are piercing. First, of course, is Spencer’s play on the age-old plea for racial equality—that under our skins, our blood is the same color. That the black man’s skull is white under his skin should lead the laughing ghoul to a recognition of equality, a recognition that his

skull, too, is white. Instead, in the horrifying tradition of taking a souvenir from a lynching, the young white ghoul takes the skull as another “white thing” and celebrates the fact that he has “made white.” The irony, of course, is in his misrecognition—in “making white,” he has not made anything at all; instead, he has destroyed life. And it is made worse in that he is the “young one,” “laughing.” His callous reaction to murder on a massive scale and to its intimate, individual details—the “glistening” white skull—demonstrates a total lack of empathy and humanity, even at a young age. (The line raises the question, then, what has he learned from his elders, if not hatred and cruelty? And this question points us back to the “tradition” of destruction in the first stanza).

The ironies of the second stanza are compounded if we compare this poem’s depiction of the severed relationship between God and the laughing ghoul to the far more consonant relationship in “Substitution” between God and the speaker. In “Substitution,” the speaker takes her cues from God—she employs her creative capacity to generate and keep a more beautiful, sacred reality. In “White Things,” the ghoul does exactly the opposite—he “creates” white through violation, ruin, and slaughter, and then attempts to dictate to God that he should do the same. In “Substitution,” the speaker names God as the “All-Mind,” the holy intellect and spirit that infuses all of creation with life. In “White Things,” the ghoul misnames God as simply “Man-Maker,” thereby limiting God’s capacity and fundamentally misunderstanding the interconnectivity of all things on earth. Additionally, rather than listening carefully to the natural world, to others, and to a divine spirit, the ghoul in “White Things” attempts to overpower everything, even God. The second stanza reiterates this effort to control God—it is especially clear in the imperative exclamation at the poem’s conclusion. Nothing could be farther from Spencer’s ideal, balanced, harmonious pastoral vision than the second stanza of “White Things,” and the actions and language of this lynch-mob member.

However, Spencer also makes it clear that the ghoul's demand of God at the conclusion of the poem will fall on deaf ears. First, she describes him as swinging the skull "in the face of God," a description of defiance, not of connection or harmony with God. Second, Spencer asserts that he is not a child of God, but rather, he was "sired" by hell. Of course, the claim that we are all "children of God" is an evocation of another familiar call to equality and justice for all—here, in naming him a child of hell, Spencer has effectively severed him from the rest of humanity. The word "sired" echoes the word "pyred" from the first line of the stanza, thereby drawing these lines together and signifying that only one sired by hell could so coldly massacre a race of men. "Making white" is not God's will, but the work of evil. Third, his final proclamation, "Man-maker, make white!" is denied in two ways. Though its position as the final line of the poem may seem to carry more weight, I would argue that what is more important is the complete lack of response after that proclamation, the total silence after that line is spoken. The white space following this line is a deafening silence, indicating that God has turned away from this desecration and its originators. Additionally, the call to "make white" is ironic in itself—the lynching and burning are not creative, generative "making," but destructive, ruinous acts. Calling on God, then, to make the world white, as these white men have done in this stanza, is an abhorrent crime against God. And it clearly severs them from God. They may be free, as the first stanza claims, but their freedom is not the freedom of empowerment. It is the ironic freedom of isolation and severance from all else—they are disconnected from nature, from others, and from God. It is a temporary, unsatisfying, hellish "freedom" after all.

The second stanza, in fact, demonstrates that this kind of freedom—seemingly above but actually cut off from the rest of the world—is just a Faustian bargain. There is no soul, no God, left in a world murdered and destroyed by racist tyranny; there is only an awful, terrifying hell. Therefore, we have in this poem a complex and subtle vision—a pastoral vision in the first line

and partly carried through the first stanza that is subsequently undercut and damaged by the separation and estrangement between black and white portrayed throughout the poem. This tension between a perfected, beautiful world and a pallid, horrifying one—demonstrating that racism devastates not just human relationships, but spiritual relationships and relationships between humanity and nature as well— plays out through the rest of the poem. And it slowly gets more and more horrifying until its awful end.

Significantly, this poem deals with more than just tensions between white and black people; it also encompasses the oppression of other races. That the color most emphasized in the first stanza is red—in the hills, the blood, and the ruby rose—is no accident, much as her direct emphasis on “black, black men” in the second stanza is inescapable. The poem, from first to second stanza, then, offers a kind of history lesson of colonialism, racism, and oppression in short, lyrical form. This chronological connection is a significant part of the politics in this poem: Spencer’s political angle connects the oppression and systematic destruction of Native Americans with the oppression and systematic destruction of African Americans.<sup>10</sup> While establishing the connection between systems of oppression is not a new idea, it is an extraordinarily difficult project to take up in a single poem, especially for a black woman poet working in the early twentieth century, as it is not an idea likely to be well-received by white publishers. In fact, as Honey describes, Spencer was told by editors that she needed to delete the references in this poem to “white men” because, “as a newly-emerging Afro-American writer....she could not afford to alienate white publishers” (10). And yet, this poem remains a powerful condemnation of racism throughout history—and Spencer relies, in part, on her pastoral vision to get that

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<sup>10</sup> Maureen Honey spells this connection out thoroughly, noting the imagery of the first stanza as representative of Native Americans, and explaining: “Spencer identified strongly with Native Americans (her father was half Seminole and she frequently wore her long, straight hair in braids). Here, she makes a connection between their defeat and terrorism against Afro-Americans, linking both to the made desire of a minority race to destroy everything unlike itself” (9-10).

argument across, even if white men are never referred to as “men,” but instead suggested by “white things.”<sup>11</sup>

“White Things” is a rare poem for Spencer in its overt protest against racism. Only one other of her poems so directly addresses this topic: “The Sévigné’s” frankly condemns the erection of a statue in 1927 in Natchitoches, Louisiana, of an old, black man with his shoulders bent forward, hat doffed, eyes trained downward. The original plaque that accompanied the statue read: “Dedicated to the arduous and faithful services of the good darkies of Louisiana.” The statue, known as “Uncle Jack” or the “Good Darcy,” still evokes plenty of controversy; in her poem, Spencer names it “this shameless thing set up to the intricate involvement of human slavery” (191, 5). Two lines later, she asserts that those who raised it show “No penance” and are “callous beyond belief” (7). Within her condemnation of this statue and what it stands for, she integrates the mention of Madame de Sévigné, a seventeenth-century French aristocrat whose treatment of peasants was abhorrent (Greene 136). Spencer’s ironic final lines, then, point out that vile attitudes like those of Madame de Sévigné’s toward the lower classes were not abandoned when Europeans immigrated to America; instead, even “these women who had so lately fled from the slavery of Europe” imported and adopted her attitudes, setting up their own despicable hierarchy of slavery in “the great wilds of America.” The final line of this poem, moving from the “civilization” of Europe to the “wilds of America,” reminds us again of Spencer’s hope in the pastoral—that the wilderness and the garden offers redemption and freedom from the sins of slavery and injustice. And her point in the poem is to show us just how far we have missed out on that offer in the past; this poem, too, carries a glimmer of the pastoral

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<sup>11</sup> That white people are only named as “white things” in this poem is, I would argue, a compelling, subtle indictment in itself. The pronouns “they” and “him” are used for white people, but words that would give them some human characteristic or form are never applied to them. Rather, they are just a faceless, soulless, destructive force. Without a doubt, the destructive power of whiteness in this poem is the exact inverse of the life-sustaining power of the pastoral in others.

and more than a glimmer of the anti-pastoral. Spencer's disappointment in the past (and the present, disheartening memorial of the past in the statue) is evident in the line instructing the reader to visit "Uncle Jack," who Spencer renames "Uncle Remus": "Go, see it read it with whatever heart you have left" (6).



Most other poems by Spencer are far less overt in their mention of racial inequality. Perhaps one reason that Spencer rarely writes the overt racial protest poem (despite the demands and expectations from some of her Harlem Renaissance counterparts) is explained in the autobiographical headnote she wrote for her poems included in Countee Cullen's 1927 anthology, *Caroling Dusk*. I quote it here in full, as it is rich in Spencer's vibrant, playful, sharp voice:

Mother Nature, February, forty-five years ago forced me on the stage that I, in turn, might assume the rôle of lonely child, happy wife, perplexed mother—and, so far, a twice resentful grandmother. I have no academic honors, nor lodge regalia. I am a Christian by intention, a Methodist by inheritance, and a Baptist by marriage. I write about some of the things I love. But have no civilized articulation for the things I hate. I proudly love being a Negro woman—its [sic] so involved and interesting. We are the PROBLEM—the great national game of TABOO. (47)

It is quite clear from poems such as "White Things" and "The Sévigné's" that racism and its accompanying destruction are some of the things she hates, some of the things for which she has "no civilized articulation" (though of course those poems are devastatingly articulate). And it is clear from the rest of the body of her work what she loves and writes about with investment, passion, and reverence—the natural world, love, and faith, among others. Gloria T. Hull reads Spencer's headnote as a candid justification for and defense of the "aracial or quietly racial" poetic approach that she and several of her female contemporaries took, and she comments that these poets "deliberately treated subjects such as family relationships, natural beauty, and inner musings—i.e., 'love things'—rather than pursue 'hateful' topics of injustice and vice" (11). And

while I agree with Hull that these ‘love things’ predominate in Spencer’s work, I also think that her work (and her headnote) is more complex than this binary of “love things” and “hateful things” allows for (and Hull notes this complexity as well, later in her argument, discussing the use of “organic images and metaphors” in black women’s literature). For example, Spencer’s first sentence of this brief autobiography is undeniably complicated—family is neither an entirely safe nor consistently enriching experience, and her feelings about it range from happiness to resentment. More importantly, in terms of the study of her poetry, Spencer points out unequivocally that one of her ‘love things’ is “being a Negro woman” and, indirectly, that she loves being the “PROBLEM,” the “TABOO.”

Therefore, while she may not have written a volume of protest poems as searing as “White Things,” Spencer most certainly writes frequently—in both her idealized and damaged pastorals—about what it means to be a black woman, and inevitably, then, she confronts racism and sexism even in a “love thing” poem. Spencer herself claimed that her poetic vision was shaped by her identity as a black woman: “Whatever is poetic with me does not belong to poor white folks; it belongs to being Negro” (qtd. in Greene 143). Thus, perhaps it isn’t so much that Spencer wrote “aracial or quietly racial” (or agendered or quietly gendered) works, but rather that the subjects of race and gender in her poetry are very often finely interwoven with other subjects upon which Spencer frequently dwells, including nature, history, and spirituality.

Our understanding of the many levels of meaning in Spencer’s poems depends upon our understanding of this intricate weaving. Her nature poems are never just nature poems. They are, very often, instructions for a better way to live, hope for a more perfected future, or condemnation of tyranny and oppression. Honey points out, for example, that “nature poetry, at which Spencer excelled, frequently was animated by subtle references to racism or sexism,” and that “pastoral beauty is a backdrop against which the ugliness of prejudice, hatred, and

domination is effectively juxtaposed” (17). The idealized pastoral is a vehicle to describe and dwell in what she loved, whereas the damaged pastoral allows her to come at the things she hated from a new angle. The age-old genre of pastoral is made new in Spencer’s hands—she deploys it to celebrate what she loves and protest what she hates.

One poem that clearly establishes this interweaving is “Lady, Lady.” This poem ties together race, class, and gender inequalities using the backdrop of a damaged pastoral (played out on the washerwoman’s body) and it redeems those injustices by pointing again toward the ideal pastoral vision, found in the beauty of night and in the deep core of the washerwoman’s heart, at the conclusion of the poem. Additionally, “Lady, Lady,” first published in 1925, is intimately tied to other poems—including “Letter to My Sister,” “He Said:,” and “[Thou art come to us, O God, this year]”—in its imagery and themes. Therefore, while “Lady, Lady” stands on its own as a work of elegance and symmetry, it also helps to illuminate some of the gendered or racial aspects of some of her other poems. The poem opens as a portrait:

Lady, Lady, I saw your face,  
Dark as night withholding a star ...  
The chisel fell, or it might have been  
You had borne so long the yoke of men.  
Lady, Lady, I saw your hands,  
Twisted, awry, like crumpled roots,  
Bleached poor white in a sudsy tub,  
Wrinkled and drawn from your rub-a-dub. (179, 1-8)

The challenge to divisions between classes is apparent from the title and made unmistakable by the musical repetition of “Lady, Lady” throughout the poem.<sup>12</sup> The subject of the poem, a launderer, is always elevated to the status of “lady,” upper-class or royalty, even as she is portrayed as burdened by her work and suffering subjugation under “the yoke of men.” Cheryl

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<sup>12</sup> Holly Karapetkova notes that this poem, as a kind of portrait, has modernist connections as well, and she compares it with the poems titled “Portrait of a Lady” by T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams.

Wall notes that in addressing her as “lady,” Spencer “invests her subject with a dignity the world denies” (19). Additionally, Spencer invests her with dignity by connecting her to a damaged pastoral landscape, and even more so by fully connecting her to the beauty of the natural and spiritual worlds. In the first two lines, we have no sense of her physical suffering; we only have the sense of her enormous restraint and power. Of course “dark as night” serves as a physical description, but in “withholding a star,” the woman already has the power to determine how others will see her, how she will present her face to the world while safely “withholding” her animating, inspiriting light from the dangers and cruelties of that world. That she chooses to withhold the star, rather than allowing anyone to see it (let alone extinguish it) immediately gives her an extraordinary strength. Even in the first two lines, then, Spencer presents us with the “great national game of TABOO”—a black woman quietly challenging the role she was assigned and challenging those who would ignore, discount, or persecute her for her gender or race or both.

And this strength is essential—Spencer’s recognition of it is essential—because the next several lines clearly depict the lady’s daily suffering, using the language of the damaged pastoral to underpin a sense of injustice and outrage. The chisel and the yoke, of course, are tools used by men to reshape or control nature—the chisel cracks, cuts into, and re-forms even the most obdurate rock, and the yoke restrains even the most obstinate oxen or horses. Thus, the mention of these tools in “Lady, Lady” already points to a damaged pastoral because the pastoral landscape here is no longer an Eden or paradise, but, in Kolodny’s terms, it has become rather “an object of domination and exploitation.” That it isn’t just the landscape that is being reshaped through domination, but instead is *the lady’s very body*, both reinforces the connection between this black woman and the landscape *and* the horror of exploitation. We see her body marked further in the next few lines, as her hands are compared to a living tree whose roots are gradually

drained of their vitality and strength. They are “twisted, awry, like crumpled roots” and “bleached,” “wrinkled and drawn.” On her body are the marks of the damaged pastoral—much as Spencer has portrayed the devastating effects of exploitation on the land in other poems, so she transfers those effects here to the exploited woman. Of course, this relationship between landscape and people, more implicit here, recalls the explicit connection made in “White Things.” “Lady, Lady” echoes “White Things,” too, in that the woman’s hands are “bleached poor white,” just as the “ruby rose” was turned into a “poor white poppy flower.”

However, “Lady, Lady” does not end with the same kind of horror or despair found in “White Things.” Rather, this poem circles back again to the woman’s dignity and brilliance—the withheld star found in the second line—expanding and developing that metaphor for her strong and rich spirit.

Lady, Lady, I saw your heart,  
And altared there in its darksome place  
Were tongues of flames the ancients knew,  
Where the good God sits to spangle through. (9-12)

Here we find Spencer returning to sacred language to elevate and venerate the lady again, over and against the tedious “rub-a-dub” and the suffering of chisel and yoke. This poem carries a trace of her hymn-like poem, “[Thou art come to us, O God, this year],” in that, while the woman lives in her “body-cramped” bone-house, her soul is yet “illimitable,” ancient, eternal. The “tongues of flames,” the symbolic arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, live in this woman’s heart. She is a faithful disciple, keeping the flames alive. And those flames, in a “darksome place,” also evoke and return us to the bright star withheld early on, and we discover that the light is not just her own dignity but God himself, seated in her heart. That “star” is even more mystical, infinite, and cosmic than we might have guessed. Spencer’s language generates an

image of the woman's interior soul as expansive and as majestic as a night sky full of stars, God "spangling through" her heart. Additionally, Spencer's wordplay—turning "altar" into "altared"—reflects both an emphasis on *transformation* (the woman has "altered" her daily suffering into something holy) and an emphasis on the sacred keeping so essential to her poetry. In these final four lines, then, we turn away from the external damaged pastoral and back toward a sacred, perfected pastoral. Much like "Substitution" or even "1975," this poem illustrates how to survive, how to turn inward and darkward to find light, and how to maintain beauty and vitality in the face of a ravaged, destructive reality. "Lady, Lady" effectively combines the external damaged pastoral and the internal idealized pastoral, and it manages quite well to restore "Lady" to full and whole personhood; it gives her a complete, illimitable soul.

Various critics have cited "Lady, Lady" as an essential poem in understanding how Spencer employs symbols from the natural world to integrate advocacy for racial equality and gender equality. For example, Honey writes that this poem "brings to the surface three major themes of women's poetry (equation of Blackness and femaleness with strength, resistance to white male oppression, survival of the core self) and illustrates how they are intertwined with nature metaphors" (18). Similarly, Karapetkova notes that this poem "represents a conscious attempt to carve out a space for such themes as female power and survival" (238). However, to some degree, Karapetkova and Cheryl Wall criticize Spencer for holding the woman at a distance, neither allowing her to have full subjectivity nor allowing readers full understanding of her experience. Karapetkova finds the conclusion of the poem too abstract, writing that "these last lines pretend to take us closer to the woman by moving into her heart but instead slip into the distanced abstraction of a 'darksome place'" (238). And Wall criticizes Spencer for talking about the washerwoman's gifts of poetry but not showing them, thereby keeping her aloof and apart:

“The subject...does not speak. Indeed, Spencer’s language and her allusions serve to hold both the subject’s condition and her voice at a distance” (19).

Of course, both Karapetkova and Wall (and certainly Honey) recognize the effort in Spencer’s poem to paint the woman as victorious over her oppressors and give her plenty of credit for doing so with art and grace. But I think that the criticisms of the poem—that the washerwoman does not have her own voice, or that her heart remains unknown—miss an essential point, a point which is amply made elsewhere in these critics’ defenses of Spencer, and a point which Spencer herself makes in multiple other poems. The point is this: to be so intimately known is to give power to others, while to hold one’s peace is a strong defense of dignity or, at the very least, self-preservation. And so, Spencer seems to say, you’d best be careful about handing over your intimate self to just anyone. Indeed, Spencer’s poems are quite cautious about exposing the “self,” even as a persona, and even from a third-person point of view.

Maureen Honey and Charita M. Ford offer compelling reasons for Spencer’s “self-veiling” and her use of that veiling for other black women who appear in her poems, such as the launderer. Ford explains that Spencer’s poetry, “cryptic in its style and symbolism,” has been “a source of confusion for her critics,” and that these critics often do not recognize them as a means to “protest and defy female subordination” (11). Assuredly, Spencer’s metaphors and symbols serve in part as protest and in part as protection for herself and her subjects. Additionally, Honey, more broadly, explains one likely motivation for Spencer to move into a more abstracted, protective description of the laundress’ heart, rather than dwelling long on her individual story, her scars, and her triumphs: “The impulse to protect oneself from a hurtful reality is not an admission of defeat, but, rather, an acknowledgment that the forces arrayed against a Black woman’s dignity and development of her powers are formidable” (17). That Spencer does not further explore the hurtful reality of the washerwoman’s life except in metaphors drawn from a

damaged pastoral vision is certainly one way of protecting her, of not exploiting her any further; indeed, these metaphors mostly serve to connect her to the land (a source of strength and vitality) and they serve to avert the eyes of the reader away from her body. And assuredly, in the final section of the poem, wherein “the good God spangles through” her heart, Spencer further protects her by furnishing her with a power that overcomes any forces against her. The images that Spencer chooses for her spirit and heart both shield her and offer her strength to push back against those very attempts.



Moreover, Spencer herself seems to anticipate and answer the criticism of her decision to shroud and shield the black women she writes about; she spells her answer out almost explicitly in the poem, “Letter to My Sister,” published two years after “Lady, Lady,” in 1927. To some degree, the speaker of “Letter” sounds like the voice of the washerwoman in “Lady, Lady,” offering instructions on how to survive. The final stanza of “Letter,” in particular, resonates with the final four lines of “Lady, Lady”:

This you may do:  
Lock your heart, then, quietly,  
And lest they peer within,  
Light no lamp when dark comes down  
Raise no shade for sun;  
Breathless must your breath come through  
If you’d die and dare deny  
The gods their god-like fun. (194, 15-22)

The lady whose face withholds the stars, whose heart contains ancient tongues of flame, has learned the lesson of “Letter” well. She has certainly locked her heart and “raised no shade for sun.” This poem makes it quite clear that women’s survival in a world where the “gods” are

forever watching, condemning, punishing, and entrapping depends upon concealment, self-protection, and subversion.

And so, while the title of “Letter to My Sister” implies a kind of closeness and intimacy that we don’t necessarily find in “Lady, Lady,” “Letter” also maintains a self-protective distance, in that it moves toward a mythological world instead of working in verisimilitude. Originally titled “Sybil Warns Her Sister,” “Letter” describes the chisel and yoke of the world differently, naming these forces the gods’ “searing lightning, / The drowning waters, tormenting fears / And anger of red sins” (5-7). “Letter” sounds both more dramatized and personal than “Lady, Lady,” but it also uses a more epic scale, a mythological cloak, and a knowing prophetic voice (the most famous Sybil in Greek mythology was a vessel for Apollo’s oracles, and also the one sentenced by Apollo to eternal life without eternal youth for her insolence) to describe the injuries the world inflicts on black women in particular. Significantly, the poem does not refer to the speaker’s own experiences, but rather generalizes them into advice for the sister named in the title. Though the speaker describes sharply and accurately various ways that women may “taunt” and challenge the gods or “mince timidly” and “sweat agony drops” before them, and so it seems that she speaks from experience (and certainly the Sybil had plenty of experience when it comes to the cruelty and punishment of the gods), the speaker does not use the first-person point of view but rather maintains distance from these actions, using “you” throughout. Through Spencer’s deliberate authorial choices—drawing metaphors from mythology and using a point of view one step removed from the self/speaker—she maintains and demonstrates that controlled distance so vital to survival. Both “Letter” and “Lady, Lady” deploy, then, their own cloaking devices to maintain a protective distance between the reader and the subject—“Lady, Lady” uses more abstract and sacred language, and “Letter” establishes its arguments in the shadow of Mount Olympus.

Yet another reason for Spencer to conceal desires and cloak injuries via pastoral metaphor and mythological allusions is to fight against the stereotypes of black women found in and beyond art. Ford notes that Spencer, like her female contemporaries, worked against the “sensationalism and primitivism” that came into vogue during the Harlem Renaissance and modernism, in an effort to “defy exotic/erotic stereotypes of Black women” (10). Karapetkova expands this analysis, noting that the demand for “exoticism and primitivism” as part of a black literary aesthetic was “particularly dangerous for black women because [it] recalled a tradition of sexual abuse and images of black women as licentious” (228). The difficulty—indeed, the trap—presented to black women writers of the early twentieth century, then, is obvious; expressions of desire, especially sexual desire, as a black woman writer might very easily be turned against her, used to “prove” her “inherent” promiscuity. Spencer encodes this very danger in “Letter to My Sister,” writing: “If you have beauty or none, if celibate / Or vowed—the gods are Juggernaut, / Passing over...over...” (12-14). The women Spencer describes in these lines are definitely not promiscuous—but it doesn’t matter to the merciless, crushing, ever-present gods who are always surveilling, always watching for any slip. And even if the women don’t slip, if they follow the advice of the final stanza—that “Breathless must your breath come through”—still the only way out from this constant scrutiny is death (or a life that looks like death—a life with no sun, no lamp, no breath). And that, of course, is the second half of the dilemma—to write without desire is to write dead poetry: poetry that is too cold, too traditional, too obscure, too predictable, too banal. Those adjectives, as discussed earlier, were certainly applied as criticisms of the work of Spencer and her female contemporaries. And so, Spencer, in particular, uses the pastoral—both idealized and damaged—in order to express desire, intimacy, anger, political opinion, despair, any of those dangerous things that might force her into that trap of “exoticism and primitivism” or into the trap of dead poetry.

Another of Spencer's poems, titled "Innocence," published in Cullen's 1927 anthology, *Caroling Dusk*, speaks directly to this trap, describing a woman who "fell" from grace and who is then further victimized by neighbors' lusty gossip. This woman has, it seems, fulfilled the eroticized stereotype of black women; she has done what folks expected her to do—but in so doing, she has been condemned by everyone around her. She is caught in that very dilemma spelled out by Karapetkova—to suppress desire is to deny oneself a fuller life, but to express desire is to prove herself licentious, to confirm suspicions. And yet, Spencer plays that dilemma very carefully and manages to protect the subject of "Innocence" from outside criticism or further gossip in two ways: first, she never reveals precisely what the fall from grace entailed, and second, she instead transforms her story into something like a fairytale:

She tripped and fell against a star,  
A lady we all have known;  
Just what the villagers lusted for  
To claim her one of their own;  
Fallen but once the lower felt she,  
So turned her face and died,—  
With never a hounding fool to see  
'Twas a star-lance in her side! (Cullen 51, 1-8)

The subject of the poem is called, again here, a "lady," and the neighbors become "villagers"—and in these fable-like names, Spencer shifts the power dynamic, keeping the "lady" above the common fray. The poem notes, too, that the "villagers" savored her fall because they believed it made her "one of their own," but Spencer's association of the lady with the stars keeps her apart from them, the "hounding fool[s]." Indeed, her fall from grace is actually made lovely, described in terms of the night sky—she "tripped and fell against a star," and the result of this falling is not ugliness but rather "a star-lance in her side," a kind of beautiful, cosmic scar. Spencer cloaks her in a blanket of nightfall and stars, keeping her errors or sins private, out of further discussion.

The title, too, safeguards the woman's reputation, as "Innocence" hovers over the whole poem—in fact, the only sin noted in the poem is "lust," and that lusting after gossip belongs to the villagers alone. Spencer portrays the woman's death as a tragedy, then, and not as justice or retribution for her supposed sins. Though the lady of "Innocence," in the end, was unable to safeguard her internal light, as the washerwoman of "Lady, Lady" and the speaker of "Letter to My Sister" learned to do, Spencer still protects her, using beautiful, cosmic metaphors for the woman's life.



Perhaps the strongest exemplar of how the idealized pastoral can be so quickly ruined by an imbalance of power—in this case, between genders—is Spencer's "Before the Feast at Shushan." This poem, first recognized for its mastery by James Weldon Johnson and published in 1920 in *Crisis* (after it had been rejected by H. L. Mencken), deserves extended analysis in the following pages, not only because it is one of Spencer's most well-known poems, but also because it presents her views on gender equality so beautifully and fully, with such careful attention to image and form. This poem is far ahead of its time in its themes, and it is one of Spencer's masterpieces, especially in the way it demonstrates how inequality and lack of respect for women rapidly transform an idealized pastoral into a damaged one.

"Before the Feast at Shushan" re-narrates the first chapter of the Book of Esther, wherein King Ahasuerus (known more familiarly today as Xerxes) hosts an extravagant display of his wealth, glory, and power for one hundred and eighty days, followed by a full seven days of feasting in his garden—the Garden of Shushan—for all of the men who lived there in the citadel of Shushan. During those same seven days, his queen, Vashti, hosts a second banquet in the palace for all of the women of Shushan. On the seventh day, "when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine," he commands Vashti to appear before him (and every other drunk man at the

feast in the garden), “wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles” (Esther 1:10-11, NIV). Many scholars have noted that Ahasuerus’ demand is inappropriate and dishonorable, and Vashti’s refusal is in keeping with the modesty and dignity of her position.<sup>13</sup> That the request in the biblical text follows a thorough and ample description of the egregious displays of wealth and excesses of wine only cements this conclusion—Ahasuerus’s festive spirit has impaired his judgment. But, after Vashti’s refusal in front of his entire kingdom, he is forced to save face. Her refusal is read as defiance, as a challenge to the king’s power (and thereby to the power of all men over women).

In fact, the possible powerful effects of Vashti’s refusal are explicitly described in the first chapter of Esther, by the King’s advisor. He notes that the queen’s agency to refuse her husband and thereby upset the structure of power will set a precedent for all women: “For the queen’s conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, ‘King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.’ . . . There will be no end of disrespect and discord” (Esther 1:17-18, NIV). If, however, the King dismisses Vashti and replaces her with another, more submissive queen, the advisor continues, the gender hierarchy—from top to bottom, king to servant—will stabilize: “Then when the king’s edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest” (Esther 1:20, NIV). And so the king does proclaim—throughout the realm, in multiple languages—that men’s power and control over women shall be the law of the land. Vashti is banished, a more submissive (if shrewd) Esther enters the story, all men are back in charge, and all seems well for Ahasuerus again.

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the explications of Esther 1:11, wherein Vashti is commanded to appear, from *Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers*, *Barnes’ Notes on the Bible*, and *Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary*.

Spencer's retelling of the narrative in "Before the Feast at Shushan," however, comes to no such easy conclusion; neither does it restabilize the gender hierarchy. In fact, in a significant departure from the biblical text, the poem begins in stability and tranquility but it concludes in a chaotic, stammering turmoil. The reason Eden devolves into disorder, Spencer illustrates, is the king's concern with holding onto absolute power, even at the expense of the queen. From the third stanza to the final fifth stanza, the king debates the conflict between his devotion to Vashti and his desire to appear infallibly powerful; gradually, as his internal conflict becomes more and more apparent, tranquility dissolves and the edenic world of the garden (along with Vashti) disappears until we are left with nothing but King Ahasuerus' choking, empty tirade. The poem is not, as Charita M. Ford suggests, "anachronistic," but instead it rereads the first chapter of Esther (a favorite for feminist scholars) brilliantly as a demonstration of the timeless conflict between love and hierarchy, between the possibility of egalitarianism and the corrupting desire for power. Here again, perhaps most explicitly, Spencer illustrates that the idealized pastoral is incompatible with hierarchy and men's dominion-over-the-earth-and-women; clinging to hierarchical power over others—rather than establishing harmony with the earth, with others, and with God—leads to a damaged pastoral. "Before the Feast at Shushan" is to gender inequality what "White Things" is to racial inequality—both equally devastating, both sharply condemning, both gorgeously written. And yet, stylistically, the poems are entirely different. "Before the Feast at Shushan" deserves close attention to see how Spencer accomplishes such a nuanced and subtle redrawing of the gender dynamics of the first chapter of Esther, and how she carefully deploys pastoral motifs to demonstrate the possibility of an idyllic, harmonious world and how that world is ruined and lost.

For the opening stanza of the poem, Spencer pulls images from the first several verses of Esther and embroiders them with richer detail to recreate the mystic, sensuous paradise of the

garden. The first two lines draw an explicit parallel between Shushan and Eden: “Garden of Shushan! / After Eden, all terrace, pool, and flower recollect thee” (195, 1-2). In the rest of the stanza, Spencer brings that paradise back to life with multihued, dreamy, lyrical magic:

Ye weavers in saffron and haze and Tyrian purple,  
Tell yet what range in color wakes the eye;  
Sorcerer, release the dreams born here when  
Drowsy, shifting palm-shade enspells the brain;  
And sound! ye with harp and flute ne'er essay  
Before these star-noted birds escaped from paradise awhile to  
Stir all dark, and dear, and passionate desire, till mine  
Arms go out to be mocked by the softly kissing body of the wind— (3-10).

The energetic contrast between the deep yellows and royal purples are tamped down under the gauzy “haze,” while the palm fronds’ swaying cast their shady spells—Spencer entrances a reader here with sensual detail and the language of dreams, the harps and flutes outsung by “star-noted birds escaped from paradise,” the almost-real delicate body of the wind. Greene explains this magic of Spencer’s garden worlds plainly: “Garden scenery...becomes linked with the divine, with tinges of both pantheism and mysticism. As Eden was a creation of God, so natural scenery is a manifestation of God’s creative powers, evidence of a divine and spiritual force in this human world” (109). This reverie of the first stanza, evocative and wondrous, is surely the glory of Eden rediscovered, whispers of divinity all around. (Describing the Garden of Shushan as “after Eden,” of course, carries the triple meaning of existing later in time than Eden, of being affected by the Fall, and of taking after Eden or sharing its characteristics.) The sounds are nearly all smoothed, echoing the softness of “Shushan”; nearly every line whispers with “s” and “sh” sounds or the soft drumming of “d” and “r” sounds in “drowsy, “dreams,” and “all dark, and dear, and passionate desire.”

But the first stanza concludes with the first crack in this idyllic dream—it ends on a shout, a demand from the king, a jarring assertion of power: “Slave, send Vashti to her King!” (11). Not only does this line wreck the daydream so carefully built in the preceding ten lines, but it brings to light multiple problems hidden behind the enchanting beauty of the garden. For one, of course, the word “slave” points to an inhumane economic system underpinning the wealth and glory of Ahasuerus’s kingdom, and it conjures all the horrors of a poem like “White Things.” Spencer’s choice of the word “slave,” too, begins to connect this seemingly far-away place to the not-so-far-removed history of America. The word “slave” does not appear in English translations of Esther 1; rather, the people commanded to fetch Vashti are called “chamberlains” in the King James Version and the American Standard Version, and more recent versions use the word “eunuchs.” While all of these synonyms imply a hierarchy of power, “slave” is a far stronger, more direct choice, connoting injustice and suffering immediately. In using “slave” and ending the line on a startling exclamation point, Spencer forcefully dramatizes the king’s tyrannical approach to power, his dehumanization of others around him. Additionally, it is important to note that Spencer carefully constructs this sentence to demonstrate just where Vashti sits in this hierarchy—she is not a slave, but she is certainly not the king’s equal, either. Her name is deliberately placed between these two extremes—and we are meant to understand that Ahasuerus is “*her King*” and not “her husband” or “her partner.” And so, the first stanza offers us an intimation of what is to come, a (jolting and disturbing) hint that all is not well in the kingdom.

The second and third stanzas, though, do seem to restore us to Eden, at least for a moment. The king imagines Vashti’s arrival, reflects on her beauty, and, in a kind of homage to the Song of Solomon (and famous Shakespearean sonnets), equates Vashti with the glories of all creation. In stanza two, Vashti is compared to the sun: the “marbled towers” (13) of the palace come aflame to match the sunset, but even this light is outdone by the “peerless beauty of the

Queen” (16). In the third stanza, the queen’s dark, luminous eyes are compared to “the pool when but the moon-ray strikes to its depth”; her lips are sweeter and “redder/ Than the grape” crushed in a kiss; and she wears a rose “in the night of her hair” but she herself is “Sharon’s Rose” (22-25). In many ways, these two stanzas (along with the first) comprise an idealized pastoral at its finest (not to mention a gorgeous redux of the age-old trope of comparing women to the sun, the moon, the stars, the roses, the wine). It seems in these stanzas that the pastoral is completed by Vashti herself—she crowns the beauty of the garden. Her arrival in paradise—and the intimacy she shares with the king—fulfills the idyllic promises of harmony, beauty, and love between people and between all things.

And yet, in the third stanza, as the king takes over the role of speaker in the poem, there are further hints of trouble in paradise. The king reflects on past idyllic moments with the queen in the garden, when he was “cushioned at the Queen’s feet” with his head in her lap (17), or when he bent to kiss her “sandaled toes” or look up to catch her “magnet of a gaze” (20-21). And, rather than adoration, here, he feels a pang of something shameful. Kneeling at her feet, he feels a reduction in his power—and he remedies it by reminding himself of his position: “nearly shamed/ Am I, *the King*, to bend and kiss” (18-19, emphasis added). The stanza continues in language that begins to mix romance and violence, reclamation of his power over her; he presses close to her to “crush a grape ’gainst lips redder / Than the grape,” and at the conclusion of the stanza, he has “Sharon’s Rose in [his] arms” (23-25).

The fourth stanza begins the real disruption of tranquility, a much stronger evocation of violence (even if passionate): “And I am hard to force the petals wide; / And you are fast to suffer and be sad” (26-27). Throughout the third stanza, Vashti is associated with delicate beauty of Sharon’s Rose, but the king, seeking to reclaim his power over her and to satisfy his own lust, wants to tear that rose apart. The sexual innuendo of forcing petals wide is clear, of course, but it

is essential to notice the deterioration of the idealized pastoral in this line, too. In reasserting his dominance over Vashti sexually, he is also destroying the perfect rose, damaging the garden. The rose destroyed in “White Things,” drained of all its vitality, resonates here, as well; Vashti, like the “poor white poppy-flower,” is now “fast to suffer and be sad.” Her suffering and sadness, we discover in the rest of this stanza, is due to the fact that the king doesn’t understand the kind of spiritually fulfilling, egalitarian love Vashti longs for. Instead, blinded by desire and power, he is “mazed,” exasperated, frustrated that Vashti tries to teach him “a new thing”:

Is any prophet come to teach a new thing  
Now in a more apt time?  
Have him 'mazed how you say love is sacrament;  
How says Vashti, love is both bread and wine;  
How to the altar may not come to break and drink,  
Hulky flesh nor fleshly spirit! (28-33)

The king’s voice here, calling Vashti a “prophet” for this “apt time” (and claiming that she would amaze even *prophets* with this “new thing”), drips with sarcasm. To him, she does not understand what love is for at all, and moreover, her timing is fairly terrible, with the king barely poised at the edge of his sexual desire. And yet, despite the king’s initial dismissal of Vashti’s description of an ideal, egalitarian, and spiritually fulfilling relationship—wherein love is a sacred communion and a spiritual rite, not just a physical response, an act of the flesh—it is clear that he has difficulty fending off her argument. Indeed, he has, as Karapetkova argues, “absorbed her speech” (232). In fact, he repeats Vashti’s ideas more than once, defining them more clearly as he continues, and through this repetition, her voice gains traction in his (and our) memory. The king begins with the more abstract claim that “love is sacrament,” then moves to the heavily symbolic biblical reference, “love is both bread and wine,” and finally ends on the most complex iteration, the doubled meaning of the lines “How to the altar may not come to break and drink,/

Hulky flesh nor fleshly spirit” (32-33). These lines imply, first, that “flesh” (or even a spirit consumed with the desires of the flesh) cannot come alone to this sacred altar of love. Second, they imply that love may not come to the altar in order to “break and drink” the flesh or the spirit; in other words, love may not do violence to another person. In this stanza, preceded as it is by the description of an edenic world, Spencer sets forth the pastoral vision of the right, intimate relationship between men and women—and that right relationship, that love, completes, sanctifies, and perfects the garden. In this stanza, despite the king’s sarcastic amazement, Vashti is, in fact, the divine prophet. Spencer makes her so, makes her—via the king—a mouthpiece for Spencer’s pastoral vision, explaining the intricate relationship between all things, and how that delicate balance can be so easily jarred or ruined.<sup>14</sup>

Vashti’s words have hit home for the king—and their impact is clear when we come to the final stanza, where the king stammers and struggles to reject Vashti’s ideas and to regain his absolute control and power:

I, thy lord, like not manna for meat as a Judahn;  
I, thy master, drink, and red wine, plenty, and when  
I thirst. Eat meat, and full, when I hunger.  
I, thy King, teach you and leave you, when I list.  
No woman in all Persia sets out strange action  
To confuse Persia’s lord—  
Love is but desire and thy purpose fulfillment;  
I, thy King, so say! (34-41)

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<sup>14</sup> Making King Ahasuerus the speaker for the majority of the poem is a key strategy in this poem, as well, and one not to be missed. As Karapetkova argues, this strategy of using a morally questionable speaker is adapted from the dramatic monologues of Browning and many modernist poets, including Eliot and Pound (230). Additionally, she argues that Spencer uses Ahasuerus’ voice to undermine his own authority and affirm the need for gender equality. Finally, I would add to this argument that using Ahasuerus instead of Vashti as speaker—indeed, keeping Vashti far off-stage—is one more cloaking/protective device for the women in her poems, similar to devices used in “Lady, Lady” and “Letter to My Sister.” And, too, this strategy offers another level of protection for Spencer herself—writing a poem that takes place far away in history enables her to step out of the contemporary controversy and view it from a different angle, while it also keeps her safe from accusations of writing about current gender inequity (even though the poem’s message applies as much to the present as it does to the past).

This stuttering, enraged stanza is the king's response to Vashti's complex ideas about the spirituality of love, and, as Karapetkova notes, "Vashti's own words reveal, and indeed create, the king's uncertainty; next to her view of love as more than flesh, his monosyllabic responses fragmented by commas...reveal a childish self-assertion that leaves him powerless in spite of his desire to reclaim that power" (232-33). "Childish" and "powerless" are perfectly apt words here. In the construction of these sentences, three times (as if creating a parallel response to Vashti's three descriptions of love) the king renames himself ("thy lord," "thy master," "thy King," and finally "thy King" again) in a kind of desperation to recall his position of authority. And, childishly, the king seems to be chanting "I, I, I"—five out of eight lines begin with "I," with another "I" thrown in for good measure. This kind of dwelling on the self, and one's own needs, runs directly counter to Vashti's vision of intimacy and mutuality. As Greene succinctly explains:

The problem is that his love on the physical level has been threatened by Vashti's attempts to teach him the 'new thing': that a woman is not merely a sex object, that love is more than physical intimacies and should be deemed so by both parties. Ahasuerus must reject this, for to acquiesce would make Vashti, a woman, his peer. (144)

In this final stanza, Ahasuerus undercuts the humanity of his wife by asserting equivalence between the gluttonous consumption of food, wine, and women; in the line, "Love is but desire and thy purpose fulfillment," the word "love" might just as easily be replaced with "hunger" or "thirst." And so, he reduces the queen to object.

But even beyond portraying the destroyed relationship between the king and queen, and beyond pointing to the destruction of the garden, Spencer again establishes that domineering over others and over nature also destroys one's relationship with the divine—and, as in "White Things," the freedom of dominion only leads to isolation. The repetition of "I" in this fourth

stanza is not only childish and selfish, but it also underscores that the king is wholly alone. Spencer illustrates subtly in that final stanza that the king has severed any connection with the divine—by establishing himself as the only and ultimate authority, of course, but also in three other ways. First, he claims that he wants no “manna for meat”—he does not, then, want God’s gift of sustenance given to the Israelites in the desert, a symbol for a soul-sustaining link to God himself. And second, he does not want the divinely inspired love that Vashti symbolized with “bread and wine”—for the king, wine is only a drink to satisfy physical thirst, and he rejects her spiritual “bread” for his “meat” to satisfy his hunger. In the king’s rant, the symbols of divinity and intimacy are explicitly stripped of any meaning beyond themselves—they, like the queen, are reduced to objects that merely satisfy physical cravings. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the connection with God (let alone anyone or anything else) is severed in the last stanza because the garden, and all its beauty and holiness and vitality, has entirely vanished. In a reversal of the moves that Spencer’s poem “Substitution” made so deftly, the king has de-created the heavenly world of the garden and reduced it to his tiny, selfish, infuriated orbit. We might as well be back in “Substitution’s” “brick and frame” and “noisy peopled room” (peopled this time with only the noisy king himself). The pastoral vision of the first stanza of “Shushan,” then, is completely undone—“Before the Feast at Shushan” shifts dramatically from Eden to hell, and what undoes the perfect world, in this case, is gender inequality: dominion and physical violence instead of mutuality and spiritual love. There is no transcendence here, despite the wealth and glory of the kingdom; there are only broken relationships, unsatisfying gluttony, and, finally, isolation.

It is also important to take into account Spencer’s title, “*Before the Feast at Shushan.*”<sup>15</sup>

James Weldon Johnson, considering the poem for publication, wrote a letter to Spencer,

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<sup>15</sup> Greene notes that Spencer’s original title was “Before the Feast of Shushan.” She changed “of” to “at” in 1972 (50).

suggesting that she retitle the poem simply, “The Feast of Shushan.” In her response, Spencer stood by her original title, arguing that it underpinned the whole meaning of the poem:

I do not like the title ‘The Feast of Shushan.’ How can you see it so? I used ‘Before the Feast’ as being interpretive. Many times the King and Queen must have been together in the beautiful garden; this particular time Vashti tried to tell the old beast what love really meant—in the last two verses I have had the King repeat in reflective monologue (without quotation marks) something of the ‘new thing’ that she aimed to teach him. You see, the Feast had never taken place. That Ahasuerus remained unchanged by his lesson we know from the tragic outcome of the feast, an episode happening later, as recorded in Esther. (qtd. in Greene 52)

One of the most important notes from this response is Spencer’s assertion that “the Feast had never taken place”—because of Ahasuerus’ intransigence. If we read the poem as a direct parallel to the first chapter of Esther, then Ahasuerus’ command for Vashti to appear takes place *during* the feast, and Spencer’s title misrepresents that fact. If, however, we read the “feast” as symbolic, as the culmination of all the beauty and intimacy and connection and spiritual satisfaction promised in Vashti’s vision, then certainly that feast never takes place. Just as the king mistakes eating and drinking whenever and whatever he wants for “the feast,” so too does he miss the spiritual significance of the “feast of love,” so to speak. And he misses it because he is too much focused on maintaining power over others.

The title also makes it clear that the poem represents far more than just one moment of the relationship between “the old beast” and Vashti; this kind of incident—the king’s demand and Vashti’s subsequent refusal and sorrow and explanations of “what love really meant”—is part of a larger pattern between them. And the pattern played out between Ahasuerus and Vashti points us toward the much larger pattern of inequality between men and women—from ancient to current time. Spencer’s choice in re-narrating this particular story—one very familiar to Christian audiences and one deployed often by black women writers, as Karapetkova notes—enables

Spencer to comment on contemporary inequality from a somewhat protected position. But her point is effectively made: the problem with gender inequality is not just that it's unfair, but that it makes us inhuman consumption machines, gobbling up whatever we can while remaining deeply unsatisfied, severing connections not only between men and women but also between people, the earth, and divinity. Gender and racial inequality damage all relationships, and they destroy any chance for an ideal pastoral world.

In the end, amid all of the social and political injustice Spencer witnessed and railed against—both in her life as an activist and, to a quieter but no less powerful degree, in her poetry—she still claims the pastoral vision as redemptive, reconciliatory, and comforting. Many poems demonstrate this faith, but in the next section, I will consider two poems in particular—“For Jim, Easter Eve” and “Requiem”—in order to examine how Spencer plays out that redemptive vision of the pastoral, even in the face of grave injustices and uncontrollable circumstances, and especially in the face of death. These poems, in different shades, rhythms, and tones, reflect on mortality and grief while simultaneously demonstrating Spencer's tenacious hold on the promise of the pastoral to comfort us and to restore our lives and our relationships with all around us—including other people, the earth, and God—to wholeness.



##### 5. The Sustaining Force of Spencer's Pastoral

“For Jim, Easter Eve”<sup>16</sup> is perhaps Spencer's most heartbreaking poem, and it is the poem most clearly aligned with the tradition of the pastoral elegy.<sup>17</sup> Written after her dear friend and

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<sup>16</sup> “For Jim, Easter Eve” was published in 1949 in *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949*, edited by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps.

<sup>17</sup> Greene explicitly places the poem in that tradition, noting that it contains several hallmarks of the pastoral elegy: “a pastoral setting; an initial expression of intense grief and sorrow (achieved metaphorically with the allusion to Gethsemane); no mention of the person's name in the text of the poem; a final resignation to the death” (79). Later, Greene explains that the poem ends on assurance and

mentor James Weldon Johnson was killed in a car accident in 1938, far too early in his life, the poem describes her overwhelming grief. In order to make that grief manageable, to write through it and about it, Spencer turns again to the pastoral, seeking beauty and comfort in a garden setting. It does seem initially, though, that Johnson's untimely death has permanently disfigured Spencer's ideal pastoral: the Garden of Eden so often reflected in her poems is here transformed into the Garden of Gethsemane—the garden where, according to the gospels of the New Testament, Jesus spent the night before his crucifixion in agonizing prayer. This garden, then, is the garden without God's presence, a garden of bitterness, betrayal, and sorrow. Spencer's first stanza draws a direct parallel between Gethsemane and her own garden:

If ever a garden was Gethsemane,  
with old tombs set high against  
the crumpled olive tree—and lichen,  
this, my garden has been to me.  
For such as I none other is so sweet:  
Lacking old tombs, here stands my grief,  
and certainly its ancient tree. (187, 1-7)

The marks of the damaged or broken pastoral are all around in this stanza—the “crumpled olive tree” calls to mind the “crumpled roots” of “Lady, Lady,” and “crumpled” once again is not just an accurate description but a sign of pain, of withering or bearing too much weight. “Old tombs,” repeated twice and redolent with the mournful sounds of the long “o” and lulling “l” and “m,” are present in Gethsemane, and the speaker's grief takes their place in her own garden. And yet, grief and pain are not the only things present, even here. Spencer's use of “lichen”—set off from the stanza with a dash, as if for emphasis—is illustrative. Lichen stands here as a symbol of death

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solace, and that “peace returns and joy pervades” (80). My only quibble with Greene's analysis here is that I believe Spencer's poem ends neither on resignation to death nor on pervasive joy and peace, but rather on the *promise* of renewal—a promise both alluded to in the title's “Easter Eve” and in the *coexistence* of life and death throughout the poem. The simultaneity of grief and hope, I think, is essential in understanding Spencer's redeeming and reconciling pastoral vision.

and life, decay and regeneration. Lichen is made up of symbiotic parts, a fungus and a photosynthetic algae or cyanobacteria, and each of these components alters the other to produce something wholly new. The fungal part breaks down the rock or tree on which it lives, while the photosynthetic part sustains life; lichen is, then, intimately tied to both decay and growth. And in fact, lichen is able to thrive even in some of the harshest climates in the world, often where no other living thing can exist (“Lichen”). The use of this single word points us toward the complexity of this poem—and toward the tenacity of Spencer’s ideal pastoral vision. Even in tragedy, the poem’s lichen hangs on, continues to grow. Other lines in this stanza reflect this complexity and tenacious hold on hope, as well—that the speaker finds the garden “sweet,” even when it is transformed to Gethsemane, is a clue that there is yet some comfort to be found. And the “ancient tree” of the final line, even if crumpled, still continues to live, a witness to centuries of loss and rebirth.

The second stanza turns even more toward the haven of the garden, finding solace in the order, safety, and beauty of the natural world:

Peace is here and in every season  
a quiet beauty.  
The sky falling about me  
evenly to the compass...  
What is sorrow but tenderness now  
in this earth-close frame of land and sky  
falling constantly into horizons  
of east and west, north and south;  
what is pain but happiness here  
amid these green and wordless patterns,—  
indefinite texture of blade and leaf (8-18)

The first line of this stanza generates its own meaning—“peace is here and in every season”—and it is a microcosm of the structure and intent of the rest of the stanza (and the poem). It both concentrates on the present moment and place (“here”) and then expands into eternity (“in every

season”), much as the rest of the stanza concentrates on both the small and immediate details and the expansive and timeless order of things. Within the safe haven of her “earth-close frame,” the speaker studies those expansive vistas—“land and sky,” “horizons/ of east and west, north and south,” and finds solace in both the shelter of the garden and the symmetry of the spheres. All, it seems, is yet in order—the sky is “falling,” a seeming reference to disaster, but it is “falling constantly into horizons,” a sign of steadiness and lawfulness abiding. And this pastoral harmony, rediscovered in the garden (even in the garden of suffering), allows the speaker to transform sorrow into tenderness and pain into happiness. This stanza, then, pushes the pastoral elegy toward the idealized pastoral—mending, healing, and comforting with the steadiness of the seasons, the constancy of cardinal directions, the endurance of smaller patterns of leaf-veins and grass blades.

The final couplet, reflective and summative, comes back to the tree once again, crumpled and ancient, bearing up and living on: “Beauty of an old, old tree,/ last comfort in Gethsemane” (19-20). This couplet certainly does not resolve or dismiss the speaker’s grief. The point of this pastoral elegy is not to reconstruct an ideal world or elide the speaker’s very real loss and pain. And yet, akin to the first stanza’s lichen, death and life are both present in this final stanza—the “old, old tree” and “Gethsemane” point us back toward death and suffering, but these are paired, respectively, with “beauty” and “comfort.” This position between brokenness and wholeness is also revealed by the title; “Easter Eve” not only places us in time, but symbolically it, too, holds to the promise of the pastoral vision even in the midst of confounding sorrow. Though Easter—the symbol of renewal and rebirth—has not yet come, it is imminent, and the title points us toward a hopeful new dawn. And so, both the title and the final couplet, bookending the poem, underpin the consolation and hope the speaker finds amid her grief, and those last two lines begin to mend the speaker’s relationship with the world, especially as the world again reveals its

stability and steadfast order. The mending and redemption are not complete, but the pastoral vision holds, even in the face of such an awful loss.



“Requiem,” too, takes up the themes of mortality and rebirth, death and renewal, threading them again through an ideal pastoral vision in order to re-establish peace and harmony after sorrow and loss. Published in 1931 in *Lyric*, “Requiem” is written as a kind of epitaph for the speaker (and, like a Dickinson poem, the speaker voices her new understanding from beyond the grave), this poem centers on the earth as the final restorer, the receiver and transformer of the speaker’s whole self—body and soul. In the tradition of Catholic requiems, it calls for peace and rest for the dead:

Oh, I who so wanted to own some earth,  
Am consumed by the earth instead:  
Blood into river  
Bone into land  
The grave restores what finds its bed.

Oh, I who did drink of Spring’s fragrant clay,  
Give back its wine for other men:  
Breath into air  
Heart into grass  
My heart bereft—I might rest then. (197, 1-10)

The earth both comforts the speaker after her death and remakes her into a sustaining force for the next generations. Though the second line, “[I] am consumed by the earth instead,” may initially seem to portray the earth as a menacing open maw into which the speaker falls, the rest of the first stanza quickly converts that consumption into something beautiful. The decay of the body is portrayed as a gift, a return to the elements, and a final renewal. And so, as in “For Jim, Easter Eve,” death becomes less of a tragedy and more of a beautiful final rest in the grave’s welcoming, restorative “bed.” The second stanza again emphasizes the beauty of both life and death and their

interconnectedness. Drinking the wine of “Spring’s fragrant clay” echoes Spencer’s use of the honey-dripping springtime wisteria in “[Thou art come to us, O God, this year],” and so the hints of divinity are here, too. Winter is the typical archetype for death, of course, but Spencer resists that metaphor and instead returns to the rejuvenation of the spring season—and the speaker’s death is an intimate part of creating another spring “for other men.” That wine she gives back is inspiriting. In Christian communion, wine symbolizes the blood of Christ, the gift of sacrifice and redemption, and the wine in this poem, too, offers the gift of life.

Both stanzas, then, illustrate a generative, natural, and spiritual transubstantiation. In the first stanza, the speaker’s physical self becomes something more expansive than the individual self; the molecules dissolve back into the earth’s fundamental elements, land and water. The second stanza pulls less from the physical body (blood and bone) and more from those parts of the body that often symbolize the metaphysical: the breath and the heart are often associated with the spirit, the seat of language, and the seat of love and connection to God. And so, as the earth transforms blood and bone into water and earth, sustaining life, so spring’s living “wine” transforms the breath and heart into air and grass, sustaining spiritual life and growth. The poem, in these four elements, creates symmetry, wholeness, and beauty out of death. And that beauty—in the parallelism between stanzas, in the elegant pairings of blood and river, bone and land, breath and air, and even the surprising twinning of heart and grass—is the central gift of the poem, the ideal pastoral vision realized even and especially after death. That wholeness and restoration is further underpinned by the quiet rhymes in each stanza (“instead” and “bed,” “men” and “then”); those rhymes create a musical emphasis on the peace and rest at the end of each stanza. It is important to note, too, that Spencer does not focus on an afterlife apart from earth, an ascension to heaven (and abandonment of all physical encumbrances), but instead the afterlife is a giving back to and remaining with the earth. This idea that “immortal completeness implies

retaining something earthly” is much more closely connected to Emerson’s poem, “Hamatreya” than orthodox Christianity, as Greene points out (112, 123). In “Requiem,” we stay firmly planted in the ground, giving ourselves over and re-nourishing the earth that sustained us, and that act, the poem asserts, is where the soul finally finds rest.

But this poem is not simply a “circle of life” meditative cliché; Spencer also manages to work in a political and economic critique—a subtle hearkening back to the theme of “White Things.” The speaker gives herself back to the land in death, creating wholeness, restoring both the speaker and the earth—and this new wholeness teaches the speaker (and the reader) that trying to co-opt the land for oneself, to divide up and control the earth, is not only a foolish notion but also a sheer impossibility. The language of ownership and consumption in the first stanza—countered by the rhythmic beauty of the language of physical transformation—underscores Spencer’s view of the eventual futility (and the wrecking damage) of a capitalist system. Intriguingly, this position places Spencer once again both in alignment with the southern writers of *I’ll Take My Stand*—especially in their opposition to industrial capitalism and their insistence on a close relationship with the land—and opposed to them, in that Spencer understands their vision of yeoman-farming-tinged-with-plantation-romance as yet another version of capitalist control over the earth, rather than as a true ideal pastoral vision. Ownership is the sticking point here—to establish dominance over the earth is to try to overcome the earth’s natural cycles and systems. And, in fact, the speaker discovers (too late, perhaps) that ownership of land is a sham; death will make that ownership moot, and the earth will reclaim and consume *us* in the end, and not the other way around. Though the capitalist/land-ownership critique is light, and certainly not the sole focus of this poem, it is unmistakable in the first lines and it echoes again in the last line. That longing in the first line—“Oh, I who so wanted to own some land”—returns in “My heart bereft” of the last line. That “bereft” doesn’t have an object (“bereft” of what?) pushes us back

through the poem to discover what the speaker has been deprived of. And what the speaker never attains is full and complete ownership of a piece of land. And yet, that bereavement is (nearly) resolved in this poem by the speaker's newfound understanding of the harmony of the natural and spiritual worlds and the balance of life and death—losing that desire for dominance and control, the speaker concludes, “I might rest then.” The word “might” implies that the speaker hasn't yet fully relinquished that desire, but her understanding of the inanity of that desire—as her body and spirit return to the earth, gradually—grows throughout the poem, and the beauty of returning to earth overtakes the poem. And that ultimate beauty of symmetry, grace, and restoration is the central resonance, the strongest message of “Requiem.” This poem is a kind of “final word,” then, giving us wisdom from beyond the grave—telling us what is worth living for and what isn't.

And it draws together many of the threads of Spencer's work into a holistic vision, a pastoral threatened by death and decay but ultimately restored to perfect balance and beauty. Those interwoven threads most present here are the harmonious relationships between the speaker, the earth, and God; the opposition to domination and hierarchy (including capitalist desires for possession and ownership); reciprocity and mutuality; and, of course, the elegance and importance of language and poetry as the conduit for imagining and generating the ideal pastoral.



## 6. Conclusion: Anne Spencer and Jean Toomer

Anne Spencer, through her pastoral vision, encompasses the possibility of harmony and abundance between people, the land, and God, while she also confronts the reality of inequality and violence in the South. It is vital that we recognize and remember her voice as one that spoke to and through multiple movements; her poetry also brings together the innovations of modernism, the political critique and vibrant expression of the Harlem Renaissance, the energy of the yet-to-be-named feminist movement, and the ecological concerns of the Southern

Renaissance, among others. Including her in the latter movement is certainly unorthodox, but it is undeniable that Spencer shares similar concerns with the Agrarians about encroaching industrialization and the need to find spiritual restoration in the land. Additionally, including her as part of the Southern Renaissance expands the boundaries of that movement beyond the Fugitives and Agrarians, allowing us a broader view of what constitutes and counts as southern literature in the early twentieth century. In essence, including her as part of both the Harlem Renaissance and the Southern Renaissance is an argument toward desegregating our classifications of southern literature and recognizing more southern voices. Finally, recognizing Spencer's work as pastoral also enables us to see the totality of her work more clearly; the pastoral vision brings the multiple tributaries of her work together into one strong current—a current that carries the spiritual, political, social, and aesthetic significance of her poems simultaneously. Recognizing the transformation of the pastoral in Spencer's work also frees her from the critiques—very often leveled at black women writers in the early twentieth century—of being too conservative or traditional. Indeed, discovering the multiple ways in which she adapted the pastoral to her vision of harmony and equality reveals her singular, authoritative, and innovative voice.

Understanding the pastoral vision of Anne Spencer also helps to clarify the complex work of one of her contemporaries, Jean Toomer, discussed in the following chapter. Toomer's *Cane*—which has been variously called a novel, a series of short stories, a modernist collage, and the work which ushered in the Harlem Renaissance—has often been classified as pastoral, but scholars disagree about the precise type and meaning of Toomer's pastoral. In the next chapter, I argue that Toomer's pastoral vision shares elements with Spencer's—he, too, seeks out a sense of community, connection to the divine, and the restoration of the spirit in the southern landscape. But Toomer also reveals the enormous obstacles in the South to that community, connection, and

restoration—especially the obstacles of racism, violence, poverty, and industrialization. In short, *Cane* seems to pose the question, in nearly every section, if a pastoral vision of the South is possible and viable. His book, then, shares similar desires, concerns, and critiques with Spencer's pastoral. Spencer's idealized pastoral, for example, is akin to Toomer's pastoral of the averted gaze in the first section of *Cane* and the pastoral of the crystallized image of the second. Toomer seeks out the idealized pastoral in the Georgia landscape of the first section, and he ultimately portrays those ideal pastoral values in the community and relationships in the second and third sections. Thus, the pastoral values, for Toomer and for Spencer, are not confined to the southern landscape, nor are they limited by a set of conventions. Both Toomer and Spencer reinvent the pastoral to challenge inequality and to reaffirm its foundational values of connection.

CHAPTER III  
THE AVERTED GAZE AND THE CRYSTALLIZED IMAGE:  
:  
THE PASTORAL IN JEAN TOOMER'S *CANE*

1. Introduction: Jean Toomer's Revitalization of the Pastoral in *Cane*

Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) is a mysterious, intricate, multi-faceted, startling work of art that, like Anne Spencer's poetry, multiple literary movements claim. Indeed, various scholars have established *Cane* as a cornerstone for modernism, for the Harlem Renaissance, and (less often, but just as importantly) for the Southern Renaissance. And these claims all have teeth: Toomer's modernist vision is evident in his work with fractured and fragmented forms; with the poems that take part in the Imagist movement, playing with traditional form and focusing intently on images; and in his return to "primitive" culture and mythology as a wellspring of inspiration and political and aesthetic value. Werner Sollors' account of Toomer's individual approach, philosophy, and style mark him as both a modernist originator and a visionary for overcoming segregation. Sollors claims, "[Cane's] very form is an attempt at finding a literary equivalent for the dislocations modernity had wrought by moving people from soil to pavements" (359). Additionally, Toomer sought "a more cosmic understanding of the wholeness of a polyvocal America as it was once sung by Walt Whitman and now proclaimed by Waldo Frank" (360). Toomer's *Cane* was also recognized by such prominent figures as Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois as a foundation and new avenue for an "epoch" of Negro writing that would "express the

life of the American Negro” (184). Waldo Frank, in the original foreword for *Cane*’s 1923 publication, also positioned Toomer as a Negro poet, despite Toomer’s objections.<sup>18</sup>

Frank also positions Toomer as a southern writer, even claiming, “This book *is* the South.” Thus, *Cane* is also very much a part of the Southern Renaissance, though, granted, with a different focus than the Fugitives’ poetry. Indeed, *Cane* changes the focus of most southern literature—and much of American literature in general—by placing African American characters at the center and portraying them not stereotypically but rather as dynamic, three-dimensional, conflicted, and vital. Mary Weaks-Baxter points out that while previous writers had ignored issues of race by writing “sentimental, exotic, or melodramatic” literature, *Cane* deals “forcefully and explicitly with issues of race,” which earns it “an enduring place in the Southern Literary Renaissance” (77). His work opened space for other writers to explore the lives and imaginations of black Americans in much richer depths. And *Cane* signals, as well, a shift in southern literature (and/or literature about the South), demonstrating that it could be richly imaginative, sensually evocative, and penetratingly insightful—a far cry from Mencken’s dismissal of the South as the “Sahara of the Bozart.”

Most importantly for this project, Toomer’s singular work presents another take on the traditional southern pastoral. While other scholars have pointed out various individual pastoral moments, I argue that considering the work as a whole is essential for understanding Toomer’s transformation of the southern pastoral mode and vision—its reevaluation of African American character and heritage; its reconsideration of relationships between races, between genders, and between people and the natural order; and its critique *and* admiration of the South. I examine the whole text of *Cane* in order to point out how its fragments, its various textures and forms, work

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<sup>18</sup> Toomer wished to distance himself from what he viewed as a limiting and misleading identity; he was adamant that his identity was American, and his ancestral roots from at least seven sources.

both in contradiction and in concert in order to transform and revitalize the pastoral. In addition, I view the poems as integral to the book, as works that connect with and serve as counterpoints to the prose sketches. Very few scholars, with the exception of Bernard Bell, have yet studied the poems closely to understand their relationship to the themes and concerns of the book. Finally, I examine how Toomer juxtaposes the pastoral myth with antipastoral elements (such as the violence, urban contexts, and unbridged divisions between classes, races, and genders) in order to strip away the pastoral's nostalgic falsehoods and to reveal what is worth salvaging from the pastoral and southern traditions, and what is worth leaving behind.

In this chapter, I will first provide an overview of the scholarship focused on *Cane*, especially those studies that examine Toomer's use of pastoral elements, in order to situate Toomer's work not just as a part of the Harlem Renaissance and the modernist movement, but also as a significant part of the Southern Renaissance, as *Cane* both shares concerns with that movement and counters some of its nostalgic portrayals and misleading stereotypes. Reviewing these studies demonstrates the centrality of and the challenge to the pastoral tradition in *Cane*, and my own arguments about Toomer's structure and themes will integrate and extend these previous studies. Following this review of scholarship, I will devote much time to analyzing *Cane*'s three sections, linking the prose sections explicitly to the poems, and thereby illustrating how Toomer's overall structure creates further layers of meaning which simultaneously undercut the traditional trappings of the pastoral while rebuilding a rejuvenated version that reestablishes the necessity of pastoral values.

Specifically, I contend that, throughout the first two sections of *Cane*, Toomer demonstrates that previous iterations of the pastoral are impossible. However, he rescues the *values* of the pastoral. The poems of both of these sections represent these ideas most clearly. While the sketches of the first section attempt to retain the surface wholeness and beauty of the

traditional nostalgic southern pastoral, creating what I call “the pastoral of the averted gaze,” the poems, for the most part, undercut that attempt and demonstrate plainly the awful inequalities between classes, races, and genders. Indeed, as the sketches progress, those hardships and inequities become more apparent, until the climactic and horrific final sketch, “Blood-Burning Moon.” It is as if the poems eventually push the narrator to face these realities in the South. The interplay between the poems and sketches, then, generates a new and different southern pastoral that acknowledges both the beauty of the southern landscape and the music and community of black southerners, as well as the suffering and violence that result from a history of slavery, continuing racism and poverty, and the encroachment of dehumanizing industrialization. In so doing, Toomer destroys previous nostalgic, false visions of the South, but he does so without destroying the values of the pastoral. Indeed, many sketches and poems in the first section, because of the violence and inequalities and inhumanity they uncover, underscore even more clearly the need for restoration of the pastoral values of community, harmony with nature, and spiritual fulfillment.

In the second section, I argue that Toomer rejuvenates these pastoral values in the urban world; here he carries forward the beauty, abundance, music, and harmony found in various places in the first section, but he demonstrates that the “trappings” of previous iterations of pastoral are unnecessary, even hindering and damaging the characters that cling to those nostalgic and misleading iterations. The sketches of the second section make that damage quite clear, as characters like the narrator of “Avey,” John in “Theater,” and Dan Moore in “Box Seat” find themselves hollow and isolated after trying to transform their urban context and the women around them into a falsified version of an idyllic pastoral world. The poems, on the other hand, regenerate and resituate the heart of the pastoral, giving it new life in urban settings and combining pastoral imagery with the electricity and structures and communities of the city,

thereby revitalizing that pastoral imagery and making it relevant in the realities of the present. The values of the pastoral, Toomer's second section seems to argue, do not rely upon placid hillsides or piney forests, plantation romances or agricultural work, in order to exist. Those values are immediately available in an urban world, in art, dance, theater, and music, as well as in the people themselves. The chances for true relationship and spiritual fulfillment—and even the chances for connection with and restoration from the natural world—plainly exist in both the poems and in the final sketch, “Bona and Paul.” Those values are neither easily recognized nor easily restored; Toomer's writing makes the obstacles to harmony and community and connection to the natural world and the divine quite clear, and those obstacles include capitalism, industrialization, middle-class mores or genteel social restrictions, racism, and inequality. However, the pastoral, renewed in the city, does offer a way to transcend those obstacles, to draw from the strength of the past without becoming trapped by nostalgic falsehoods, and to bring together in a single moment the best of the past and the present, the South and the North, male and female, and even, in the case of Paul and Bona, black and white.

Finally, the third section of *Cane*, the play-turned-novella titled “Kabnis,” returns to the agricultural South, and I contend that this section demonstrates a binding together of the themes of the first and second sections. Kabnis, the central character, is a well-educated northerner who comes to Georgia looking for his roots and yearning to be the voice of the South. His nostalgic visions of what those roots and what his voice might be, however, are immediately challenged, as he faces elitism (his own and others'), false piety, violence, isolation, and his own pride and fears. The ruined heart of the pastoral, depicted plainly in the first section, surrounds Kabnis, but so, too, do the values of the pastoral threaded throughout the first and second sections. In this third section, Toomer creates multiple opportunities for pastoral community, abundance, and spiritual fulfillment, particularly through the characters of Halsey, Lewis, Carrie K., and Father John. The

complex imagery of the final scene beautifully renders, in brief, *Cane*'s contrasting visions of ruination and despair against a hope for rejuvenated pastoral values that can sustain the characters and restore them to wholeness. This final image brings together the truth of the past and hope in community and connection, represented by Father John and Carrie K., seated together in the basement but encircled in dawn's light coming through the window.

Overall, Toomer's complex pastoral shares significant similarities with Anne Spencer's idealized and damaged pastorals; Toomer, too, reveals both the beauty and violence of the South, both the vitality of the black community and the oppression and division they face, both the necessity of a meaningful relationship with the natural world and the threat to that world posed by industrialization. Throughout *Cane*, using an intricate structure that weaves together poetry and prose, Toomer juxtaposes and integrates the idealized and damaged pastorals, allowing them to speak back to one another, creating a kind of dialectical interplay. This interplay never allows the pastoral tradition to go unchallenged, often revealing as unnecessary and stripping away the stagnant or suffocating "trappings" of the pastoral tradition, while simultaneously revitalizing the essence of the pastoral and underscoring the importance of its ultimate values of beauty and abundance, connection and community.



## 2. Critical Overview: Scholarship on Toomer's *Cane*

Despite the multiple lenses that scholars use to read Toomer's work—from New Critical to autobiographical, from feminist to modernist—many find a point of agreement in that *Cane* functions primarily as a pastoral work, either structurally, thematically, or both. Lucinda MacKethan, for example, outlines *Cane*'s "pastoral design" as a movement away from modern civilization, initially, and toward nature—but that initial movement is a temporary one, and eventually *Cane* moves back toward an urban industrial reality, leaving the reader questioning

whether the restoration of pastoral values is possible (105). Robert Bone finds the pastoral ideal affirmed in Toomer's work, situating *Cane* as part of the pastoral impulse of the Harlem Renaissance. This impulse arose, Bone claims, for multiple reasons:

By keeping them in touch with their folk origins, it could serve as a check on their cosmopolitan aspirations; assuage their guilt for outdistancing the black community; resolve their ambivalence toward the black masses; and in brief, keep them true to themselves as they faced the temptations of upward mobility. (122)

Elevating simpler country life over urban complexity, the pastoral provides a way to celebrate southern African American folk culture and prove its superiority over elitist, oppressive white culture. This elevation—and its connection to modernism's employment of “primitivism”—certainly has its pitfalls. And while Bone believes that Toomer's work falls squarely in the pastoral vein of the Harlem Renaissance, I would argue that antipastoral (or “damaged pastoral”) strains are also present; Toomer seems keenly aware of the pastoral dream's shortcomings and the impossibilities of recreating a pastoral world in modern reality. Like Bone, Donald Shaffer also focuses on the how the pastoral functioned for black people migrating from farm to city, naming *Cane* a “ghetto pastoral.” Rather than hearkening back to older pastoral myths, the ghetto pastoral attempts to map the way that immigrants to the city lay claim to their southern and spiritual roots while navigating a modern urban reality. While Shaffer's thesis is compelling, it seems to weigh the second section of *Cane* as more essential or important than the other two, and the descriptor “ghetto pastoral” fits uneasily with the first and third sections. With MacKethan, I believe it is vital to take a wide-angle view of *Cane*, trying to weigh each section individually and as part of the larger work, in order to understand how the urban second section factors into Toomer's pastoral view as a whole.

A series of scholars have also pointed out *Cane*'s pastoral impulses and designs demonstrated in the relationship Toomer creates between the female characters and the landscape. According to Annette Kolodny, this trope—the presentation of women as symbolic of the land, and vice versa—is as old as American literature itself. Toomer's partly aligns his vision of the South with "the pastoral impulse" Kolodny defines as "yearning to know the landscape as feminine" (8). Certainly, Toomer's evocation of the fields of rural Georgia—and the women who live there—presents a kind of wild, unbridled sexuality that thrives in the deep shadows of the sugarcane. The first section of the book—with its chapters titled after various women and its landscape strongly associated with and transformed by those women—certainly fits this bill. The women stand less as representation of actual women and more as ciphers to be decoded or vessels to be filled with meaning by the male narrators and characters. Janet Whyde argues that the women in *Cane* "function not representatively as individuals, but as signs to be interpreted and reinterpreted" by "an outside agent—the narrator/speaker and/or male characters within the individual sketches" (43). The women in *Cane* not only link the present to the past, but they also promise a more fulfilling, more connected, more spiritually robust life, if only the men could fully connect with them. Mary Weeks-Baxter affirms, "Over and over again in *Cane*, Toomer portrays the South as an uneducated rural woman with whom the persona (an educated man) should join, but for much of the book the persona rejects that union" (65). This understanding of the southern landscape as feminine—and the ramifications of that understanding, which include not just the positive promise of emotional, physical, and spiritual fulfillment, but also the darker implications of exploitation—is a key piece of the American pastoral tradition, and *Cane* participates in, challenges, and explores that key piece in each of its three sections.

On the whole, then, Toomer clearly draws on the traditional southern pastoral, but he does not just reiterate previous versions. Rather, he creates a setting where the idyllic is imagined

quite differently and more complexly, and he uses the pastoral tradition toward different ends—sometimes to point up the impossibility of an idyllic South in the face of violent racism, and sometimes to reclaim the communal and spiritually connected values of the pastoral even in settings beyond the rural South. And so his emphasis is akin to Spencer's, in his reclamation of spiritual values of the black community, and it differs strongly from previous iterations of southern pastoralism in its challenges to gender, class, and racial hierarchies.

As one example, Toomer's approach differs quite clearly from that of the *Fugitives* and *Agrarians*. In their manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*, which appeared seven years later than *Cane*, the *Agrarians* include only one brief and unsettling chapter about racial division and politics by Robert Penn Warren, and in their poetry and manifestoes they mostly prefer to keep black people offstage (or to rely on the cipher of the "happy darky"). For Toomer, on the other hand, African-American characters are both the central sun and the orbiting planets that come in and out of view. This perspective is unusual in southern pastoral. The pastoral's long history in the South is engaged, quite often, with maintaining a patriarchal ("natural") order; thus, the writer portrays poor laborers as simpler, happier creatures, allowing the (mostly white and wealthy) audience to believe (at least for a moment) in "a beautiful relationship between rich and poor," in William Empson's definition. But Toomer's narrators and characters speak quite differently; though they are, much of the time, part of the laboring class, they are not invented as innocent, picturesque, lute-playing shepherds (or contented, loyal slaves or ex-slaves) who put our minds at ease about a status quo or permit some kind of escapism. Instead, Toomer portrays his characters as turbulent, searching, sensual, conflicted, and dynamic.

Intriguingly, though, Toomer's discussion of *Cane* and his perspective on the South does mirror Allen Tate's discussion of the defining moment of the Southern Renaissance. Tate writes, "With the war of 1914-1918, the South reentered the world—but it gave a backward glance...."

That backward glance gave us the Southern Renaissance, a literature conscious of the past in the present” (qtd. in Cobb 594). Toomer, too, describes a similar “backward glance,” though he looks toward a different source in the past—the folk and religious culture of rural southern African-Americans. Describing his first encounter with a family who sang traditional African-American songs, Toomer explains:

And this was the first time I’d ever heard the folk songs and spirituals. They were very rich and sad and joyous and beautiful. But I learned that the Negroes of the town objected to them....So, I realized with deep regret that the spirituals would be certain to die out. With Negroes also the trend was towards the small town and then towards the city—and industry and commerce and machines. The folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert. That spirit was so beautiful. Its death was so tragic. Just this seemed to sum life for me. And this was the feeling I put into *Cane*. *Cane* was a swan song. It was a song of an end. And why no one has seen and felt that, why people have expected me to write a second and a third and a fourth book like *Cane*, is one of the queer misunderstandings of my life. (qtd. in Fullbrook 461)

While Toomer’s book is assuredly “conscious of the past in the present,” it draws from a much different southern history than the one from which the Agrarians (as well as the writers of plantation romances and novels nostalgic for the antebellum era) draw. Both, of course, return to the traditional myth of natural order and harmony with the land; Toomer, however, adds the complex perspectives, customs, voices, and stories of southern African Americans who were often reduced or caricatured in white patriarchal versions of the pastoral—and he draws these voices not only from rural Georgia but also from the busy urban world of Washington, D.C., and Chicago, as well as those living between worlds, trying to determine which is home.

There is, without doubt, a “soil-soaked beauty,” a lushness and richness, a kind of *loam* in Toomer’s work. The South, Toomer proves, is still fertile ground for creativity, beauty, and spiritual longing—even if the South is also the place of slavery, war, and post-Reconstruction hatred and violence. Maria Farland notes that this beauty is essential to Toomer’s piece because,

in writing about the rural South, he faced modern readers for whom the characterization of rural workers—especially black southern rural workers—had taken a steep dive during modernization. Therefore, Toomer’s work—which was, in part, to revalue the South and to recover the traditions and culture of southern African-Americans, while also reinventing the pastoral genre and adapting it to modernist practices—is no easy task. In order to accomplish this reinvention, Toomer borrows explicitly from traditional pastoral elements, including celebration of the simplicity, beauty, and harmony of rural life. And yet, Toomer also confronts violence, blood, and death in the midst of this pastoral world, painting what Farland calls the “inverted counterpart” to the sweeter, more peaceful traditional pastoral (926). A major reason Toomer can fit these divergent pieces together, and make such a complex claim about the South’s history of beauty and suffering, harmony and conflict, is his brilliant use of structure. That structure circles through rural Georgia, wheels up through the northern cities of Chicago and Washington, D.C., and returns us to a more complex, even disillusioned vision of Georgia in the third section, all the while providing narrative sketches and crystallized images that highlight not just beauty and harmony but also violent confrontation, fear, and destruction. And so, that structure enables Toomer to resituate the pastoral in the modern world, to sort through what is yet relevant in the pastoral (which includes its values of human and spiritual connection to other people, to the land, and to God), and to reveal what is false, out of date, or even harmful about the pastoral tradition (including racial stereotypes, gendered oppression, and the trap of longing for an idealized, tranquil past that never was).

Indeed, the structure of *Cane* demonstrates the very complicated history and complex sources of southern values—admiration for such a gorgeous landscape, hierarchical oppression and subjugation, desire for peace, desire for wealth, respect for the land, and violence against people and destruction of the land in the name of profit. Much like Anne Spencer in her complex

pastoral vision, Toomer often juxtaposes these contradictory ideas; far less often in the book than in Spencer's poems, however, do we find hope for redemption and purity and reconnection with the land and the divine. The clashing between the idyllic beauty and the disruptive violence and encroaching modernity seems too much to overcome or solve; in Toomer's vision in the first section (and again in the third, though differently), these two contrasting visions of the South jar against one another.

Additionally, Toomer's own beliefs about the modern age also shed some light on the themes and dominant images of *Cane*. Gorham B. Munson writes of Toomer,

Shortly after writing *Cane*, he formed two convictions. One was that the modern world is a veritable chaos and the other was that in a disrupted age the first duty of the artist is to unify himself. Having achieved personal wholeness, then perhaps he would possess an attitude that would not be merely a reaction to the circumstances of modernity, merely a reflection of the life about him, but would be an attitude that could act upon modernity, dissolve away the remainder of an old slope of consciousness, and plant the seeds for a new slope. (262)

Clearly, *Cane* reflects Toomer's understanding that "the modern world is a veritable chaos," especially in the book's portrayals of the impossibility of the previous iterations of the pastoral, as well as the complex obstacles of an urban, industrialized world. The "old slope of consciousness" that clings to nostalgic versions of a placid, harmonious South is assuredly dissolved, almost from the first pages. But I would argue that the "attitude that could act upon modernity" and "plant the seeds for a new slope" of consciousness are also present in Toomer's rewriting of the pastoral—not as a set of stuffy and worn-out tropes and narratives, but rather as a revitalized set of values that can be found and lived out even in the most modernized of places.



### 3. Part One: The South as it Is, The South as We Wish it to Be

#### 3.1 “*Karintha*”: *Beauty and Smoke*

“*Karintha*,” *Cane*’s opening sketch, begins the pastoral of the averted gaze, defined by its elisions and omissions. The idealized pastoral (featuring beauty, harmony, and placid respite from industrial urban chaos) in the first section of *Cane* is only a surface, held together through repetition and description of a detailed, pine- and mist-filled landscape. The damaged heart of the pastoral, however, is just beneath, occasionally glimpsed through rips in the surface, alluded to by pauses in the narration, the ellipses and altered angles of vision. The devastation, the spiritual struggle, the inequalities and suffering and stifled attempts at wholeness are decentered in the sketches, kept sometimes wholly and sometimes unsuccessfully under the surface, but they constitute a darker layer existing always beneath the ideal surface. The peace and beauty of pastoral are not all a sham in the first section—the narrator’s reverent tone toward the landscape, the rituals and rhythms of the southland, and the rich spiritual culture of black people in Georgia are real and fully present throughout the book. But that peace and beauty, that reverence, is often disturbed by violence, death, sterility, industrial ruination, pollution, waste, isolation, and foreboding. Both the idealized tapestry of pastoral and the modernist awareness of alienation and despair are present in this first section, and together they create a contradictory, complex pastoral work, one that refuses easy solution or simple return to the values of an imaginary idyllic past.

While the narrator of the prose sketches often turns toward the gorgeous landscape and spirituals, rather than face the violence head-on, that averted gaze or turned ear serves, ironically, to underpin the sorrow or horror of the scene avoided. However, the poems of the first section operate slightly differently; they very often present both the traditional idyllic pastoral and the disruption—but only in a kind of still-life of emblems and images. These emblems and images are the clearest expression of the conflict of the South (a conflict between rural and urban,

tradition and modernism, pastoral idyll and social struggle) that the narrator of the sketches often hesitates to voice. The poems create a modernist pastoral of metaphor and parallel, gesture and implication, rather than a pastoral of elision and averted gaze, gaps and omissions.

In a sketch like “Karintha,” the narrator holds the pastoral surface together through refrains of songs and an averted gaze that looks away from death and ruin and back toward the pines, the fog, the small creatures, the dusky skin of beautiful Karintha. Under the surface, though, coming up through small slips and gaps, a far more contradictory, complex pastoral world emerges—the intrusions of industry, the ever-present inequities, the inheritance of poverty and slavery, and the damage done to land and people break through the seemingly placid surface. These problems appear in metaphors, in parallels, and in symbols of love, consummation, and fertility that are misused, wasted, maimed, or abused.

“Karintha” opens by immediately creating a lyrical pastoral world, a world that echoes the romantic strains of pastorals like Christopher Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love,” but that world turns, eventually, to a pastoral elegy for both the wild southern landscape and the woman who carries its beauty and the marks of its violation. The snippet of song that opens this piece reflects both the romantic and elegiac pastoral vision, the singer’s gaze moving back and forth between the beautiful woman and the darkening sky, calling out to the listeners to recognize both beauty and melancholy, perfection and inevitable decline:

Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,  
O cant you see it, O cant you see it,  
Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon  
...When the sun goes down. (5)

Her skin is mesmerizing, an ephemeral shade, a deepening color suspended, momentarily, by the ellipses in the fourth line, but inevitably lost when the world slips into darkness. Dusk, an

overarching metaphor in *Cane*, is not always associated with loss or hopelessness or gloom; it accumulates, like multiple other symbols in the book, a complex of meanings. This verse, the very beginning of the book, amply demonstrates how dusk is both desirable and sorrowful, a sign of perfection and of temporality. In fact, dusk, as a symbol, echoes Toomer's own description of *Cane* as a "swan-song."

The first paragraph of the sketch, directly following the refrain, amplifies these themes of perfection and decline. Karintha is the object of desire. Significantly, nowhere in the first paragraph does Karintha occupy the subject position of the sentence; rather, she is always the object: "Men have always wanted her, this Karintha, even as a child, Karintha carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down. Old men rode her hobby-horse upon their knees. Young men danced with her at frolics when they should have been dancing with their grown-up girls" (5). These games and dances are indirectly erotic, but the narrator makes the sexual edge and the danger of the men's longing clear. Caught somewhere between the lusting wishes of old men and the sexual hungers of young men, Karintha is rendered here as a "thing," a ripening thing, a growing thing, a natural thing closely connected to the natural world around her. But, like a virgin wilderness tamed and divided, transformed and developed, Karintha will not be left unmarked, unscathed, in her growing, nor will she be allowed to follow the natural course of development.

The narrator, having shown us the relentless scrutiny of the male gazes around her, then shifts his focus to Karintha herself, at age twelve. Not so much a girl as a burst of light, she is free, feral, fully alive, inseparable from the beauty and wilderness around her. She is a glimmer, a glint, a blaze, a "wild flash that told the other folk what it was to live" (5). She is "a bit of vivid color, like a blackbird that flashes in the light," and her "running was a whir" (5). Her voice is "high-pitched, shrill"—a voice that, significantly, rings out between scenes of industry and domestic work. She cries in that voice that "would put one's ears to itching" right after the

sawmill blades stop running and right before the women start “their supper-getting-ready songs.” Her voice inhabits that pure intermediary moment of wildness—her voice is not muffled by the sounds of industry (an industry reliant on cutting down the very forest that Karintha flits through, and therefore an industry associated with the same desires of the men from the first paragraph—a desire to own, to tame, to “ripen too soon”). Neither is her voice drowned out by the sounds of domesticity, another kind of taming; her voice overrides, preempts, the songs of women readying the house for evening supper. “What it is to live,” then, is to be a part of the wilderness, to be more akin to flitting, untamed bird than to mule or workhorse (or hobby-horse).

It is also important that the narrator notes that Karintha is not exactly who the men wish or hope or believe her to be—she is not beholden to the rules of civilization. She embodies one aspect of that early unconquered American landscape defined by Kolodny as feminine and wild, both beautiful and frightening, bountiful and threatening. Where other children’s feet “flop” in the dust, Karintha becomes a tornado: her running “had the sound of the red dust that sometimes makes a spiral in the road” (5). She is also a brutal force: “She stoned the cows, and beat her dog, and fought the other children...” (5). And she seems beyond conquering, at age twelve; even though her voice pierces everyone’s ears, “no one ever thought to make her stop because of it” (5). The town’s preacher, who, of all the townspeople, should be able to see the savagery in her and perhaps curb or chastise her, convinces himself instead that “she was as innocently lovely as a November cotton flower” (5). The narrator, too, makes clear that Karintha, at age twelve, is still innocent—the narrator calls her wild streak “mischief,” and paints her as a vibrant bit of color in an otherwise smoke-filled, impoverished place. And though “rumors were out about her,” that she was already experimenting with sex and finding the power of her beauty and her body, the narrator qualifies this as something natural, something learned from one’s parents. He explains that, if she had seen or heard or felt her parents loving, following them by loving and “playing

'home'" "was the way of God" (6). It isn't Karintha's inherent wildness, beauty, or newly-discovered sexuality that poisons her innocence—those, in fact, are hallmarks of a simpler pastoral romance. Rather, the men's exploitation of her wildness, beauty, and sexuality is what eventually corrupts this pastoral world. The narrator, if he does not fully empathize with twelve-year-old Karintha, does admire her vitality and her seemingly boundless energy—her natural spirit, so unconquered, so brilliantly aflame.

The refrain that opened the story recurs in the middle of the narrative, in shortened form, as an indication of elapsed time; when the refrain ends, the narrator begins again with "Karintha is a woman." He repeats the description that she is still carrying beauty, still "perfect as dusk when the sun goes down," but Karintha has also changed in many ways—what happened during that time, covered by the refrain, is left unsaid, but its dark and painful effects are clear. Karintha has not only grown older, she has been "married many times"—between ages twelve and twenty, this can only indicate that she has been sexually used and perhaps also abused by many men.<sup>19</sup> This sexual exploitation seems confirmed by her new reactions to the men around her, those who strive to bring her money or to remind her of a more innocent time (even though those innocent times were marred by their lust that "could mean no good to her"): "Karintha smiles, and indulges them when she is in the mood for it. She has contempt for them" (5, 6). Several critics read Karintha's life as one where she is forced into prostitution<sup>20</sup>; men's desire for her beauty does not translate into a spiritually fulfilling and loving commitment, but instead into something that stunts Karintha's own soul, making her soul "a growing thing ripened too soon." And in turn, just like King Ahasuerus in Anne Spencer's "Before the Feast at Shushan," the men's lust and exploitation—rather than full spiritual connection and egalitarian relationship—deadens their

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<sup>19</sup> John M. Reilly succinctly summarizes this second half of Karintha's story: "Having been forced to ripen too soon, she indulges the men who buy her body but stays spiritually aloof from them 'carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down'" (315).

<sup>20</sup> See DuBois and Locke, Sollors, and Gino Michael Pelligrini.

own souls. They do not connect with her, they do not know her, and they cannot bridge the contempt and disdain she carries for them. They only bring her money. But bringing her money only further demeans her, only further distances her from them, and it cripples their chances—and her chances, too—for spiritual fulfillment.

Indeed, men's exploitation of Karintha results in something even more horrific than a deadened sense of humanity or empathy; it ends a life. Karintha, somewhere between ages twelve and twenty, "has had a child," and that child "fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine-needles in the forest" (6). Whether the child was stillborn, aborted, or killed after its birth is unclear; the narrator elides any of those difficult possibilities. But the overall meaning is clear: Karintha gave birth to her child alone, apart from everyone, in the wild forest outside of town, and she takes the child from its natural cradle of pine needles, which are "soft and sweet" and "elastic to the feet of rabbits," to the sawmill, an emblem of destruction, where a "pyramidal sawdust pile smouldered." The child, which should be representative of new life and continuing vitality, is instead a sign of pastoral devastation and spiritual ruin. And this devastation does not just disappear. For weeks, the town is filled with smoke, hanging like ghosts in "odd wraiths about the trees," so thick that "you tasted it in water" (6). The specter of this death lingers over the natural symbols of life and spirit—the trees, the water. And this specter indicts the town for allowing the death to happen, for permitting the severance of body and soul, for perpetuating the exploitation of the child's mother, for abandoning her and her child.<sup>21</sup> Even if the town is unaware that Karintha has been forced to leave her child to die (a significant problem in itself), in

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<sup>21</sup> Gino Michael Pelligrini reads this chapter as evidence of suppression of people of mixed blood. Reading the death of the child as infanticide, he eloquently defines the questions that must arise for readers after the child's death: "Toomer's use of ellipses and antithesis here...signals the reader to think critically about the social significance of her act, and perhaps reach the conclusion that her act is as much socially prompted as individually chosen....In this milieu, she does not belong to a family or to a community that would have cared that she was pregnant, that would have claimed her and her baby as its own, and that would have noticed her absence" (10).

response to that strange and heavy smoke, someone in the town begins singing an elegiac hymn: “Smoke is on the hills. Rise up. / Smoke is on the hills, O rise / And take my soul to Jesus” (6). This song acts as one small moment of sorrow and redemption, a lullaby to sing the baby’s soul to peace.

But that peace does not last long; the narrator returns to other lines from the story that signify the opposite of peace. These sentences, stacked one on top of the other, remind the reader of the damaged pastoral that Karintha emblemizes—her damaged soul, the commodification of her body, the objectification that keeps men from seeing her as a full human being, her beauty and wildness descending into darkness. The narrator reminds us, “Karintha is a woman. Men do not know that the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon. They will bring their money; they will die not having found it out...Karintha at twenty, carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down” (6).

This chapter closes by repeating the verse that began it:

Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,  
O cant you see it, O cant you see it,  
Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon  
...When the sun goes down. (6)

And yet, now the verse reads as less of an ode and more of an elegy, less a tribute to her beauty and more an indication of sorrow or regret or anguish. The emphasis has shifted, bearing now the full knowledge of Karintha’s life thus far. The tone of the verse changes throughout the narrative because each time Toomer incorporates it—at the opening, and again in the middle of the story—he follows it with something threatening, something painful, something devastating. Jennifer D. Williams, highlighting the limitations of language to define agonizing experiences, notes that often in *Cane* “Music interrupts narrative continuity as a way to signify what cannot be said”

(93). In “Karintha,” the music, as well as the narrator’s lens—which moves away from the most sordid, horrifying, or dehumanizing moments and shifts toward the sky, the pine trees, the smoke in the air—disrupts the continuity of the narrative as well as the continuity of beauty, harmony, and simplicity in a pastoral landscape.

Karintha’s story, then, serves as a kind of microcosm for an exploited people and an exploited landscape; she stands as a symbol of a wild beauty colonized, “civilized,” exploited, tamed, ruined. Just as Spencer does with Queen Vashti in “Before the Feast at Shushan,” Toomer here creates a clear parallel: Karintha represents a beautiful, wild land, and, in an ideal pastoral, sexual union and reproduction with Karintha should represent spiritual union with and fruitful cultivation of that land. Here, however, (like Spencer’s King Ahasuerus) overzealous desire and lust without any counterbalance of deeper love, respect, or spiritual understanding, leads to the death of a child, the poisoning of the wellsprings of life. This harmful desire is akin to the greed that leads to overuse and exploitation of the land, “ripening a growing thing too soon”—which eventually leads to sterile or barren soil, a forest chopped down and burned, a landscape sliced up by railroads and choked with smoke.<sup>22</sup> And these destructive impulses continue to appear throughout *Cane*. “Karintha,” then, serves as our entry into Toomer’s contradictory pastoral of both beauty and ruin, told through elisions and absences, gestures and implications.



### 3.2 “Reapers” and “November Cotton Flower”: Blood and Drought

The two poems that follow this opening sketch, “Reapers” and “November Cotton Flower,” reinforce the undercurrents of beauty and ruin that collide in “Karintha,” and they take

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<sup>22</sup> As Jennifer Williams explains, “These men, who treat Karintha like an exchangeable commodity, model modernity’s destructive impulses against nature and folk ideals....Hence, sexual acts in ‘Karintha,’ and in the other five sketches in Part One, are punctuated with violence and are most often nonreproductive. These aborted acts of conception stress the impossibility of cultural rebirth, and of mending the ruptures that modernity has wrought” (92).

on the collision between pastoral peace and modern social violence more directly. Though many scholars have mentioned the poems only in passing or ignored them altogether,<sup>23</sup> the poems between sketches—which first seem like pauses for breath, or like strains of background music that become momentarily louder—are as important to *Cane* in terms of theme and structure as the sketches themselves. The poems, in fact, echo throughout the sketches, and they act as connective threads that carry forward significant motifs. They also sharpen the focus for the reader, zeroing in clearly on one moment, allowing that image to expand and reverberate, to take weight and meaning. Bernard Bell calls the poems “functional, serving to elucidate or to set the stage or to provide a transition between the sketches” (229). I believe they are more essential than even Bell describes—though they are not narratives, they tell as much of the story of the contradictory South and provide the sharpest images of Toomer’s modernist pastoral. Using parallels and metaphors, the poems fill in narrative omissions—the poems see, and say (though indirectly), what the narratives cannot or will not.

“Reapers,” for one powerful example, stands as a clear snapshot of the dichotomies of a complex pastoral:

Black reapers with the sound of steel on stones  
Are sharpening scythes. I see them place the hones  
In their hip-pockets as a thing that’s done,  
And start their silent swinging, one by one.  
Black horses drive a mower through the weeds,  
And there, a field rat, startled, squealing bleeds,

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<sup>23</sup> As one example, in Ladell Payne’s otherwise thoughtful analysis of the characters’ search for identity in *Cane*, he mentions the poems only once in vague terms, and he claims that the poems serve primarily to connect him to other novelists: “Characteristically [the poems] repetitiously describe a woman or a setting in nature while attempting to evoke a mood. But in considering Toomer as a southern writer, they are important for two reasons: first, they align him with those southern novelists, black and white, who also wrote either poetry or poetic prose; second, Toomer’s poems repeatedly celebrate aspects of southern life and nature” (51). As another example, Robert Bone describes *Cane* variously as a novel or a collection of short stories, and in his chapter on Toomer in *Down Home* discusses only one poem, “Song of the Son.” Mary Weaks-Baxter and Lucinda MacKethan mention the poems only in passing, while they analyze the prose sections in far more depth.

His belly close to the ground. I see the blade,  
Blood-stained, continue cutting weeds and shade.

One indication of this difference in the poems—that the poems create crystallized, representative images of the disrupted pastoral, where the narratives avert the gaze from that disruption—is the repetition in “Reapers” of the phrase “I see.” The speaker thus highlights the fact that his gaze is direct and fearless, taking in both the beauty of the agricultural landscape and traditional practices as well as the brutal consequences of industrial indifference. Thus, along with the speaker, here we see the pastoral’s underbelly, the reality of the southern landscape.

The poem’s structure also crystallizes those contradictory images; though the poem is one stanza, its end-rhymes and syntax, taken together, create a split between the first and second quatrains.<sup>24</sup> The end rhyme of the first couplet in each quatrain mirrors a slant rhyme in the second couplet (e.g., “stones,” “hones” and “done,” “one”). This divided structure, then, points to a clear divide between traditional farming and modern technology. The silent pastoral idyll of careful reaping and preparing the soil in the first four lines contrasts sharply (sonically and imagistically) with the blood and indiscriminate blades of mechanized agricultural practices in the last four lines.

The first quatrain, in its unified sounds, emphasizes the ritual and the harmony (between the people themselves, and between the people and the land) of traditional, close-to-the-land farming. Sibilance dominates these opening lines, which smooths the language of the poem, sliding one word into the next, blending them into a coalescing whole. Simultaneously, the “s” sounds create a sonic image of the rasp of steel on stones. In the third and fourth lines, then, the poem turns toward silence. We still have the echo of the “steel on stones” in the sounds of the

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<sup>24</sup> Michael North explains that this split is emphasized by the rhyme in particular: the poem is “written in rhymed quatrains, rhymed so insistently, in fact, that it is possible to read the poem as having only two rhyming sounds for its eight lines” (172).

line, “And start their silent swinging.” But the silence adds an additional aura of reverence for this practice. The speaker of the poem, then, invites us to hear and see the black reapers at their work, giving us a crystallized image of the pastoral ideal.

That silence is, of course, broken in the sixth line—the “s” sounds return, but here, they are attached to a tiny moment of horror: “a field rat, startled, squealing bleeds.” Here, Toomer turns the ideal pastoral image, created through the rasp and silence of the reapers, on its head; the smoothed sibilant beauty in the first quatrain is ironized, inverted, and ruined, associated now with violence in the mechanical, impersonal farming world. And here, the repetition of “b” sounds—in “bleeds,” “belly,” “blade,” and “blood-stained”—takes over, drawing attention away from the ritual of “silent swinging” and emphasizing the tool-turned-weapon and its brutality. Toomer disrupts the second quatrain in other ways, too; the syntax becomes choppy, especially around the field rat, and it never quite repairs itself, though “the blade, / Blood-stained, continue[s] cutting.” As Michael North points out, “The dying squeal of the rat affects the poetry itself, which is least iambic and most interrupted just here, as if the line itself were cut mindlessly and inorganically” (173). Thus, the poem’s rhythms and imagery reflect the speaker’s lingering grief over the death of the field rat, and that lingering contrasts with the indifferent, systematic blade.

In looking directly at these dichotomies between quatrains, as well as between the speaker’s empathy and the indifference of the mechanized world, “Reapers” also fills in some of the omissions in “Karintha” (and of other sketches, as well—most notably “Becky,” “Fern,” and “Blood-Burning Moon,” discussed later). Though Toomer does not directly refer back to Karintha or her dead child, he does establish a connection with both of them through several details. The tragedy of the field rat, though perhaps smaller in significance, reverberates with the death of the child and with Karintha’s sorrow and bitterness. As one example, the squeal of the

field rat reminds us of Karintha's voice, described as "high-pitched, shrill." And just as her voice "would put one's ears to itching," so the squeal of the rat sets a reader's teeth on edge. The image of the rat, bleeding and squealing, is the crystallization of the young Karintha "ripened too soon" and wounded, ostracized. The rat, with its small "belly close to the ground," calls to mind Karintha's baby, also close to the ground on the bed of pine needles. And the blood and violence that we do not see in "Karintha" (either from the birth or from the baby's death) appear here, in parallel.

In addition, the mower's indifference to the rat's death (indeed, the lack of a human subject in charge of the mower at all) resonates and amplifies the men's indifference toward or lack of understanding of Karintha's anguish and subsequent self-protective cynicism. Finally, the last line of "Reapers"—wherein the blade, "Blood-stained, continue[s] cutting weeds and shade"—seems initially to create an implausible image. How can a blade cut shade? Perhaps Toomer invokes this idea in order to show just how merciless the blade is, cutting through even that which it shouldn't be able to. But once paired with "Karintha," this line sharply parallels her story; the "shade" resonates with the repeated descriptions of Karintha's skin, which is "like dusk." The blade, then, emblemizes that which cuts Karintha down. The hopeful reading of this emblem is that, because a blade cannot cut through shade or dusk, the "blades" of men or alienation or pain cannot cut Karintha, either. But the line's double-edge is also present: that which indiscriminately slices through the land and its creatures is an emblem for that which ruins women, and vice versa. The landscape and the women, here, mirror one another. The poem's sharpened images reveal what the narrator of "Karintha" looks away from—the rippling effects of a dehumanized, mechanized world on both the land and the people who inhabit that land, particularly the most vulnerable people.

The poem that follows “Reapers” is, in some ways, its inverse. “November Cotton Flower” presents a different landscape, a different season, and its central image—the titular cotton flower—initially offers a far more hopeful symbol than the slaughtered rat of “Reapers.” And it, too, resonates with the themes of “Karintha” and other sketches of the first section. In this sonnet with each couplet rhymed, the speaker sets a barren scene from the outset: “Boll-weevil’s coming, and the winter’s cold, / Made cotton stalks look rusty, seasons old” (1-2). The rest of the octave builds upon this desolate scene, making it starker, starved:

And cotton, scarce as any southern snow,  
Was vanishing; the branch, so pinched and slow,  
Failed in its function as the autumn rake;  
Drouth fighting soil had caused the soil to take  
All water from the streams; dead birds were found  
In wells a hundred feet below the ground— (3-8)

Whereas the reapers swung their scythes through a bounty of weeds, here all is drying up and failing—the crops “vanishing” into winter rust, the drought “fighting soil” and all the streams gone dry, birds so thirsty they die for the last drops of water below ground. All signs of life here are dwindling and the language of this winter scene is desolate. In many ways, this scene seems the direct outcome of cash-crop farming, that industrialization begun in “Reapers”—here is the result of the slow starvation of an ecosystem when it has been replaced with acres and acres of one crop only. And this poem, too, brings to the surface the undercurrents of a sketch like “Karintha,” as well as subsequent sketches like “Becky.” A “growing thing ripened too soon,” the smoldering sawdust pile, the thick smoke over and in the water—these images come to a sterile fruition here, in the winter of scarcity and drought.

And then, the sestet of the sonnet takes a sudden turn when “the flower bloomed.” That cotton flower, surrounded by fields of nothing, becomes a sign of hope. And by the conclusion,

the flower is no longer a flower but a woman, against all odds, growing and thriving and loving in this barren place:

Such was the season when the flower bloomed.  
Old folks were startled, and it soon assumed  
Significance. Superstition saw  
Something it had never seen before:  
Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear,  
Beauty so sudden for that time of year. (9-14)

The poem echoes “Karintha” everywhere here. The cotton flower is plainly her parallel; in the sketch, the narrator describes her as “innocently lovely as a November cotton flower” (5). The old folks are here in this poem, as well, staring at her and trying to figure her out; her initial fearlessness in love and life is here; and her startling beauty shines again in the last line. The poem, then, seemingly reaffirms Karintha’s initial unspoiled innocence, redeeming her or offering some new angle on her story—that it is, in fact, possible to “bloom” despite the ruins and desolation all around. The structure and rhyme of the poem would seem to support such a reading, in that the sonnet form sets up the problem of drought in the opening eight lines and seems to resolve that problem in the last six. And the rhymes are exact nearly all the way through, placating a reader with lulling repetition and soothing sounds. Bernard Bell reads this poem as primarily hopeful, a comment upon Karintha’s vitality even in the face of hostility, and he argues that the “contrast between the reaction of the old folks to the flower and that of the men to Karintha” suggests that “those who stand in awe of Nature possess not only a lust for life but a greater capacity for love” (230).

And yet I would argue that the poem, on closer inspection, is perhaps less hopeful than Bell’s reading, more of a damaged pastoral than an idealized one, more of a swansong than an ode to joy. While the burst of beauty, that etched image, is absolutely present, and it does

survive—and even bloom—in the face of an oncoming plague and the deepening winter, it is important that the speaker never names the bloom hopeful or promising of anything. Rather, the speaker reflects the reactions of others, those “old folks” who attach no such hope to the sudden flowering, and who see it, instead, as something that has significance, as a sign of something—but what is that *something*? At this point in the poem and in the book, we seem to be turning toward an expectant, positive sign. And yet, the rhyme scheme, so perfect throughout, breaks down right here, right at the moment of hope—“saw” and “before” jar against each other and create a moment of dissonance.

And the language, too, points toward something less bright; the old folks were “startled,” and we are drawn immediately back to the same word in “Reapers,” where the startled field rat bled. Thus, the “significance” and superstition the flower creates generate wariness rather than anticipation. The old folks of this poem are much more in line with the narrator of “Karintha,” who can see even in the first paragraph that the kind of lust the men feel for Karintha—the “lust for life” and “greater capacity for love” that Bell finds—could “mean no good to her.” The old folks in this poem, it seems, can see farther down the line, and they understand that this astonishing beauty is also ephemeral. We must then circle back to the first line of the poem—or to the refrain in “Karintha”—and see that the “boll-weevil’s coming” still, and the sun goes down earlier and earlier. This tiny burst of beauty, no matter how sudden, how fearless, is not sustainable. The flower, without support, without even water, cannot survive.

Thus, together, “Reapers” and “November Cotton Flower” present two crystallized images that suggest and represent what the narrator in “Karintha” refused to look at or could not abide. In “Reapers,” amidst bounty and green fields, there is a tiny, tragic heart, a moment of horror. In “November Cotton Flower,” amidst a barren landscape, there is a tiny, significant moment of hope, but one that simply cannot survive. Both, then, are more akin to the razed

ground and godless world of Spencer's "[God never planted a garden]" than to other idealized versions of pastoral. Inverting each other, these two poems reveal—though they tell it slant—the contradictions, conflicts, and disruptions of the southern pastoral.



### 3.3 "Becky": Collapse and Absence

"Becky" further underscores these conflicts, and though the narrator's gaze in this sketch seems far more direct than in "Karintha," in fact the omissions here are far more disturbing. They are more disturbing in part because of the *longevity* of the averted gaze. We discover early on in the sketch that "No one ever saw [Becky]"—not after she, "a white woman," had "two Negro sons," and not even after she died, buried under her fallen chimney. She is never exhumed, her only memorial a Bible flung on the pile of rubble that was her house. Additionally, the averted gaze of this sketch is more disturbing because the whole town seems to share it. After Becky has first one, then a second son by an unknown black father, everyone, black and white, condemns her and casts her out. No one looks for or at her again. Some men build her a house "on a narrow strip of land between the railroad and the road," but neither the donors of the land and lumber nor the builders want to be associated with her. Some others sneak food and "sometimes snuff" and "sugar sap" to her, but only in secret. Some travelers throw papers and food toward her house, including "little crumpled slips of paper scribbled with prayers," but no one gets close enough to pray with her. She is "islandized" on her small "eye-shaped piece of sandy ground" (9). In fact, the trees—that emblem of the pastoral of the averted gaze—are the only ones who speak for her, who pray for her—"the pines whisper to Jesus"—while everyone else looks away.

That Becky is the centerpiece of this story, that her story is immensely tragic and painful, and that she is also entirely absent from her own story, willfully ignored by nearly everyone—all of these facts underscore the difficulty of holding together a serene pastoral idyll in this southern

town. Gino Michael Pelligrini argues that “sketches of mixed-race women and men in *Cane*...reveal how the American biracial system marks multicultural difference, and limits, blocks, and cripples the person who embodies such difference,” and these crippling effects seem clearest in “Becky” (11). If Becky ever was the “November cotton flower,” the woman whose “eyes...loved without a trace of fear,” the town’s reaction to that love evinces that the cotton flower cannot survive. Indeed, the narrator describes Becky (only once, before she disappears entirely) as completely transformed and broken by the town’s anger and condemnation: “Taking their words, they filled her, like a bubble rising—then she broke. Mouth setting in a twist that held her *eyes, harsh, vacant, staring*” (9, emphasis added). Rather than thriving as a November cotton flower, able to love without fear, Becky instead becomes the embodiment and constant reminder of the historical conflict in the South that disrupts the possibility of the pastoral. Her interracial affair and its evidence, her two children, bring to the surface the tensions of racism, miscegenation, and segregation, and subsequently the town suppresses *her*, to try to restore that unruffled surface.

And yet, Becky herself becomes a ghost story that persistently undermines the town’s peace, and she persistently haunts those who cast her out—and she is perhaps more powerful because they never see her, never know if she is alive or dead. At the midpoint of the sketch, when the town discovers that Becky has had a second child, the narrator’s language seems very nearly to erase her altogether: “‘Becky has had another son,’ was what the whole town knew. But nothing was said, for the part of man that says things to the likes of that had told itself that *if there was a Becky*, that Becky now was dead” (10, emphasis added). However, in the following section, her existence is confirmed through her two boys, “sullen and cunning,” who eventually “beat and cut a man” and later make their mark by “shooting up two men and leaving town.” And so, Becky continues to haunt—through her sons and the violent acts they commit before

abandoning the town altogether, through the “thin wraith of smoke” from her cabin (reminiscent of the “odd wraiths” of smoke in “Karintha,” also signaling the tragedy of and penalty for abandonment), through the “trembling of the ground” that comes from the train but also, somehow, seems to emanate from Becky’s house, and through what remains of her house after its collapse because, as the narrator remarks parenthetically, “(No one has ever touched it)” (11).

“Becky,” similar to “Karintha,” is bookended by a kind of refrain composed of snatches of blunt narration and description: “Becky was the white woman who had two Negro sons. She’s dead; they’ve gone away. The pines whisper to Jesus. The Bible flaps its leaves with an aimless rustle on her mound” (9). This invocation of Becky’s story is a tiny complex pastoral in itself: it reveals the problems of racial tension in the first sentence, and the untenable though only available solutions to that problem in the second sentence—to die or go away—in order to restore some semblance of the pastoral ideal. The fourth sentence creates a further problem: religion, without harmony between people, is also an empty solution. Though Toomer quietly employs a natural metaphor here, describing the pages as “leaves,” the Bible’s rustle is still “aimless,” directionless, unable to offer salvation for either Becky or the townspeople who leave it there.<sup>25</sup> The only active communication with the spiritual realm and the only possibility for the restoration of harmony is found in the perfectly natural image: the pines whispering to Jesus. This sentence turns into an incantatory prayer, scattered and whispered throughout the sketch (“O pines, whisper to Jesus”), and as in many of Anne Spencer’s poems (as in “1975” and its command to “Kneel” and hearken to the “curly worm,”) this reclamation of the connection between the natural world and the divine spirit is a moment of redemption—if not fulfilled, then at least evoked.

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<sup>25</sup> As Jennifer D. Williams notes, another source of tension is revealed in the fourth sentence with use of the word “mound”: “Even the doubling of mound—as grave pile and as the rise of the female genital area—conflates Becky’s sexuality and death. While Toomer does not refer to lynching directly in this sketch, Becky’s refusal to reveal the identity of her black lover(s) hints at the violent retribution that would follow this discovery” (95-96). Thus, the image of Becky’s grave is linked directly with miscegenation, further portraying the impossibility of pastoral harmony between races.

Indeed, the repetition of “O pines, whisper to Jesus” becomes a through-line for this sketch, marking the narrator’s (or the town’s) averted gaze from both the worst of Becky’s suffering and the worst of their own actions. In this way, the repetition of this prayer underlines both the need for redemption and reunion with the land and the divine, as well as the impossibility of that pastoral ideal in this sketch, in this place, and with this history. Pelligrini argues that the narrators in *Cane*, and particularly the narrator of “Becky,” “reveal themselves as powerless to change situations in which they are both participants and witnesses....The narrator sympathizes with her situation while he is also complicit in her exclusion from the southern town in which she lives” (14). The calls to the pines to whisper, pray, and shout are precise examples of this simultaneous sympathy and complicity. For example, in the first full section of Becky’s story, the narrator describes how both the black and white communities ostracize Becky, naming her awful things, and highlighting that they believe she is cut off from God, as well: “Common, God-forsaken, insane white shameless wench, said the white folks’ mouths....Poor Catholic poor-white crazy woman, said the black folks’ mouths” (9). Directly after the decision to “cast her out,” the narrator or another voice, appearing within sets of ellipses, murmurs, “...The pines whisper to Jesus...” (9). This murmur is a restorative, calming moment in an otherwise ugly story, certainly, but it also allows and even demands the reader to look away—like the rest of the town—from Becky’s situation. Immediately after this first call to the pines, almost as if the pines’ prayers on her behalf were heard, a few members of the town build Becky a cabin to live in.

The prayer does not heal everything, however; Becky’s cabin also stands as a symbol of the problem of encroaching industry in a pastoral landscape. As if invoking Thoreau, Toomer portrays the railroad nearly riding upon Becky. The tracks are close enough on one side that the trains shake the foundations of her house, and the “Fords, and horse- and mule-drawn buggies went back and forth along the road” on the other side. Again, here, Becky and her cabin stand in

for the impossibility of the pastoral ideal in this place, and they demonstrate explicitly the isolation that results from industrialization.

The second invocation of the pines' whisper comes in the description of the boys, growing up as outcasts, boys whom no one in town would care for. As if to mark the wretched sadness of the boys' situation, and the violence that would result from their anger, the prayer extends here to ask for some kind of redemption and spiritual companionship: "...O pines, whisper to Jesus; tell Him to come and press sweet Jesus-lips against their lips and eyes..." (10). But the prayer is not enough for boys shunted off to the outskirts of town, in the least idyllic, most industrialized place between the train tracks and the main road. The prayer for natural and spiritual communion goes unrealized, since it is unaccompanied by any kind of action to create community, to enact the harmony of the pastoral. And so the boys turn to violence, and then leave the town and Becky behind. When the boys leave, the townsfolk begin to bring Becky food again, but "they quit it soon because they had a fear" (10). When they turn their backs on her yet again, the call to the pines to pray returns, and in this call the narrator marks once again the lack of harmony, the lack of community, the despair of finding wholeness or peace.

The final paragraph of the sketch before the closing refrain reveals the strongest tension between the desire for an idyllic pastoral and its impossibility. In this paragraph, the narrator and his companion, Barlo, are driving back from church on the road that passes Becky's house. The narrator notes, "There was no wind," and "Even the pines were stale, sticky, like the smell of food that makes you sick" (10). These descriptions foreshadow Becky's impending death, and they signal the lack of connection between people, the landscape, and the divine—indeed, spiritual connection is rendered entirely absent, with no wind, the Christian symbol for the Holy Spirit, and no whispering pines to pray. When the narrator approaches Becky's house and sees the smoke from her chimney, that odd ghost, the prayer for the pines appears—a kind of talisman

against evil and devastation. But even so, “there still was neither chill nor wind.” And so, the narrator calls on the pines more vehemently: “Pines shout to Jesus!” (10). But they do not hear, and there is no salvific response for either the narrator or for Becky—her chimney collapses, Barlo throws his Bible on the pile, and together the men flee.

The narrator here tries, without much success, to avert his gaze, and the readers’, from the terrifying final collapse of Becky’s rickety chimney into her cabin, the collapse that killed her. The calls to the pines to awaken and pray become more desperate, while the narrator and his companion flee the scene—and that contradiction resonates with the pastoral of the averted gaze. In looking to the pines instead of to the townsfolk for assistance, spiritual consolation, and community (or instead of offering such assistance himself), Toomer’s narrator underscores the desire for and impossibility of the pastoral.



### 3.4 “Face” and “Cotton Song”: Pain and Resurrection

“Face” and “Cotton Song,” the poems that follow “Becky,” again fill in the gaps left by the narrator’s (and the town’s) prolonged averted gaze in the sketch. The first, “Face,” offers a crystallized image, developed through diverse metaphors, to represent the contradictions of the southern pastoral. If, in the southern pastoral, woman stands for land and vice versa, this poem underscores both the beauty and strength of the woman and the suffering she has endured. This poem studies a woman’s face and body intently, from hair and brows to eyes to muscles, with compassion. And though this woman is not Becky, this poem still seems to stand as an answer, if not a rebuke, to the town’s refusal to look at Becky, their unwillingness to “face” her. The poem also resonates with “Karintha,” portraying beauty again here, even in the midst of pain. The poem reads:

Hair—  
silver-gray,  
like streams of stars  
Brows—  
recurved canoes  
quivered by the ripples blown by pain,  
Her eyes—  
mist of tears  
condensing on the flesh below  
And her channeled muscles  
are cluster grapes of sorrow  
purple in the evening sun  
nearly ripe for worms. (12)

It is worthwhile to compare “Face” to a similar portrait by Anne Spencer in her poem, “Lady, Lady,” as the similarities and differences are instructive in understanding Toomer’s approach to the complex southern pastoral. Both poems describe an aging woman worn down by work and suffering, and both poems are structured by intense study of different parts of that woman. Spencer’s poem, though one stanza, is built in three quatrains—one that depicts the woman’s face, the second her hands, and the third her heart. Toomer’s poem, structured a bit more loosely, focuses on four different features—hair, brows, eyes, muscles. Both poems open by connecting the woman to something cosmic and beautiful. Spencer describes the woman’s face as “dark as night withholding a star” (Greene 180, 2). Toomer paints “streams of stars” into the woman’s hair (3). In subsequent sections, drawing on natural images both elegant and damaged, both poets focus on the woman’s work-worn suffering and oppression. Spencer points to the woman’s hands, “Twisted, awry, like crumpled roots / Bleached poor white in a sudsy tub,” which are a sharp contrast with her starlit soul (6-7). Toomer creates beautiful comparisons for her brows and eyes—the brows, “recurved canoes,” however, quiver on an unsettled lake, “blown by pain,” and her eyes are not described at all, really, and seem to be hidden entirely by the “mist of tears” (6-8). This “mist” recalls the images of smoke that have blown through the previous two sketches—

the heavy smoke from the sawdust pile in “Karintha” and the “thin wraith of smoke” rising from Becky’s chimney—and this connection, then, finally offers a direct image of tears we never see in Karintha’s or Becky’s eyes.

The most distinct difference between the poems arises in their final lines. Spencer’s poem, as discussed in chapter one, shifts away from describing the woman’s face and hands—external features—to her heart, and there she finds strength, holiness, and hope:

Lady, Lady, I saw your heart  
And altared there in its darksome place  
Were the tongues of flames the ancients knew,  
Where the good God sits to spangle through. (Greene 180, 9-12)

Toomer’s final lines also provide a connection to Christianity, as Bernard Bell points out, but his emphasis departs significantly from Spencer’s. As Bell explains, “Portraying the ‘channeled muscles of a woman’s face’ as ‘cluster grapes of sorrow / purple in the evening sun / nearly ripe for worms,’ ‘Face’ draws on the traditional typology of the suffering and sacrifice of Christ” (230). Rather than moving inward to the spirit or “heart,” “Face” remains in the physical realm, suspending any reference to the resurrection, offering very little hope for rejuvenation of the spirit or the body. We remain with the suffering in “Face,” and we hear echoes of “the sun go[ing] down” in “Karintha” and of Becky’s death in “nearly ripe for worms.” This poem, then, forces us not to avert our gazes but instead to look through the rips in the pastoral’s surface into the full face of suffering—to see, quite plainly (if also artistically rendered), the devastating consequences of a falsified pastoral image, of any effort to conceal the discordance and violence in the southern past and present.

“Cotton Song” rectifies and redeems the suffering presented in “Face” somewhat, through its extended use of the image of rolling the stone away from Christ’s tomb as a metaphor

for rolling cotton bales, as Bernard Bell notes (230). Additionally, Toomer's invocation of the long tradition of African American spirituals and work songs, through such refrains as "We ain't agwine to wait until the Judgment Day," presents a celebration of the culture and rituals of an agricultural community—a hallmark of pastoralism. However, its position in the work, following and thus connecting to the ending of "Becky," also makes this poem an eerie and disturbing commentary on the impossibility of pastoral redemption. For example, the poem opens, "Come, brother, come. Lets lift it; / Come now, hewit! roll away!" (1-2). The title, of course, is "Cotton Song," but the antecedent of "it" is still ambiguous—and with Becky's living burial quite fresh in a reader's mind, the "it" might just as well refer to her collapsed chimney. And so, these first lines ring like a call to rescue Becky, as well as a reminder that no one did try to roll away the stones that trapped and crushed her.

The subsequent two lines of the first stanza also function as a call to free Becky from those more figurative traps she faced throughout her life, human judgment and condemnation: "Shackles fall upon the Judgment Day / But lets not wait for it" (3-4). Additional lines later in the poem reinforce this reading of the poem as highlighting the town's failures in "Becky." For example, "Cant blame God if we dont roll" (7) seems less an encouragement to workers in this context than a reminder of the uselessness of Barlo's gesture in throwing a Bible on her mound and of the narrator's call to the pines to "whisper to Jesus" while the community mostly ignores Becky. The central stanza also seems to be a prayer for Becky, in this context: "Cotton bales are the fleecy way / Weary sinner's bare feet trod, / Softly, softly to the throne of God" (9-11). These three beautiful lines offer some hope for redemption. But the following line, "'We aint agwine t wait until th Judgment Day!'" again reminds us of all that was not rectified during Becky's life on earth (12).

“Face” and “Cotton Song,” then, reflect and underscore a complex pastoral vision—in “Face,” the suffering of the women in the text is made plain, if also romanticized, and in “Cotton Song,” the promises of the pastoral ideal on earth (and in this particular southern town) are belied by the reminders of Becky’s collapsed chimney, as well by as the resonances of the history of slavery and calls for emancipation that are not yet fulfilled.



### 3.5 “Carma” and “Fern”: Rapture and Torment

The next two sketches, in the very heart of the first section, come perhaps closest to a traditional, undisrupted pastoral vision—and that vision very closely associates women’s bodies and spirits with the gorgeousness of the landscape. Additionally, the two poems that come between them, “Song of the Son” and “Georgia Dusk,” are also the nearest to the ideal pastoral vision, though they are far more elegiac than celebratory. However, both sketches, in their conclusions, also display the difficulty of holding that pastoral ideal together; both sketches are ruptured by acts of violence, deceit, or disconnection. And the averted gaze returns here, in an effort to cover over those disruptions.

The first half of “Carma,” in fact, evokes strong southern pastoral mythology, making that ideal vision of the south explicit, even integrating the sawmills and the railroads into the beauty of the landscape. And Carma is its centerpiece. She is the South in its entirety, it seems, to the narrator—at least in his first glimpse of her. In the first paragraph of her sketch, Carma is both the sign of masculine strength and the emblem of feminine beauty, the embodiment of labor and the signifier of natural harmony: “Carma, in overalls, and strong as any man, stands behind the brown mule, driving the wagon home...The sun, which has been slanting over her shoulder, shoots primitive rockets into her mangrove-gloomed, yellow flower face” (14). Her strength and labor combine with her beauty; just as in “Karintha” and “November Cotton Flower,” Toomer’s

narrator also depicts Carma as a flower, and a resilient, powerful one at that, which can draw in and withstand the “primitive rockets” of the sun. Indeed, the narrator even envisions her as the assurance of the presence of divinity. Watching her as she passes, the narrator mythologizes her: “Nigger woman driving a Georgia chariot down an old dust road. Dixie Pike is what they call it” (14). That “chariot” is the first sign that the narrator connects Carma to something older, something reverent; this connection is reinforced by the narrator’s meditative reflection, a few sentences later, that “God has left the Moses-people for the nigger” (14). Carma becomes a sign for God’s faithfulness and presence in the South’s pastoral world, traveling along that road.

As Carma disappears from view, the narrator turns to reverie, a full evocation of a complex pastoral world where industrial and rural worlds harmonize under the setting sun—all of which seems to stem from and connect back to Carma’s sunlit, “yellow flower” face. In the second paragraph, peace and beauty descend, blanketing the landscape and connecting its various parts into a single song. The paragraph begins in the natural world: “The sun is hammered to a band of gold. Pine-needles, like mazda, are brilliantly aglow. No rain has come to take the rustle from the falling sweet-gum leaves” (14). The reverie then expands to take in the industrial pieces of the town; the sawmill and its smoke appear, but they are less sinister here than in past sketches. Here, the sawmill “blows its closing whistle,” and the smoke joins with the elegant natural world: “Marvelous web spun by the spider sawdust pile. Curls up and spreads itself pine-high above the branch, a single silver band along the eastern valley” (14). The smoke’s silver band complements and pairs with the sun’s “band of gold.”

And here, as elsewhere in *Cane*, a woman’s song unites the pastoral world—the song “echoes, like rain,” evokes the “smell of farmyards,” “the fragrance of the woman.” And then, “her body is the song,” and the landscape, the woman’s body, the smoke and sun, the railroad track and the houses—all meld into this one voice. The pastoral is nearly complete, but it reaches

back even further. In this reverie, the road and Carma's travels on it, the song and the landscape, also become a reclamation of a past before slavery, and a sign of freedom, ritual, and connection to ancestry: "She is in the forest, dancing. Torches flare...juju men, greegree, witch-doctors...torches go out...The Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa" (14). The curtain falls on this reverie with the italicized stage direction, "*Night*," and a dog barking at the moon, disrupting silence, and "slick[ing] back her ears," a sign of nervousness or threat.

And as the dog's anxious behavior signals, this vision of all in harmony—past and present, natural world and industrial world, feminine and masculine—does not hold. The story takes a sudden dramatic turn; the narrator, rather than passively describing and dreaming, instead actively inserts judgment on Carma and her story. He calls it "the crudest melodrama." The sentences of this second half of the story become clipped and abrupt, a striking contrast to the long, languorous breaths of the first section, which was filled with enigmatic ellipses and luxurious observations. The narrator establishes Carma as the center of trouble, instead of the centerpiece of the pastoral ideal, writing, "Her husband's in the gang. And its her fault he got there. Working with a contractor, he was away most of the time. She had others. No one blames her for that" (15). Within these sentences lies a telling contradiction: though the narrator claims that no one blames her for having affairs, it is "her fault" after all. Her sexuality and beauty, at a distance, represent the wholeness and unity and possibility of the pastoral world, but enacted—like Karintha's, like Becky's, like the women Anne Spencer portrays in "Letter to My Sister" and "Innocence"—her sexuality becomes the emblem for the damnation and ruin of that world.

Bane hears rumors of Carma's affairs, accuses her, wants to beat her, and his words "wormed to her strength" and "fizzled" it out. Carma runs into the canefield with a gun; Bane hears a shot and believes she has killed herself. Frightened, he gathers men from the neighborhood and they go into the cane to find her. When they do, they bring her body back to

the house and lay her out on the sofa. In looking for the wound, the men wake her, not dead after all and with no wound at all. And Bane understands that “the shot she fired, with averted head, was aimed to whistle like a dying hornet through the cane” (15). In a fury, Bane slashes a man who had helped find Carma, and subsequently Bane is punished, put in the chain gang.

This second half of Carma’s tale rips through the pastoral reverie created in the first half. Before the narrator fully knows Carma’s story, he can conjure a whole world of edenic beauty around her, a whole history of soulful connection behind her trail of dust on the road. But coming closer to her story (or one version of her story), to her presumably unbridled sexuality and, perhaps most importantly, to her husband’s possessive jealousy, the narrator’s tone shifts—the abrupt sentences convey distaste and judgment (considering the narrator, as well as the men’s anger and resentment toward Carma, one is reminded again of Spencer’s warning in “Letter to My Sister”: “If you have beauty or none, if celibate / Or vowed—the gods are Juggernaut, / Passing over...over...” (12-14). The two halves of the story jar against one another, dissonant, and in the second half there are only a few moments wherein the narrator tries to recover that initial idyllic reverie. As in “Becky,” the narrator turns to the sky and to the natural world at the most desperate moments of the story. First, when Carma runs to the canefield, the narrator shifts our gaze upward: “There, in quarter heaven shone the crescent moon” (15). Later, when the men begin to search for Carma “because she still might be live enough to shoot,” the narrator evokes the eternity of the natural world, outside of time: “Time and space have no meaning in a canefield. No more than the interminable stalks” (15). And finally, he likens Carma herself to a defenseless creature, echoing the bleeding rat from “Reapers,” when he sees that she is being hunted like “cornering a rabbit or a skunk” (15).

These few moments that point back to the natural world and away from “the crudest melodrama” are significant, in that they offer a couple of important keys to Carma’s story and to

the complex pastoral of the sketch. First, the narrator offers no concrete evidence of Carma's affairs—all is speculation, “week-old boasts and rumors,” and Carma's reaction to her husband's accusations—to lose all strength and to run—are indications of fear but not necessarily of guilt. That she runs to the fields, seeking safety and an escape from “time and space” (as well as, perhaps, a means of deception), is one indication of the harmony she still finds in the natural world, apart from the world of men. Additionally, that we do not see what happens in the canefield is an omission that tries to hold together the beauty of the previous half of the sketch. Moreover, the narrator's gaze upward, to the crescent moon, resonates with earlier stories and sketches—this averted gaze here, too, tries to hold the pastoral world together, even at the worst moments, and seeks some salvation from impending violence and death.

Last, the narrator's sympathy for Carma appears in the comparison between her and the rabbit or the skunk, as well as in his choice of names for the characters here; Carma is not the victim of violence, here, perhaps an indication that she has done nothing wrong, while Bane, the thorn in her side, the jealous possessor, is punished. The pastoral world here is disrupted, but it is important that it is not disrupted by Carma's beauty or sexuality; it is disrupted by Bane's jealous ownership (a very different mode of relationship than love and connection, which are values at the heart of the pastoral) and an act of violence so out of place and out of proportion. Bane does not slash Carma (though he seems ready to shoot her earlier), but instead slashes “one of the men who'd helped, the man who stumbled over her.” This violence—misplaced, misdirected—demonstrates the devastation that results from a departure from pastoral values, a devastation that ripples throughout the community.

The narrator returns to the refrain again to conclude “Carma,”:

Wind is in the cane. Come along.  
Cane leaves swaying, rusty with talk,

Scratching choruses above the guinea's squawk,  
Wind is in the cane. Come along. (15)

This refrain, like the one in "Karintha," changes tone and temper as the sketch progresses, appearing at its opening, in the middle, and as its conclusion. Here, though, as opposed to "Karintha," the refrain is more restorative than elegiac; it attempts to create harmony and community through its repeated invocation to "come along" and through its constant communicative chatter with the natural world. The "wind," too, resonates with "Becky," signifying the presence of a hopeful and active spirit. On the whole, because of this refrain and because of the powerful lyrical beauty of the first half of "Carma" (and the stifled, staccato, uncomfortable rhythms of the second half), this sketch is the first to actually retain some of the pastoral mythology and its hope for a more unified, harmonized, and peaceful world, and it partially resists the disruptions of violence and inequality. The "melodrama," of course, undercuts this simpler pastoral, but its quick resolution (Bane is punished, Carma goes on with her life, appearing again as "strong as any man") and the suggestion of Carma's restored sexual freedom ("Should she not take others, this Carma...?") return us to the first half of the story, to the undisrupted, placid landscape.



"Fern," along with "Carma," serves as the heart of the first section. But whereas Carma's physical beauty seems to offer transcendence to a distant world captured only in reverie, Fern's spirituality creates the heart of the southern pastoral, black folk culture, and connection through the natural world to the divine. Her ancestry, Jewish and African American, creates in Fern a deep spiritual awareness and an accompanying deep sorrow. Robert Bone points out that many critics in the past have misread "Fern" as a psychological portrait, but the real importance of this sketch is Fern's mysticism, her holiness. Her name, of course, signals her connection with

the natural world; she represents the delicate wildness of the southern landscape. She embodies the pastoral's connection between the natural and spiritual worlds, and she also points toward the fading of that connection. Fern herself is the embodiment of the averted gaze, that last attempt to reach beyond the disintegrating South and find some spiritual transcendence and salvation.

Throughout the sketch, the narrator notes that Fern, who sits on the porch of her home, staring off listlessly into the air, never seems to look directly at the world around her. Like the washerwoman in Spencer's "Lady, Lady," Fern's face is also "withholding [her] star," keeping her deep knowledge and her soul hidden and protected. While everything is drawn to her, and drawn to her gaze, she seems to look beyond all of it, toward some truth or image or vision beyond that world. The narrator explains that the whole pastoral world, "the whole countryside seemed to flow into her eyes. Flowed into them with the soft listless cadence of Georgia's South" (19). She stares past trains, past men, taking in the whole of beauty without disruption. In Fern, Toomer reveals the pastoral values of beauty, communion, and connection to and between the natural and spiritual worlds. And yet, Toomer also reveals the diminishment of those values in Fern's isolation and inability to communicate her vision to those around her.

Fern comes by far the closest to some connection with divinity; she is, as Bone notes, Toomer's version of the Virgin Mary, and toward the end of the sketch, she seems to be channeling God, rocked by a powerful spiritual vision. Out beyond the town, in a peaceful and purpled dusk, the narrator and Fern sit down "under a sweet-gum tree, and where reddish leaves had dammed the creek a little" (21). In this place, the world of the mythic pastoral begins to emerge, as all pieces begin to connect. First, the narrator, holding Fern in his arms, notices that "her eyes, unusually weird and open, held me. Held God. He flowed in as I've seen the countryside flow in. Seen men" (21). The markers of connection between Fern and the narrator, and between them and the landscape and God appear in rapid succession, until Fern is filled to the

brim with her vision. In these few sentences, the narrator makes Fern the true embodiment of the pastoral, the heart of it, where all things and people and souls connect.

And then, Fern's vision—what she sees is uncertain, but it is clear that it is rapturous and torturous, at once—seems to carry her closer to a fierce connection with divinity. But the vision also shatters the perfect pastoral world. The narrator still connects her to the landscape, but it is not a peaceful connection. “Her body was tortured with something it could not let out,” he describes. “Like boiling sap it flooded arms and fingers till she shook them as if they burned her. It found her throat, and spattered inarticulately in plaintive, convulsive sounds, mingled with calls to Christ Jesus. And then she sang, brokenly” (21). If Fern embodies the landscape, she is not the quiet sweet-gum tree here but a burning pine, evoking again the sawmill's tragic smoke, and forecasting the burning alive of Tom Burwell in the concluding sketch of the first section. Fern is no longer able to avert her gaze, to keep looking past and beyond the world of suffering and degradation; instead, in this vision, she embodies the ruined heart of the pastoral, and she takes on the painful history of the South fully. Here again, the pastoral cannot hold, even in the woman who seems to all the men to hold its promises of fulfillment and connection and beauty, the woman onto whom Toomer has projected the whole pastoral world.

That earlier version of Fern—the Fern who embodies the pastoral world—connects directly to the poem that precedes her sketch, “Georgia Dusk.” The final verses of that poem explicitly, elegantly, capture all the threads of the pastoral myth (and thus functions differently than most other poems in this first section), and Fern is the living emblem of those verses. The first four stanzas of the poem dwell in and on the landscape, giving a full sweep of southern beauty, its sunsets and farms, its food and music. These stanzas conjure much of the imagery from previous sketches, seaming them together to restore, for a moment, the almost-flawless pastoral surface. The sky, “too indolent,” allows the sun to slip away (2), and then emerges the “a

feast of moon and men and barking hounds” (5), and the poet finds himself “surprised in making folk-songs from soul sounds” (8). And here, too, is the sawmill, the “plowed lands” and “promise of a bumper crop,” and the “smoke from the pyramidal sawdust pile” (11-13). That smoke that “curls up [like] blue ghosts of trees” begins the more elegiac note, the remembrance of Becky and Karintha, but the speaker turns that remembrance back toward spiritual reconnection and reunion, and in that turn evokes the beautiful—if impossible—pastoral of “Carma” and “Fern.” The fifth stanza hearkens back to Carma:

Meanwhile, the men, with vestiges of pomp,  
Race memories of king and caravan,  
High-priests, an ostrich, and a juju-man,  
Go singing through the footpaths of the swamp. (17-20)

Just as Carma evokes “juju men, greegree, witch-doctors,” “Georgia Dusk,” reinforces that connection to ancestry and mysticism, and the path to history and majesty, to restoration and wholeness, becomes clearer.

The poem then draws together the themes from “Carma” with those of “Fern” in its final two stanzas. In these stanzas, the music becomes stronger, the mystical vision appears clearer, and Toomer merges the landscape, the people, and God nearly completely in blended images:

Their voices rise...the pine trees are guitars,  
Strumming, pine needles fall like sheets of rain...  
Their voices rise...the chorus of the cane  
Is caroling a vesper to the stars...  
  
O singers, resinous and soft your songs  
Above the sacred whisper of the pines,  
Give virgin lips to cornfield concubines,  
Bring dreams of Christ to dusky cane-lipped throngs. (21-28)

In these final stanzas, the landscape becomes the musician, the pine trees and cane become players and singers, and they merge with the men “with vestiges of pomp” in the previous stanza. The pronoun “their,” after all, seems to belong to both the men and the landscape equally, and the adjective “resinous” for the singers connects them again to the pines. In the final quatrain, the connection between the natural world and the spiritual world strengthens—the “sacred whisper of the pines” binds together music, divinity, and nature, and the renewal of “virgin lips” for “cornfield concubines” reconnects men and women to the land and to holiness. And each of these lines also connects to Fern. Fern, who had many men, “became a virgin,” distancing and purifying herself, and her virgin lips transmute the whisper of the pines and the sorrows of the South into sacred songs, like “a Jewish cantor singing with a broken voice” (21). She dreams of Christ—though, where the poem seems hopeful for restoration or redemption, the sketch proves that restoration cannot exist without the agonies of the past unearthed and witnessed.

And so, in some ways, the ending of “Fern” is the counterpoint to the end of “Georgia Dusk.” It is clear at the conclusion of “Fern” that once again the pastoral of the averted gaze is not a lasting solution to the suffering and struggles of the South. Looking past the racial violence and stratification, the encroaching world of industry, the poverty—none of that is possible after Fern’s vision. Though it seemed to create harmony and connection initially, her spiritual vision does not, finally, create an idyllic pastoral or mend relationships. The narrator disconnects from Fern, and eventually he leaves her, as all other men have, and he stares back at her through the train window. If the sketch had concluded with Fern’s vision, with her song, we might have had a more redemptive vision of the pastoral—we might have kept that mystical moment suspended. But the connection breaks in the final paragraph, and Fern’s averted gaze seems more despairing and severed from the world than a point of connection and restoration. And indeed, the narrator finds no renewal or relationship with her. He finds her just as she was before, “on her porch,

head tilted a little forward where the nail was, eyes vaguely focused on the sunset,” but now Fern as the embodiment of the idyllic pastoral is just fruitless and ephemeral, and the narrator dismisses her as a source of fulfillment or spiritual connection. He concludes, “Nothing ever really happened. Nothing ever came to Fern, not even I” (21).

The poem that follows “Fern” underscores this lack of action and agency—despite the momentary beauty and transcendence—in its crystallized images. This poem titled, tellingly, “Nullo,” echoes the imagery conjured in both “Fern” and “Carma,” while simultaneously echoing the sad incompleteness of the pastoral world in both of those sketches. In “Nullo,” one gorgeous moment goes unnoticed, passes quietly, without any recognition or any startling consequences or changes:

A spray of pine-needles,  
Dipped in western horizon gold,  
Fell onto a path.  
Dry moulds of cow-hoofs.  
In the forest.  
Rabbits knew not of their falling,  
Nor did the forest catch aflame. (1-7)

The images—the band of golden sun, the cow-hoofs, the rabbits—recall the images first presented when the narrator sees Carma, and later when she is being hunted, as well as those images that Fern seems to see and not see. This scene emblemizes the pastoral world—natural, beautiful—but in the final two lines, it is also disconnected and it does not amount to much. The rabbits do not see or hear the transcendent moment, the forest doesn’t catch fire, and it is over abruptly, so we are pointed back to the title, “Nullo,” whose meaning echoes the narrator’s conclusion in “Fern,” that “nothing ever really happened.”



### 3.6 “Conversion,” “Portrait in Georgia,” and “Blood-Burning Moon”: Descent into Darkness

“Carma” and “Fern,” and their accompanying poems, “Song of the Son” and “Georgia Dusk,” represent the beautiful apex of the idealized pastoral (though in each of these pieces there are many moments of disruption and difficulty, as well), but they are representations of a vision that cannot hold. The poem “Evening Song,” which follows “Nullo” directly, is a romantic poem that begins with the “full moon rising on the waters of my heart” and concludes with the speaker’s love, Cloine, pressing her “lips...against my heart,” and it is the last moment of purified, holy beauty and connection in the first section. After these pieces and until the end of the first section, the surface of the pastoral world is torn again and again until we are left, quite literally, with ashes.

Toomer follows “Nullo” with another prose sketch, “Esther,” which portrays a “chalk-white” woman who dreams of discovering the kind of purified and holy beauty revealed in “Evening Song.” She seeks that perfect love in a romance with King Barlo, a prophet and impromptu preacher, a powerful “clean-muscled, magnificent, black-skinned Negro” (24). But Barlo remains unaware of Esther for most of her life; her vision of their union lives only in her perpetual daydreams. The dream seems promising at first—a chance at true fulfillment, a connection across class and color, a source of identity and vitality. But the longer Esther lives, the more that keeping her daydream alive proves difficult. Though Barlo is “the starting point of the only living patterns...her mind was to know,” the vision of him becomes stale, and eventually Esther withers. “Her face pales,” the narrator writes, “until it is the color of the gray dust that dances with dead cotton leaves” (27). The markers of a faded and dying pastoral vision appear everywhere in Esther; throughout her life, she becomes more and more isolated, and her body and spirit seem to wilt until she looks “lean and beaten” (27). In the final scene, Esther confronts Barlo, but the lack of connection between them—and the impossibility of consummation—is

immediately clear, and her idealized vision is destroyed. Esther's averted gaze, which kept her vision of harmony and connection alive for so many year, is now impossible, and her dream shatters. And in its place (as in "Fern" and "Nullo"), she finds nothing at all. Esther's vision—both her imagination and her sight—are blank. The sketch ends on a hopeless note: "There is no air, no street, and the town has completely disappeared" (28). If Esther still tries to avert her gaze in the end, she finds no pastoral dream in that evasion—she finds only sterility and emptiness.

Following "Esther," the final three pieces of section one, rather than trying to sustain the dream of a pastoral South, instead finally confront its dark realities, conflicts, and history directly. "Karintha" opens the book at dusk, in a moment of transfixing beauty—a moment that still allows the narrator to (almost) avert his gaze. But these final three pieces carry the book into its darkest night. The violence and suffering presented in these pieces are far too strong to ignore, and they ensure that the fallacy of the pastoral dream is laid bare, plainly exposed. Neither the characters nor the readers can avert their gaze any longer. The first of these final three pieces, the poem "Conversion," paints an insidious picture of the cooptation and exploitation of African religion that twisted it into a tame and hollow Christianity. The "white-faced sardonic god" of this poem is reminiscent of Anne Spencer's "White Things," and indeed, the imagery of lynched and burned black men evoked in "White Things" also appears in Toomer's final two pieces, the poem "Portrait in Georgia" and the sketch "Blood-Burning Moon." The form of "Portrait in Georgia" directly parallels Toomer's earlier poem, "Face,"<sup>26</sup> tracing a woman's features one by one, but where "Face" reveals suffering and pain in more elegant, veiled metaphors, "Portrait in Georgia" pulls no punches, and its metaphors are stark and terrifying, invoking throughout the worst of racial violence. For example, in "Face," the woman's hair is described as "silver-gray, / like

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<sup>26</sup> The poems "Face" and "Portrait in Georgia" were published together with a third piece to complete a trio titled "Georgia Portraits." They were published in the first volume of *Modern Review* in January of 1923.

streams of stars” (2-3), but in “Portrait,” the woman’s hair is “braided chestnut, / coiled like a lyncher’s rope” (1-2). The rest of the poem is equally dark, full of mourning and horror:

Eyes—fagots,  
Lips—old scars, or the first red blisters,  
Breath—the last sweet scent of cane,  
And her slim body, white as the ash  
of black flesh after flame. (3-7)

This poem, more than any other in the first section, proves the impossibility of ignoring the racial strife and divisions in the South, and it demands that the narrators as well as the readers of *Cane* bear witness to this violence and injustice as much as (if not more than) they acknowledge the South’s beauty. The subject of “Portrait in Georgia,” after all, embodies both—but the insistent return to images of lynching and burning in nearly every line underscore just how prevalent that violence is, and that even the most beautiful portraits bear its scars plainly.

The final sketch, “Blood-Burning Moon,” plays out the paradox embodied in “Portrait in Georgia” in punishing detail. From the title and opening paragraph, the scene is both gorgeous and ominous—a “blood-burning moon” ensures rage and violence, and the first paragraph describes “skeleton stone walls,” “rotting floor boards,” a full moon “glowing like a fired pine-knot.” In contrast, beauty stirs in the songs crafted by Negro women against the omen of the “full moon in the great door” (31).

In Louisa, the central female character, the story promises love and sexual union, the kind of relational fulfillment and connection for which all the sketches of the first section have reached. Tom Burwell, a black man who works in the fields, and Bob Stone, the youngest son of the white mill owners, are both in love with Louisa, a black woman who works in the Stone family kitchens. And she, from the narrator’s description, is in love with both of them. But that love is clouded immediately by Louisa’s strange restlessness, her vague fears. And her fears are

quite well-founded, and no song she or any other woman sings can dispel the evil or divert the violent confrontation that comes later that night. Both Tom and Bob, when they discover that Louisa is in love with the other, rewrite the love they have for her into a narrative of possession and violence. For Tom's part, he promises that he would "cut [Bob] jes like I cut a nigger." For Bob's part, he talks himself back into a position of power over Tom and Louisa, emphasizing his whiteness and capitalist power: "His family had lost ground. Hell no, his family still owned the niggers, practically" (34). And later, thinking of Tom and Louisa directly, Bob thinks, "No sir. No nigger had ever been with his girl. He'd like to see one try. Some position for him to be in. Him, Bob Stone, of the old Stone family, in a scrap with a nigger over a nigger girl....Why nigger? Why not, just gal? No, it was because she was a nigger that he went to her" (35). In negotiating their relationship with Louisa, either internally or in dialogue, both men transform love—that promise of the pastoral—into a struggle for ownership and power. And so the pastoral promises are overshadowed, polluted, and distorted. As if to underscore this idea, the music in the town disappears when Bob rushes to confront Tom: "Singers in the town were silenced. They shut their windows down" (35-6). In a subsequent fight, Bob is quickly overpowered, and when he pulls out his knife, Tom also pulls out his, and he slashes Bob's throat. Bob, bleeding, runs back toward the white section of town and tells the white men there that Tom Burwell cut him. These white men, "like ants," track Tom down, drag him to the rotting and ominous factory, tie him to a stake, pour kerosene on him, and burn him alive.

Thus, by the conclusion of *Cane's* first section, Toomer has examined all of the mythical promises of the southern pastoral—the beauty and abundance of the landscape, the spiritual restoration from living closely connected to that land, and the spiritual, emotional, and physical fulfillment of close relationship and community. But in each examination, the pastoral promises

fall short, and in these final three sketches, they completely unravel.<sup>27</sup> “Blood-Burning Moon” plainly juxtaposes that transcendent vision with the grim reality of racial stratification, the problem of gendered hierarchy, and the dehumanization of industrial advancement and class division. Violent racism, in this final sketch, is no longer veiled in metaphor or alluded to briefly. Here that racism is clear and plain. That we are given access to Bob Stone’s thoughts reveals how deeply ingrained the legacy of slavery still is in the South, and that we witness the horrific deaths of Bob Stone and Tom Burwell demonstrates the sickening consequences of that racial divide for both white and black people. The community promised in the pastoral is, here, undone entirely.

Additionally, though perhaps more subtly, the final sketch exposes the problems of gendered hierarchy. That both men sought their fulfillment in Louisa, and that they then turned that seeking into a quest for power and control, demonstrates the impossibility of pastoral fulfillment without egalitarian relationship. Mary Weeks-Baxter argues that Louisa’s dilemma in deciding between Bob Stone and Tom Burwell “represents the conflict at the heart of *Cane*,” and that “she struggles with a conflicted identity, a desire to encompass all when that possibility is not yet open to her” (65). And Louisa’s struggle to connect with and across racial and gendered divides is an essential part of *Cane*’s theme; however, Weeks-Baxter’s reading seems to give Louisa more agency than she truly has in the sketch. The men’s desire to own and control Louisa effectively renders her powerless in deciding between them or in “encompassing all.”

This total lack of agency in her own life is made particularly clear at the conclusion of “Blood-Burning Moon,” when Louisa, who has remained on her front stoop, opens her eyes to confront the evil face of the moon again. She, like Esther, confronts an emptiness, a blankness.

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<sup>27</sup> As Donald Shaffer succinctly notes, “The last image of the full moon, the great omen of chaos and disaster, completely reverses the transcendent pastoral vision that began the Georgia section of the novel” (120).

She has no community, no relationship. As she looks at the “homes of folks she knew,” she asks, “Where were they, these people? She’d sing, and perhaps they’d come out and join her. Perhaps Tom Burwell would come” (37). Her isolation, the effect of racial violence and gendered hierarchy, is complete—and exceedingly lonely. Alone, she sings again the refrain of the whole sketch, “Red nigger moon. Sinner! / Blood-burning moon. Sinner! / Come out that fact’ry door” (37). This refrain is already a far cry from the lovely and elegant refrain of “Karintha”; it is menacing, condemning, superstitious, and fearful. But in Louisa’s single voice, this refrain takes on a new layer of meaning—Tom will not come out of that door again, and all the doors of the houses around her remain closed. The problems of racism also spill over into relationships between men and women, destroying any chance for full connection.

Finally, the problems of industrialization and capitalism—and the fact that they are and have been a part of the South, no matter its agrarian mythology—are also laid bare in this sketch. Werner Sollors argues that the pattern of the first section of *Cane* is designed to

intensify the reader’s sense of hearing Toomer’s ‘swan song,’ of experiencing fragments of a passing rural world in which natural images, especially those of sunsets and autumn, and religious sentiments increasingly give way to such intrusions of modernity as railroad tracks and factories and to scenes of violence. (361)

Those intrusions reach a fever pitch in “Blood-Burning Moon.” The sawmill smoke, a constant symbol of suffering, loss, and haunting memories, permeates the first section of *Cane*. That Tom Burwell becomes the literal smoke that comes from the mill is a startling and dreadful symbol of how dehumanizing and death-dealing industry and capitalism are. They create, in Toomer’s telling, literal graveyards. That the moon itself is framed by that factory door is a more subtle metaphor for the ways in which industry takes over, transforms, and destroys the natural landscape. And that the factory is repeatedly described in terms of death and decay—the

“skeleton stone walls” and the “rotting floor boards”—underscores these points further. The final sketch of the first section, then, is a complete unravelling of the promises of the pastoral in the face of racism, gender and class division, and disconnection from the natural world.



#### 4. Part Two: The Pastoral in the Urban

As if propelled north by the horrific conclusion of “Blood-Burning Moon,” where all tensions are laid bare—even by a narrator who often struggles to countenance such violent conflict—the second section of *Cane* opens on a dynamic, energetic escape north to “Seventh Street” in Washington, D.C., a corner of the world filled with “nigger life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington” (41). This entirely different world from the placid surface of the southern pastoral buzzes with energy and life, “dizziness” and “flowing.”

This second section of *Cane* marks a transition from the first, of course, but its themes are consistent. Where the first section demonstrated that the pastoral surface cannot hold in the rural South with all the tension, violence, and racism boiling underneath, this second section—set in the urban centers of Washington, D.C., and Chicago—also illuminates the fallacy of a nostalgic pastoral dream in such an industrial, often-oppressive, and racially-divided country. The realities of the urban world certainly impinge on the pastoral longings of the narrators and characters in this second section. And those narrators and characters who attempt to transform reality to their nostalgic (or elitist) vision of pastoral harmony are thwarted, quite often portrayed as naïve or arrogant or disconnected (even if they seem to have Toomer’s sympathy in places). Even these characters’ most hopeful visions of a return to pastoral beauty in the South (often projected onto the women in their sketches) amount to sterility, abandonment, and disillusionment.

Additionally, the pastoral world seems even further out of reach in the second section because, in

various sketches, Toomer paints the natural world as constrained and stifled, much like the suffocating trees growing in boxes on city streets. In multiple places in the second section, the walls and buildings and streets of the urban landscape are cold and cruel, “whitewashed” and oppressive. Thus, the second section initially appears to confirm Lucinda MacKethan’s argument that this section serves as “the counterforce essential to literary pastoral, the real world that qualifies and forces an ironic slant on the poet’s vision of Arcadia” (113).

But the second section does far more than underline the disillusionment begun in the first. In fact, the city, in Toomer’s vision, is far more complex than a stifling, oppressive world that stands in contrast to a perfect pastoral world. The city, in this second section, is far more than a cold, cruel reminder of the impossibilities of the dreams and harmony evoked by a nostalgic pastoral. In the second section, rather, Toomer presents a multi-layered, multi-faceted vision of urban life in which the heart of the pastoral—its essential values of community, connection, and harmony—can and do thrive. In the analysis that follows, I argue that the second section of *Cane* continues to illustrate that the idealized southern pastoral vision, in all its trappings, is unattainable. But Toomer also demonstrates that, in the context of urban life, the ultimate values of the pastoral—harmony, connection, spiritual fulfillment—become even more essential for survival, and in multiple sketches and poems, Toomer illustrates that those values, which are the heart of the pastoral, are available and abundant in the city, in the people, in their artistic expression, in their creative transcendence, in their community. It is worth noting that Toomer’s version of pastoral here diverges somewhat from Spencer’s, at least in their emphases. For example, Spencer’s pastoral vision is firmly rooted in the spiritual rejuvenation that comes from connecting to the land first, and she establishes her garden (both literal and literary) as a safe haven from the outside world, where she can then rebuild relationships among people and God. Toomer’s first section, however, demonstrates that there is no safe haven or retreat in a rural

landscape, that finding any control over that landscape is a myth, and his second section indicates that pastoral values are in fact found in strong bonds between people first, that these bonds can be created anywhere, and that those connections are what enable us to reconnect to the land and to God.

In the following pages, I will develop this argument further, first highlighting various examples from the second section to provide an overview of its predominant themes and images. These themes and images illustrate, again and again, the need to jettison false pastoral nostalgia and the need to rediscover the pastoral's essential values in the city's communities, in relationships, and in art. I will then analyze in detail the pieces that most clearly illustrate these arguments, and similarly to the first section, I will work to show the different functions of the prose sketches and the poems. In this second section, Toomer uses the sketches to illustrate that the characters' averted gaze—which focuses on a far-off rural world of imaginary peace—keeps them isolated, alienated, and unfulfilled. Toomer deploys the poems of the second section, by contrast, in order to present what the narrators and characters of the sketches have overlooked; the poems provide crystallized images of fulfillment, connection, possibility, and vitality within the urban world. Thus, I will argue that two of the sketches, "Theatre" and "Calling Jesus," illustrate the misplaced longings for a non-existent pastoral world, and how these longings, along with the pressures of industrialization, racism, and class mobility, sever the characters from those around them and from a full-fledged, fully-realized life. Additionally, I will look closely at three poems, "Beehive," "Storm Ending," and "Her Lips are Copper Wire," to demonstrate how they use metaphor and parallel to reveal the possibility and promise of the city to which the characters in the sketches are mostly blind.



In multiple instances in this second section, the city is a vibrant, lively, singing, passionate place. “Avey,” for example, opens on a metaphor that ties together the vibrancy of the narrator, his love for Avey, and the young trees growing on city streets, “the young trees that whinnied like colts impatient to be let free” (44). In “Theater,” the walls of the theater are initially described as “sleeping singers,” and as the rehearsal begins, bringing music and dance, the walls transform and “sing and press inward,” paralleling the energy of the dancers and the passion John feels (though he resists it). In “Box Seat,” too, the houses do not, initially, symbolize oppression; instead, they promise connection and relationship: “Houses are shy girls whose eyes shine reticently upon the dusk body of the street....The eyes of houses faintly touch [Dan] as he passes them. Soft-girl eyes, they set him singing” (57).

These buildings and streets become oppressive or sterile only when the characters in the sketches turn away from them, looking elsewhere (often to a rural pastoral ideal) for fulfillment, or when they attempt to reshape the world (and women) around them to suit a false idea of perfection or achievement, created in part, no doubt, by the pressures of class and capitalism. At the conclusion of “Avey,” for example, when the narrator expounds upon his condescending theories about Avey’s lacks and failures, telling her how her life ought to be, the flame of love—and the beauty of the world around him—dies out. Avey sleeps through his lecturing, and the narrator’s passion for her subsides because she will not conform to his ideas of what a woman ought to desire and become. His projection of a pastoral vision onto Avey—one in which Avey’s “nature and temperament” would have “a larger life for their expression,” one which the city was “incapable” of understanding—has failed. Thus, at the end of the sketch, he cannot see her as she is nor feel any further life-giving connection to her, but he can only view her as someone who is lacking: “Avey’s face was pale, and her eyes were heavy. She did not have the gray crimson-splashed beauty of the dawn” (48). “Theater” and “Box Seat” conclude similarly—when the men

eventually reject the women onto whom they have projected their desires for a harmonious, fulfilling, connected life, and when they have turned their backs on the dynamic, energized world in front of them, the possibility for passion and relationship dies out. It is only then that the fragile moments of beauty and connection disappear, and the complex promises of the city turn into signals of despair and barrenness. The ideals of the pastoral—such as spiritual fulfillment, community, and harmony among living things—are alive in the city, Toomer illustrates frequently, but they often go unrecognized when they are not in their “proper” or traditional forms. Yes, the city can be deadening, threatening, overly-intellectual, fragmented, and disconnected—but the ideals found in the pastoral world are still palpable, even in this setting, if only the characters search for connection and soulfulness instead of individualism and escape.

The second section’s poems crystallize this theme of possible connection and fulfillment in an urban setting; like those of the first section, they crystallize particular images or create striking metaphors for what the protagonists of the sketches have missed or have refused to see. These poems, on the whole, revel in the thrill and energy of the city even as they recognize the pressures and oppression of industrial and technological development. On the whole, in their imagery and metaphors, the poems point directly toward moments of connection and fulfillment (the ultimate promise of the pastoral), but rather than locating them in an edenic rural world, the poems find those moments generated by the fluid energy of the city. Therefore, the pastoral vision of the second section is a pastoral without the traditional trappings; in this section there are no flocks of sheep or Arcadian shepherds (or, more faithful to *Cane* itself, there are no mysterious canebrakes or purple dusks or spiritually wise field workers or singing women at the cookstove).<sup>28</sup> Most poems in the second section either recognize the thrilling desire and

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<sup>28</sup> One poem, “Harvest Song,” seems an exception to this idea; initially, its title indicates a desire to recapture the harmony of the southern pastoral surface and return to the imagined past. However, instead of finding an abundant harvest, the beauty of the southland, or the lyrical music of the first

dynamism of the city, as in “Her Lips are Copper Wire,” or combine that energy with natural imagery, as in “Beehive” and “Storm Ending.” Together, the poems serve as a critique of the sketches, where the characters long for an idealized pastoral world; simultaneously, the poems illustrate, by metaphor and parallel, that the wellsprings of life and desire and energy are present in the city, in the people themselves. Thus, the ideals and impulses of the pastoral *do* translate over to an industrial, urban setting.

What remains of the pastoral in this second section, then, are its ultimate values—there is, in fact, abundance, connection, spiritual fulfillment, and strong bonds between people, divinity, and the landscape, even in the city. Those values, Toomer seems to argue in this second section, are available and present; the mistake is believing that they exist only in an idyllic past or far-off land. Additionally, reestablishing those values is a powerful antidote to the often destructive pressures of class and capitalism. Thus, the second section of *Cane* reunites the values of the pastoral with modernist art—those pastoral values, found amid and inside of and even *because of* the energy and dynamism of the city, redeem the otherwise deadening, alienating, and isolating industrial and technological world. These pastoral values are what John, dreaming of Dorris dancing in “Theater,” and Dan, angry with Muriel’s primness in “Box Seat,” miss. Dorris and Muriel, as well as various other characters in the second section, already contain the vibrancy and life the men believe they will find elsewhere (or that they believe they must find by “fixing” or reshaping these women). And these pastoral values are what make “Bona and Paul” a centerpiece for the second section—Paul grasps, in a transcendent moment, the idea that the dancers on the floor of the Crimson Gardens are one manifestation of the beauty of the pastoral

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section, this poem only finds fatigue, chill, hunger, and pain. It sharpens the longing for spiritual and communal connections while simultaneously pointing out that aiming this longing at a southern pastoral landscape is misplaced. Set against all of the accumulated knowledge and imagery of the first section, and in the midst of the urban hustle of the second section, “Harvest Song” strikes a note of longing but most acutely of despair—it creates, altogether, a call that is not answered, a song that cannot be heard, an absence and solitude where there should be presence and communion.

image of a field of flowers, that pastoral communion can be found in the heat and sensual energy of a dance club. As Paul explains in the final scene,

And all the while the Gardens were purple like a bed of roses would be at dusk. I came back to tell you, brother, that white faces are petals of roses. That dark faces are petals of dusk. That I am going out and gather petals. That I am going out and know her whom I brought here with me to these Gardens which are purple like a bed of roses would be at dusk. (78)

Paul's final revelation, though it is met with Bona's absence and his abandonment, binds together the theme of the poems in the second section—that full spiritual and relational connections—between people, divinity, and the land—are present and possible, and that looking elsewhere (toward an idealized non-existent past, toward an imagined South, toward a woman recreated in imagination) for the harmony and beauty promised by the pastoral ideal is the most damaging part of the pastoral myth. The values of the pastoral—community, spiritual fulfillment, connection to the natural world—are the pieces of the pastoral worth salvaging.



#### 4.1 *"Theater": Artifice and Authentic Connection*

One of the most revealing sketches in the second section—one which most clearly demonstrates how the characters long for the ideals of the pastoral world, but in that longing, miss opportunities for fulfilling those ideals—is "Theater." In "Theater," the opening paragraph suggests the vitality and possibility of the city. Some of the city's "white-walled buildings" are cold and mute, but many of the buildings are transformed by the "mass-heart of black people," whose "throbbing jazz songs" and shouts and stamping feet "soak into" the walls. The walls are "sleeping singers," awoken by the music and dance performed within them (51). John, the central character and theater manager's brother, both absorbs and resists this life—he desires it, feels it in his body, but detaches himself from it, rejects it in his mind.

He is, Toomer makes clear, divided between the desire for union and connection and the arrogance and fears that keep him isolated. Toomer represents this divide in multiple ways throughout the sketch; from the beginning, John's face is split between light and shadow, brilliant life and somber gloom: "Light streaks down upon him from a window high above. One half his face is orange in it. One half his face is in shadow" (51). Later in the same paragraph, this division is made more explicit: "John's body is separate from the thoughts that pack his mind" (51). John's body is already united with the "mass-heart of a black audience," and he can feel the rhythms of the dance—but his mind atomizes, dissects, and analyzes him out of this unity. Watching the dancers arrive on stage, he ceases to "feel them in the mass" and instead "his mind, contained above the desires of his body, singles the girls out" (51). Rather than connect to the whole of the scene and the troupe of dancers emotionally, John disconnects from and subsequently atomizes the group. Additionally, he (like the narrator of "Avey") compares the dance troupe to livestock, using language like "herd" and "dancing ponies," a condescension that reduces their status to instinctual, trained creatures (and simultaneously elevates his status as thinking man). This conflict between head and heart is the conflict that prevents John from true, emotional (and possibly physical) connection with Dorris, the dancer who eventually takes center stage. MacKethan notes that John, like many of the male characters in the second section, is "paralyzed by thought" and the theater, in this sketch and in "Box Seat," symbolizes their artificial actions (116). However, the theater, as shown in the images of light and rhythm, color and jazz, is also a place of possibility and vitality; it is also the place where the pastoral ideals (the pastoral itself an artificial construct) are reconceived, reenacted, and reestablished.

Dorris is the centerpiece of this energy; her dance is the most authentic restoration of the pastoral ideals, at least momentarily. Dorris is the only one to whom Toomer gives full color and beauty; her hair is black, her face "lemon-colored," her lips "curiously full, and very red," and her

limbs clad in “silk purple stockings” (52). Unlike John, half in light and half in shadow, Dorris is fully illuminated in the stage lights. Initially, she doubts the possibility of connection with John—her friend Mame tells her he’s “dictie,” that there’s no hope of a relationship between them. But Dorris, throughout her dance, works to convince herself and John of the possibility of that true, faithful, respectful relationship.

In one of the few passages when we are made privy to Dorris’ thoughts, we hear her speak in dialect (unlike John, who uses Standard English throughout his musings) while arguing for their equality: “Aint I as good as him? Couldnt I have got an education if I’d wanted one? Dont I know respectable folks, lots of em, in Philadelphia and New York and Chicago? Aint I had men as good as him? Better” (52). Dorris wants to meet him on equal footing, wants to convince him of the possibility of authentic relationship. Later, when she begins dancing from her soul and heart, with contagious joy and without regard to the “tricks” and steps, she communicates through art the possibility of genuine connection to John: “O will you love me? And give me kids, and a home, and everything? (I’d like to make your nest, and honest, hon, I wouldnt run out on you.) You will if I make you. Just watch me” (53). Dorris’ ideas about the possibility of marriage and a home and family are a far cry from John’s ideas presented to us earlier. He considers not a long-lasting, true relationship but rather “get[ting] her to herself—(Christ, but how she’d bore you after the first five minutes)—not if you get her right she wouldn’t. Touch her, I mean. To herself—in some room perhaps. Some cheap, dingy bedroom” (53). John limits the possible connection to a one-night stand before it’s even begun.

But Dorris continues to dance, and eventually, she conjures the whole beautiful pastoral—the rich, luminous imagery from the first section of *Cane*, unspoiled and whole—from within herself: “Glorious songs are the muscles of her limbs. And her singing is of canebrake loves and mangrove feastings” (54). This is the transcendent apex of the sketch—her art has

created a return to harmony, beauty, abundance, and love. Dorris dances, and in that dance, evokes the beauty of the southland, the harmony and rhythm of the spiritual, the connection between people, divinity, and landscape. Mary Weaks-Baxter illustrates the connection between the pastoral ideal and Dorris; her purple stockings evoke the consistent purple imagery from the first section, and so “these legs that [John] desires [represent] Dorris’s clear connection to the South. Her sexuality is linked to the southern earth” (66). Her dance is so powerful that, for a moment, she pulls John toward her until, Toomer writes, “the walls press in, singing. Flesh of a throbbing body, they press close to John and Dorris. They close them in. John’s heart beats tensely against her dancing body” (54). It is essential to note that Dorris, here, is immediate, fully there, presenting herself and John with the rich possibility of fulfillment, human and spiritual connection, an egalitarian love—not in some far-off world, not in an idealized past, but in the present moment, in the middle of the city, within the richly evocative world of art. Her evocation of the South—“canebrake loves and mangrove feastings”—demonstrate not a return to nostalgic southern pastoral but rather a trumping of the limits of time and space through art, a full recapturing of worthwhile pastoral values in the present moment.

John, perhaps afraid of full connection, perhaps afraid of succumbing to his own desires and to Dorris’ magnetism and eroticism, separates himself from the present moment and from her dance—and he, essentially, rewrites her dance in his own words, creating an entirely different ending. Abandoning her physical presence and the throbbing walls of the theater, John’s imagination whirls away, out the window, and he dreams of a different narrative altogether. John’s ending is not full of “mangrove feastings” and “canebrake loves,” rich life and consummations; it is, instead, full of melancholy, separation, and dead leaves rustling on the ground, a sure symbol of stagnation and decline. John, imagining, re-dresses Dorris in a funereal “loose black gown,” only “splashed with lemon ribbons,” and in his dream, he walks with her

through an alley without any trees (one of the consistent symbols of the idealized pastoral in both the first and second sections) but full of old leaves and signs of autumn. Instead of fulfillment and love, John replaces them with melancholy, a “deep thing that seals all senses but his eyes,” deadened sensation, and sadness. While Dorris still evokes the rural, pastoral South in John’s dream, Dorris’ vibrant colors are now muted, and the pastoral celebration is turned to pastoral elegy: “Her face is tinted like the autumn alley. Of old flowers, or of a southern canefield, her perfume” (54). For a moment, near the end of John’s dream, it seems that he might yet restore their connection and allow himself to engage fully with Dorris; the walls once again become “the flesh and blood of Dorris,” and again they sing amid “soft lights” (54). But abruptly, John turns away from the flesh, emotion, and heart of this dance and returns to his intellect, analyzing, editing, controlling, writing it out. Instead of joining Dorris in her dance, John “reaches for a manuscript of his, and reads. Dorris, who has no eyes, has eyes to understand him. He comes to a dancing scene. The scene is Dorris” (54). By incorporating Dorris’ dance into one of his scripts, John does not allow for Dorris’ independence, her unscripted dance, which, earlier, led the other dancers to “forget set steps,” to “find their own” (53). Indeed, he takes away Dorris’ agency, rewriting her with eyes that can only understand and focus on him. This dream effectively disconnects John from Dorris—both in the present moment, because he has stopped watching and feeling her dance, and in the future, because he has rewritten the relationship Dorris imagined. While she considered the possibility of an egalitarian, fully realized relationship, John has reduced her to a character in a performance he has written.

This disconnection is made obvious in the final paragraph of the sketch, wherein both John’s dream and Dorris’ dance simultaneously end, and it is devastating. Dorris’s dance, which captured the attention of everyone in and around the theater (including the director, the other dancers, the stage-men in the wings, even the people playing craps outside), garners applause and

adoration from everyone except John. Looking at John's face, Dorris instantly recognizes that he has cut himself away from her, that in his dream he has rescripted her, tried to contain her energy, limited their connection. Looking for her dance, Dorris "finds it a dead thing in the shadow which is his dream" (54). Interestingly, Robert Bone reads "Theater" as an achievement for John, in which he supersedes the limits of the body through the power of imagination. Bone writes, "The walls of the theater press in upon the human world until they become symbolic of the prison of the flesh, from which imagination alone can offer an escape" (224). What Bone reads as a victory for John, though, seems more akin to alienation and despair at the close of the sketch. After all, Toomer does not end the sketch on John's scripting of Dorris' dance, wherein she "whirls, whirls, dances..." (54). That kind of an ending might be read as liberation, an unceasing, illimitable dance. But instead Toomer ends on Dorris' devastation as she runs from the stage and collapses in tears in her dressing room. And instead of walls that continue singing, throbbing with music and heat and erotic energy, we are returned to a "whitewashed ceiling," and a room replete with the "smell of dry paste, and paint, and soiled clothing" (54). All these final images emblemize the deadened city life which Dorris' dance transcended, even if momentarily. But John's desire for control, and his subsequent dismissal of her instinctual, passion-fueled dance, have punctured Dorris' dance, deflated that transcendent moment.

So, John's imagination may be an escape, but it is an escape from connecting truly with another person. *Because* John lives strictly in the imagination throughout this sketch, repressing his physical responses, he remains isolated; throughout the performance, his imagination and intellect interfere with any chance of union with Dorris. Sadder yet, at the end of the sketch, his face is completely "in shadow," and Dorris' dance has become "a dead thing" (54). John's disconnection, then, does not only maintain his own isolation; it also alienates Dorris. Dorris does have, at the end, the "old safe arms" of her friend Mame, a small comfort, but Mame's

words to her—"I told you nothin doin"—only underscore the lack of action to realize the promises of the pastoral on John's part (he is doing nothing) and the impossibility of connection with him ("nothin doin"). Thus, "Theater" illustrates in sharp, bold lines the dichotomy between the possibilities of fulfillment and beauty and abundance (vividly presented in Dorris' dance) and the rejection of those possibilities based on class division, the desire for pure pastoral elegy over messy enactment of love and connection, and the privileging of the intellect over the spirit and the body.



#### 4.2 "Her Lips are Copper Wire," "Beehive," and "Storm Ending": Electric Nature and Natural Electricity

As with many of the sketches in *Cane*, "Theater" is followed by a poem which highlights what the speaker or protagonist of the sketch has refused to see. The poem that follows "Theater," "Her Lips are Copper Wire," seems a pointed rebuttal to John's melancholy dream and his dismissal of Dorris' erotic energy. Indeed, one can imagine the speaker of "Her Lips are Copper Wire" as Dorris herself, highlighting through powerful metaphors the possibilities of physical and emotional connection. Bernard Bell sums up the problem of John's prioritizing the intellect over the body:

Indeed, the primary focus of Part Two is on the corruption of the mind when it is enslaved by the genteel mores of society as well as the mind when it has rid itself of that form of oppression. Properly used, mind, emotions, and body can be one. Spirituals, folk songs, jazz, and poetry are vehicles for the attainment of this end. (233)

John follows the mores of a genteel society, unable to imagine crossing class boundaries to connect fully with Dorris, but Dorris' dance, as well as the poem that follows the sketch, illustrate the life-giving energy of art—the energy that might unite body, mind, and spirit as well as create

physical, creative, and emotional connections with others—that is present and attainable in an urban landscape.

The poem opens on a muted hum of electricity, cutting through darkness and fog and generating movement:

whisper of yellow globes  
gleaming on lamp-posts that sway  
like bootleg licker drinkers in the fog (1-3)

This stanza is both gentle and energetic, secretive and seductive; the repetition of “l,” “o,” and “s” sounds, along with the “fog” and the “sway,” creates a softened, lulling atmosphere, but one that is laced with energy and the promise of abandoning the social mores Bell noted, in the “whisper,” the “gleaming,” and the liquor drinkers evoked in the final line. The images of light and electricity amid the darkness and fog correlate directly to the image presented of John’s face, which begins as half illuminated and ends entirely engulfed in shadow. The poem, then, rescues Dorris’ erotic energy from becoming “the dead thing in the shadow which is his dream,” and renews the promise of connection and illumination.

The next two couplets turn from description of the surrounding urban night to an erotic entreaty, drawing the addressee of the poem into this urban landscape through simile:

and let your breath be moist against me  
like bright beads on yellow globes  
  
telephone the power-house  
that the main wires are insulate (4-7).

In these lines, the speaker and the person addressed draw closer, close enough to feel one another’s breath, and the electric energy of the lamp-posts is transferred to their own bodies. The second of these couplets further secludes them; in telephoning the power-house to tell them all is

safe and protected, they (and their electricity, nearly connected) will remain intimately alone. In the next two lines, the poem diverts from the energy between the couple for a moment, as if a camera zooms out: “(her words play softly up and down / dewy corridors of billboards)” (8-9). These lines, in parentheses, seem to come either from the person addressed in the other lines or from an outside perspective, looking at the couple on the street. In either case, the quiet isolation of the couple is enhanced, here, as only her words “softly” echo throughout the “corridors of billboards,” mirroring the motion of the lights; they are the only sounds outside of the electric whisper of the lampposts. And, indeed, this wider angle also connects the couple with the larger city—Toomer’s imagery implies that connecting the wires between two people not only illuminates and energizes their own bodies and spirits, but also creates light throughout the city. Though these urban images appear to be far removed from the rural pastoral world of the first section, the continued images of connection underscore the pastoral’s ultimate values.

The poem ends on a call for ecstatic union, an “uninsulating” of the wires: “then with your tongue remove the tape / and press your lips to mine / till they are incandescent” (10-12). This vital, electric connection finally fulfills what has been absent from the previous sketches, and it does so in the imagery of industry and technology—not, perhaps surprisingly for a pastoral work, in the imagery of a traditional pastoral. Michael North observes that this poem not only functions as a resolution for the failed connection in “Theater,” but as a metaphor for many of the faltering connections across the second section of *Cane*. He claims that, “The reconnection of a circuit, the jump of electricity across a gap, is, in fact, a gathering metaphor for most of this, the second, section of *Cane*,” especially noting the failure to connect in “Theater” and “Box Seat” (170).

The release from restriction and reconnection between characters are underscored in “Her Lips are Copper Wire” by the form of the poem and its lack of punctuation. The form—two

tercets framing three couplets—emphasizes the “coupling” of the poem, while the lack of punctuation creates a cohesion between and uninterrupted flow from one stanza to the next that mimics an unceasing current, even across gaps between stanzas. Additionally, this poem is an early imagist experiment for Toomer—much like Dorris’ dance, this poem creates Pound’s “intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time,” and thus this poem also bridges the gap between a more romantic pastoral impulse and a modernist experiment. This poem, then, solidifies the argument the second section seems to drive toward—that spiritual, emotional, and physical fulfillment are not constrained to an idealized pastoral vision, and they should not be constrained by divisions between classes and races and genders. Neither is this fulfillment only available in the past; this poem, like Dorris’ dance, captures that connection in the present tense, in the immediate moment. Indeed, Toomer presents this kind of fulfillment vividly and brilliantly in the language of the city.



Two other poems of the second section, “Beehive” and “Storm Ending,” also work to establish the possibilities of recovering pastoral values of relationship and fulfillment while simultaneously grasping the energy of the city and connecting with the landscape. These poems, situated between “Avey” and “Theater,” again comment on the protagonists of those sketches, demonstrating the futility of their nostalgic pastoral ideas as well as the possibility of reconciliation between the beauty of the natural world and the energy of the urban landscape. Additionally, these poems renew pastoral imagery, reinventing it for a contemporary world. “Beehive,” for example, reinvents the city as a sonorous “black hive,” a “swarm [of] a million bees” (1-2). In the first seven lines, the word “bees” appears six times, creating through sound a connection between the intense buzzing of the natural and electrified world. These million industrious bees are “passing in and out the moon,” “escaping out the moon,” and “returning

through the moon,” images that work on two levels—first, the speaker sees the bees via the light of the moon, watching as their silhouettes, silvered by the moon, fly past, and second, the speaker implies that the bees are otherworldly, able to transcend the earth and reach the moon. Bernard Bell reads these bees as “mechanical activity of human life” representing “man’s failure to develop his intellectual and spiritual potential” (233). And yet, while the bees may certainly evoke a kind of mindless activity, their otherworldliness, their extraordinary travel and their beautiful “silver honey” brought to earth, “a waxen cell of the world comb,” seems to point toward a different meaning. For example, the “black hive” echoes the “mass-heart of black people” described in “Theater,” and that “mass heart” is the energetic, musical thrill of the streets, the vibrant life that opposes and transforms the otherwise deadened buildings. The “black hive” also recalls the imagery of “Seventh Street,” a buzzing life that splits the “white and whitewashed wood of Washington,” the blood that sets the world “flowing.” The kind of energy in “Beehive” seems less mechanical, then, amid these images from the sketches, and more life-giving. And indeed, the image of bees, here, reclaims a natural metaphor for the life of the city—this image is one part of the reconciliation between the traditional pastoral and the reinvented, revitalized pastoral of this second section.

A further reason to read the swarm of silver bees “passing in and out the moon” as a positive comment on the buzzing of the city is the stark contrast between that swarm and the speaker. This speaker appears, after a dramatic shift, in the second half of the poem. He is “a drone, / Lying on [his] back,” separate from the rest of the bees, and separate, really, from the rest of the poem. (This split is made formally clear by the dramatically shorter lines that introduce the speaker—lines nine through eleven have only four or five syllables each, approximately half of the syllables in the each of the first eight lines of the poem.) This drone, who is not buzzing, escaping, returning, or doing anything at all but “lipping honey” and “getting drunk with silver

honey,” is dreaming—and it is a distinctly nostalgic dream. In the final lines, we are presented with a soothing but altogether wistful and impossible (and literally fruitless) vision: “[I] wish that I might fly out past the moon / And curl forever in some far-off farmyard flower” (13-14). While this lovely, alliterative final line seems a beautiful image initially, it is, underneath its trappings, an image of isolation, sterility, and death. This speaker’s wish separates him from the rest of the hive (an echo of the narrator of the previous sketch and his separation from Avey, as well as John’s separation from the “mass heart of the black audience”), and his wish to “fly out past the moon” is a rejection of the earth, the “waxen comb” of the world, the source of safety and nourishment and community.<sup>29</sup> And though his dream may reconnect him with a rural landscape and therefore seem more life-sustaining, a bee “curl[ed] *forever*” in a flower is a dead bee (14, emphasis mine). Indeed, a drone on his back is already a bad sign—most bees on their backs *are* dead. The living silver bees, the swarm producing the honey and circling back to earth and to one another, the hive producing music and rhythm in the middle of the night, are the life-force in this poem.

Thus, “Beehive” accomplishes several things at once. First, its use of a natural metaphor for city life explicitly reconnects the imagery of the pastoral with the urban landscape. Second, its division between the vital, active swarm and the dreaming, drunk, isolated bee reflects the choice between living fully engaged in the present moment, like Dorris or Avey, and living in a nostalgic (or overly-intellectualized, overly-analyzed) fog, like John or “Avey’s” narrator. And last, like “Her Lips,” this poem manages to combine the pastoral values of community and harmony with the modernist urban landscape and the world of industry and of city nightlife. The

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<sup>29</sup> The juxtaposition of this bee-speaker with the speaker of Anne Spencer’s “1975” is also instructive, illustrating just how far Toomer’s speaker is from an idealized pastoral. For example, whereas Spencer’s speaker urges us to get closer to the earth, to “turn an earth clod” and “peel a shaley rock,” this speaker rejects the world close at hand, wishing for something far off and unattainable. Additionally, Spencer’s speaker recognizes the inherent connection between all things—represented by the “curly worm / Whose familiar is everywhere”—while this speaker rejects that connection and community, opting for isolation.

poem echoes, to some degree, Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," with the dreaming drone a parallel for the uncertain, agonizing, anesthetized Prufrock. And yet, in Toomer's poem, the city is not so much a threatening, menacing place as it is a place of possibility and vitality. This re-envisioning of the city again points to Toomer's revitalized pastoral values—of connection and life and beauty—made available and possible in the urban world.



The poem that follows "Beehive" directly, "Storm Ending," also unites the natural world with the urban world. Another imagist poem, focused intently on a single moment of natural wonder, "Storm Ending" might easily belong to the first section of *Cane*; that it appears in the second section emphasizes Toomer's reclamation of pastoral values—here, especially the values of beauty and connection to place and landscape—in and amid city life. This poem picks up on the "far-off farmyard flower" that ended "Beehive," and opens with another, very different flower:

Thunder blossoms gorgeously above our heads,  
Great, hollow, bell-like flowers,  
Rumbling in the wind,  
Stretching clappers to strike our ears...  
Full-lipped flowers  
Bitten by the sun  
Bleeding rain  
Dripping rain like golden honey—  
And the sweet earth flying from the thunder. (1-9)

This poem, then, seems to answer the drone's wish in "Beehive"—not by providing a "far-off" idyllic flower but by pointing to the "great, hollow, bell-like flowers" immediately present, surrounding and enveloping the speakers. The plurality of speakers in this poem, noted by the collective "our heads" and "our ears," is important to note, especially in contrast to the solitary bee at the end of the previous poem and in contrast to John in "Theater," the sketch that

immediately follows this poem. Though the use of “our” is a small piece of this poem, the collective pronoun is an indication of the centrality of community as a pastoral value, and it reverberates throughout the second section of *Cane*—from the vibrancy and connectedness of the “swarm” in “Beehive,” to the “mass-heart of the black audience” in “Theater,” to the revelatory vision of the Crimson Gardens dancers in “Bona and Paul.”

Additionally, these flowers of sound, opening and rolling across the sky, present an image of both violent wonder and beneficial restoration, a connectedness to the natural world that is possible even in the urban setting of the second section. The thunder, “rumbling” and “stretching...to strike,” is threatening, but it also creates gorgeous, living flowers. The adjective “full-lipped” in the fifth line of the poem resonates with the images of energy and beauty in “Her Lips are Copper Wire,” as well as with the descriptions of many of the women who represent the possibility of pastoral fulfillment and connection throughout *Cane*. And these thundering flowers also transform violent imagery to nourishing, restorative imagery—the flowers that were “bitten by the sun” and “bleeding rain” turn those wounds into renewal in the gentler line, “dripping rain like golden honey.” On a literal level, the softer rain accompanies the storm ending of the title. On a metaphorical level, though, that softer rain symbolizes a renewal of pastoral values in the urban world—a restoration of beauty, peace, and connection to nature’s bounty. The simile of rain “like golden honey” also answers the previous poem—the honey in this poem is life-sustaining, calling up the pastoral’s abundance and beauty in the immediate present, as opposed to the drone’s drunken dream of escape. Though this poem, too, ends on a flight, the final line, “And the sweet earth flying from the thunder,” evokes a different kind of flight than the wish for escape at the conclusion of “Beehive.” For one, the flight that concludes “Storm Ending” is not the flight of a single speaker but the earth as a whole. This unity in flight indicates the possibility of transcendence, and the “sweet earth flying” is far more like Dorris’ inspiring dance than like

one bee dying alone or like John's controlled and melancholy script. Additionally, the ending of this poem promises restoration and rejuvenation, rather than alienation—the world coated in rain like golden honey is a vital, nourished image. Therefore, even in this small poem, Toomer highlights the pastoral values that are worth salvaging, and those that are very much available in an urban setting. In these nine lines, he conjoins the pastoral values of natural beauty and wonder with restorative connections to the landscape and to other people.



#### 4.3 “*Calling Jesus*”: *God in the City*

The sketch that most plainly supports the idea that the values of the pastoral are immediate and available in an urban setting is “*Calling Jesus*.” This sketch—which is perhaps better described as a prose poem due to its circularity, its evocations of the images from other poems throughout *Cane*, and its lack of a linear narrative—appears in the very center of the second section. It is a kind of bridge between the main characters of the sketches—who often miss out on the chance at fulfillment that pastoral values promise—and the poems of the second section, where the images of connection, abundance, and natural wonder create fulfillment. Like all of the sketches in the second section, “*Calling Jesus*” takes place in the reality of the city, with images of “streets and alleys,” “asphalt” and “tumbled shanties,” and “storm doors,” “vestibules,” and “iron hinges” appearing in each of the three paragraphs that make up this sketch (56). But like many of the poems of the second section, this sketch incorporates snatches of songs, images of nature, and metaphors of relationship and connection in order to represent, again, the possibilities of wholeness and unity between past and present, rural and urban, South and North.

In “*Calling Jesus*,” an unnamed woman walks through the city by day, and behind her, the narrator explains in a tender metaphor, her soul, “like a little thrust-tailed dog,” follows. At night, that little cold and neglected soul is shut out of the woman’s house, left in the vestibule,

“filled with chills till morning” and “nosing the crack beneath the big storm door,” trying to get back to her. The woman, meanwhile, sleeps inside, dreaming of “clean hay,” and “cradled in dream-fluted cane” (56). This separation between the woman and her soul bookends the sketch, described in the first and third paragraph. In the second paragraph, we return to the daytime, and though the woman doesn’t seem to recognize that the dog follows her, some observers (including the narrator) do see it, or more accurately, they sense its warm, sweet presence. The narrator carefully builds this encounter: “Nothing happens at first, and then...a soft thing like fur begins to rub your limbs, and you hear a low, scared voice, lonely, calling, and you know that a cool something nozzles moisture into your palms. Sensitive things like nostrils, quiver” (56). The soul, even disconnected from the woman, still finds a way to connect with others, to give and receive affection. And something small but significant then happens in Toomer’s language—the soul and the woman seem to merge. The dog, thus far in the sketch, has been referred to as “it,” differentiating it from the woman. But here, there is a conflation—“her” and “it” seem to inhabit the same space, the same vision, the same moment: “Her breath comes sweet as honeysuckle whose pistils bear the life of coming song. And her eyes carry to where builders find no need for vestibules, for swinging on iron hinges, storm doors” (56). The nose of the dog, “nozzl[ing] moisture,” is the clearer source of the breath, but the feminine possessive “her” must be the woman. And so the woman’s soul is returned to her, in a small way, here. And the soul finds renewed life, a wellspring of joy and freedom, in the honeysuckle flowers and pistils, in the “coming song,” and in the vista that opens beyond the confining walls of the buildings—in short, in the wide open beauty of an imagined pastoral world.

The third paragraph initially diminishes this moment of fulfillment, as it returns to the opening scene where the woman shuts out the little dog and leaves it stuck, scratching at the storm door. And so the city seems, then, inevitably a place of division and lifelessness, a place

where fulfillment and beauty can only happen in dreams. And yet, in both the first and third paragraph, Toomer reestablishes the art and connection of the pastoral by repeating the refrain, "...eoho Jesus..." from the poem "Cotton Song" in the first section. This sketch mirrors that poem's emphasis on resurrection, salvation-in-action, rolling away the stone in front of Christ's tomb. At the conclusion of the first and third paragraphs in "Calling Jesus," an unnamed person opens the door, cares for the tiny dog, and returns it to the woman, and that person is defined by language drawn directly from the pastoral. Thus, this sketch successfully enacts spirituality and community, removing some of the darker traces that cling to "Cotton Song" because of its reminiscent images from "Becky." In the first paragraph of "Calling Jesus," Toomer writes, "Some one...eoho Jesus...soft as a cotton boll brushed against the milk-pod cheek of Christ, will steal in and over it that it need not shiver, and carry it to her where she sleeps upon clean hay cut in her dreams" (56). In the concluding paragraph, Toomer revises this version only slightly: "Some one...eoho Jesus...soft as the bare feet of Christ moving across bales of southern cotton, will steal in and cover it that it need not shiver, and carry it to her where she sleeps: cradled in dream-fluted cane" (56). These final moments are restorative and tender; they demonstrate the reconciliation between the body and the soul, the urban life and the pastoral values, in action.

At this point in *Cane*, the symbolism of "Calling Jesus" is quite clear, and also far more complex than a dichotomy between pastoral salvation and urban despair. The pastoral imagery of this sketch functions in (at least) two ways. First, the woman's dreams point to the trappings of an idyllic pastoral world—the "clean hay" and "dream-fluted cane" directly echo the descriptions of the southern rural landscape in the first section of *Cane*. But these dreams are elusive, imaginary, and unattainable—and more importantly, they seem to keep her from recognizing the presence of her own desperate, tender, sweet-nosed soul. Like the drone in "Beehive," the woman's dreams are an escape from the present moment, a nostalgic return to a non-existent

idyllic past. However, the language of the pastoral, the spirituals and work songs, and the soft imagery of southern cotton are also restorative in this sketch—they are evoked as metaphors for the soul and for the divine. The pastoral images of cotton bolls and milk-pods and hay bales are used here not to claim that the rural South is the only possible place for connection to the divine, but rather to demonstrate that spiritual relationship, fulfillment and care of the soul (and the soul's care of the self) are possible, indeed essential, in this urban world, as well. Just as “Cotton Song” earlier reflects Becky's need for help and rescue, the echoes of that song here reflect the possibility of salvation, or simply kindness and relationship. And that possibility exists in the city—if we will let the tiny dog in. The softened, sweetened language of the pastoral in this sketch demonstrates the spiritual fulfillment and relationship that are immediately available—literally right outside the door—even in this urban setting of heavy doors and iron hinges.

Similarly, the images of the urban city are complex in “Calling Jesus,” and they also function in disparate ways. Initially, of course, the city for the woman is a place of spiritual disconnection; the walls and doors section off and fragment the world, and they separate her from others as well as from her very self. However, through quick and subtle images, the narrator of this piece also positions the city as a site of connection and vitality. In the final paragraph, as the little dog follows the woman home, we find the city as a place of “chestnut trees flowering” and “dusty asphalt freshly sprinkled with clean water” (56). These are spiritual, life-giving images; they are images of baptism and renewal. The city, too, comes to life with music and relationship: the woman passes by “alleys where niggers sat on low door-steps before tumbled shanties *and sang and loved*” (56, emphasis mine). Thus, the city is not all heavy, imposing, locked doors; it is also a place of life and connection, if, this piece seems to suggest, we would only recognize it and allow it to be so.

The overall themes of the second section of *Cane*, then, seem to be, first, an insistence on stripping away the trappings of a traditional pastoral and an intense focus on the reality of life for many black people living in large, urban, industrialized cities—and this focus is wide enough to take in both the jazzy, lively beauty and the stark, grim isolation in these cities. Those characters who cling to the pastoral as a set piece, as nostalgic imagery, as a worn and familiar narrative—those characters become stuck, isolated, fragmented, lifeless. Those characters who are able to remain in the present moment, abandoning pretenses and rules of class and tradition, are the characters who come closest to discovering the true heart of the pastoral. Thus the second theme of this section becomes clear: it also insists, with equal intensity, that stripping away the pastoral trappings does not have to mean throwing away the central pastoral values of harmony and relationship, spiritual fulfillment and intimate connections. Indeed, this second section highlights multiple moments where the art, music, dance, and energy of the city can recreate these values. Even more, in many places, this second section *rejuvenates* these values by living them out in the present, in the immediate moment and surroundings, and it demonstrates how a true spiritual, emotional, physical, or intellectual connection can bring together past and present, South and North, male and female, black and white. The pastoral values—not the trappings—open a way, then, toward unity and transcendence, rather than a way back to some deceitful image of an escapist never-never land.

The first theme—stripping away the trappings of the traditional pastoral—is particularly clear in most of the second section’s sketches, particularly “Avey,” “Theater,” and “Box Seat.” The second theme—that of restoring pastoral values by rediscovering them in the present place and moment—is most apparent in the poems. And the poems seem to take up various angles and concerns of this second theme. “Her Lips are Copper Wire,” for example, emphasizes the thrilling possibilities of physical connection, the electricity of relationship that can restore the body and

the soul. “Beehive” and “Storm Ending” sketch out a pathway back to reunion with the natural world, in and amid the city life. The first sees the workings of the city and its people through the lens of a natural metaphor, while the second draws a more explicit and literal relationship to the natural world, finding both wonder and grace in the gift of the storm. Finally, “Calling Jesus”—somewhere between a sketch and a poem—studies the possibility of spiritual connection and fulfillment in the city; using the setting of the city combined with the sweet language of the pastoral, the narrator reunites the central character with her soul, and he doesn’t take her out of her present context to do so. Taken together, then, the poems create a vital counterpoint to the emptiness and despair that many of the sketches end on—and, more importantly, these poems revitalize the pastoral values in an urban context. They create a way to reconnect, a way to restore what was missing.



##### 5. Part Three: The Weaving of Themes in “Kabnis”

The third section of *Cane*, a play-turned-novella titled “Kabnis,” synthesizes the themes from the first and second sections. Though this piece is far more complex than just a summation of the pastoral variations, we can read “Kabnis” as a sustained effort to live inside the ruined heart of the pastoral South (the town of Sempster, where “Kabnis” is set, is no stranger to division within the black community, oppression from the whites, and culminating horrific violence). Throughout this third section, Toomer makes clear that living in that ruined heart requires more than pastoral scenery—the landscape alone is clearly unfulfilling for the central character, and it does nothing to ameliorate the struggle of many of the characters. Living in the ruined heart of the pastoral requires a return to the timeless and transcendent values of community, friendship and love, and harmony with the landscape and with the soul. What also becomes clearer throughout the third section is just how extraordinarily difficult it is to return to, believe in, and

sustain those values; one could easily read this play as a series of failures (particularly the failures of the central character, Ralph Kabnis) to fully experience those values without rejecting them as unsophisticated or silly, or as a threat to his autonomy and status. Another possible reading, though, is that Kabnis' failure to fully belong and thrive in Sempster is the means by which Toomer highlights the pastoral values played out in other characters' lives. Those characters are entirely fulfilled, either, but their efforts toward building community, connecting truly with a divine spirit, and reveling in nature's gifts take them down a more fruitful path than Kabnis', which is paved with fear, alienation, and anger.

A few examples serve to demonstrate how "Kabnis" weaves together the themes of the first and section sections, and also how Kabnis' failures to reconnect with pastoral values contrast sharply with the hope and life and belonging that other characters come closer to finding. From the outset, Kabnis paints a compelling picture of the conflict between images of the South as the mythic pastoral of beauty, song, and spiritual inspiration and the ragged, ugly, bloody reality of the South. Kabnis wants to be a poet of the South—more aptly, *the* poet of the South. In his very first interior monologue, he works up to his dream of being the lyricist for the South's beauty and battles his atheistic cynicism. He dreams aloud, "If I could feel that I came to the South to face it. If I, the dream (not what is weak and afraid in me) could become the face of the South. How my lips would sing for it, my songs being the lips of its soul" (81). Here, Kabnis yearns to connect and merge with the South; he seeks some kind of reconciliation with the past, some rootedness in ancestry, some connection to this landscape. Lucinda MacKethan points out that Kabnis is "a black man from a northern city [who] dreams and denies...the song that is the South—simple, unspoiled, regenerative" (118). And the denial of this dream of the South is immediate; following his expressed longing to be "the lips of its soul," Kabnis reverses course: "Soul. Soul hell. There aint no such thing. What in hell was that?" And throughout the opening scene, as well

as throughout the third section, Kabnis approaches a pastoral vision of the South only to recoil from it again, dismissing the possibility that pastoral values might hold any significance in the modern world. These dismissals stem from his own fears, his own elitism and separation from people less educated than himself, and the very real threats of violence from both white and black communities.

The rest of the opening scene continues to reveal the conflict between the pastoral of myth and the world of reality: first, a rat running over his ceiling sends down “a powdery red dust...Dust of slavefields, dried, scattered” (82). The oppressive history of the South intrudes on Kabnis’ consciousness even in the smallest, quietest, most nearly inspired moments; that dust chokes out the desire to sing for the South. Instead, Kabnis, suddenly irritated by the chicken that shares his house, gets up and wrings the chicken’s neck—a surprising, disturbing, unnecessary act of violence on which to open the play. After killing the chicken, he hides it and “wipes blood from his hands onto the coarse scant grass” (82). This image, like the poems of the first section, seems to crystallize the violent realities of living in the South; like the bleeding rat of “Reapers,” the blood from this chicken soaks the ground and, also like the bleeding rat, it creates a clear reminder of the South’s bloody history that mars the picturesque pastoral myth. Leaving the chicken’s body in the bushes, Kabnis then turns to the night sky, a small moment that reiterates the first section’s pastoral of the averted gaze. But that averted gaze cannot hold long; instead, Kabnis voices again the conflict between the South’s beautiful landscape and the realities of history, the continuing legacy of racism, and the impending changes brought on by industry and capitalism. In an eloquent, tormented prayer, Kabnis wrestles with all that the South means. His contradictions highlight the paradoxes of the South; he begs God, “do not torture me with beauty,” but then tells himself to “look around” and see the ugliness of the place, its “hog pens and chicken yards,” its “dirty red mud,” its stinking outhouse” (83). He connects to the divine,

but he also feels unimaginably alone. He wavers in his belief—how could God, who is beautiful, create ugliness? He argues with himself, “God, he doesn’t exist, but nevertheless he is ugly....Oh, Jesus, Thou art beautiful” (83). He spouts “curses and adoration” simultaneously. This prayer, this monologue of yearning and hatred, beauty and ugliness, connection and isolation provides a clear insight into how difficult it is to reconcile the imagined pastoral world of the South with its realities, and this prayer serves as a cornerstone for the rest of the play.

Multiple other examples of this conflict appear throughout the rest of the third section. For example, shortly after the opening scene, Kabnis meets with Halsey and Layman, two members of the community who have welcomed him. They have a frank, graphic discussion of the lynching of Mame Lamkins, a pregnant woman, and the subsequent horrific stabbing of her fetus. There is no clearer illustration of the ugly, ruined heart of the pastoral than the story of Mame Lamkins, and yet, all throughout the telling of that story, a church service continues down the road, in the background. Halsey, Layman, and Kabnis hear the preaching and the singing, and outside, the world is transformed by dusk back into the beautiful night Kabnis first so admired. After the story, and following Kabnis’ panic over a brick thrown through Halsey’s window, Toomer concludes, “Softly luminous over the hills and valleys, the faint spray of a scattered star....” (91). That luminous night—along with the echoes of the final hymn from the church—does offer some solace, though certainly it is not enough to dispel the story’s horror.

And so it is not only violence and horror that mark this third section, and it is not only the ruined heart of the pastoral that is revealed. If this play plainly demonstrates that the imagined pastoral world of the South does not exist (and never did), then it also reveals, often simultaneously, that the ultimate values of the pastoral *do* exist, and they may yet provide a path to restoration and wholeness, spiritual fulfillment and joy, true human connection and relationship. In this way, the third section also returns to and reinforces the themes of the first

and second section. Although the realities of the modern world (even in rural Georgia) are chaotic, violent, and oppressive, the values of the pastoral offer a way to reclaim community—particularly community among black people—to transcend those awful realities, to bind together the best of the past and the present, and to reconnect people to each other, to the land, and to God. These values run throughout the third section like small, glimmering threads; they do not make up the whole cloth, but they are a stabilizing, strengthening force that surround Kabnis and support the major characters in the play.

As one example, despite all of Kabnis' best efforts to alienate or irritate or provoke Halsey, Halsey shows what can only be described as unrelenting kindness to Kabnis. After a dramatic and difficult series of events for Kabnis—from the story of the murder of Mame Lamkins, to a brick thrown through the window with a note that seems meant to threaten Kabnis, to the loss of his teaching position when principal Hanby catches him drinking in his cabin—Halsey offers continual, tangible compassion. First, after defending Kabnis against Hanby's attacks, Halsey then sees Kabnis struggling to vocalize his own defense. Toomer describes Kabnis' internal battle in short, choppy sentences, and amid his struggle, he includes Halsey's sympathetic response and action: Kabnis' conviction

is just strong enough to torture him. To bring a feverish, quick-passing flare into his eyes. To mutter words soggy in hot saliva. To jerk his arms upward in futile protest. Halsey, noticing his gestures, thinks it is water that he desires. He brings a glass to him. Kabnis slings it to the floor. Heat of the conviction dies. (95)

Though Halsey misreads Kabnis' desire (and Kabnis rejects his consolation), Halsey's friendship and his concern still take the sting and anger out of the terrible situation. Later in the same scene, Halsey draws a bath for Kabnis, heats the water, and “bustles and fusses about Kabnis as if he

were a child” (96). In both of these instances, Halsey offers Kabnis water, a symbol of rejuvenation.

In addition to immediate kindnesses, Halsey also looks out for Kabnis by offering him a new job and a new place to live in his wagon shop, though Kabnis has no ready skills for that kind of work. Halsey’s patience, generosity, and compassion—as well as his constant efforts to build community—create one of the threads of ultimate pastoral values stitched through this final section. Even if Kabnis resists or resents or dismisses Halsey, Halsey remains steadfast. Both metaphorically and literally throughout the play—and especially in the final scene—Halsey continues to call Kabnis back into the light and out of the darkness, to meaningful work and away from self-absorbed destruction, and to community and away from isolation and fear.

Other threads of community and connection center around Lewis, a character whose inner workings and background remain mysterious, a character who, according to Halsey, knows “a bucketful bout most things” but “seems like he doesnt want t talk, an does, sometimes” (89). He is, according to both Halsey and Layman, a “damn queer fellow” who unsettles others through his intense observations and his quick understanding of others’ vulnerabilities, longings, and sufferings. Though his appearance in Sempter goes unexplained, and his departure happens abruptly, he still creates community because of the instant and powerful bonds he shapes with those around him. For example, the first time he meets Kabnis, their connection is startling and potent. Lewis’ keen understanding of Kabnis’ isolation seems to draw Kabnis toward him and away from the solipsism he keeps intact with a shield of condescension. As Lewis leaves Kabnis’ cabin, he looks directly at Kabnis, and a vision appears, it seems, to both men in that instant:

Kabnis, a promise of soil-soaked beauty, uprooted, thinning out. Suspended a few feet above the soil whose touch would resurrect him. Arm’s length removed from him whose will to help...There is a swift intuitive interchange of consciousness. Kabnis has a sudden need to rush into the arms of this man. His eyes call, “Brother.” (96)

For many critics,<sup>30</sup> this passage sums up Kabnis' central difficulty—his sense of disconnection from the land, from the community, and from God keep him from “rooting,” from growing, from fully thriving. Lewis intuits Kabnis' separation from the soil and from others who would help him, and voices them in language of spiritual relationship. That understanding is a moment of genuine vitality and connection. Though Kabnis' cynicism and defenses keep him from fully realizing his connection with Lewis, the glimmer of that connection is enough to point out just how valid and essential the pastoral values of community and relationship are, how healing and transcendent they may be in the worst of moments.<sup>31</sup>

Carrie K. and Father John also create their own threads of pastoral values throughout the play. Carrie K., for example, serves as the emblem of maternal care, purity, healing, and devotion. She, like Halsey, is a character of genuine compassion; at the end of the play, she is able to bring the fever of fury and frustration out of Kabnis and restore him to sanity, if not to wholeness, by placing her cool palms on his cheeks. And she, like Lewis, both defends and nurtures Father John, feeding him, listening to him, and protecting him from Kabnis' verbal attacks. Father John, as many scholars have noted (and as Lewis explicitly points out in the play) is a symbol of the southern past, the legacy of slavery and suffering, now left mute and immobile in the basement but ever watchful and always present. And at the end, Father John does find his voice. He says, directly to Kabnis and Carrie K., “O th sin th white folks 'mitted when they made th Bible lie” (114). Though Father John can barely articulate it, he carries the final note of the play, moving Carrie K. to tears and, with her help, cutting through Kabnis' cynicism. It is

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<sup>30</sup> See Ladell Payne, 50; MacKethan, 123; Weaks-Baxter, 72-3.

<sup>31</sup> Several other scenes with Lewis reinforce the reading that he embodies the pastoral value of relationship which transcends suffering. When Lewis and the others are in the basement for the party, he alone seems able to break through the silence of Father John to understand him. Earlier, Lewis reaches past Carrie K.'s adherence to social mores for a moment, and he connects with her emotionally, physically, and spiritually. These examples, among others, establish Lewis as an embodiment of the pastoral value of true connection—and he also serves to demonstrate that those connections regenerate stronger connections to the land, to other people, and to a divine source of life.

difficult to claim that the ending note of the play is pure hope; one or two lines from Father John cannot overcome all of the residual darkness and despair in the third section. But, as Weaks-Baxter points out, the wagon shop and Father John “carry with them the symbolism of the southern past of African Americans,” including the history of slavery, “but here there is also life that comes from death, from a past associated with a deaf and blind old man” (73). Father John’s realization communicates a true path back to God and a way to salvation, clearing away the distortions in religion and enabling transcendence of oppression.

Carrie K. is the co-creator of that life that emerges from the grave-like cellar. Her nurturance and compassion, even in the face of Kabnis’ despair and cruelty, do work to turn the play from contempt for and despair over the South to hope for its restoration or redemption—or, at the very least, restoration of those values that emerge from the myth of the pastoral, if the pastoral itself can never and never did exist in reality. Lucinda MacKethan highlights the essential roles played by Carrie K. in reconnecting other characters to the ultimate values of the pastoral: during the last scene she is “food bringer, healer, mother, Madonna, and midwife. This concluding act brings all the major symbols and themes together, and while the drama ends ambiguously with no clear statement of possibilities, the final focus is on symbols of hope rather than those of despair” (122). I would argue, too, that the final focus reminds readers plainly of the themes of the first and second sections.

Father John emblemizes the damaged pastoral—his very presence reminds everyone of the history of slavery and its lasting ramifications of segregation, oppression, and violence. Carrie K., in her attentive concern and thoughtful compassion, seems a perfect symbol of restored pastoral values, even in the dark basement that carries the lingering smells of death and debauchery. Her words are the last of the play, and they reconnect the third section of *Cane* to a sincere spiritual hope: “Her lips murmur, ‘Jesus, come’” (115). The image of Father John and

Carrie K., framed in a circle of sunlight, functions like the poems throughout *Cane*; this image is a crystallization of the themes of the first two sections, a demonstration of the tragedies of the South as well as the possibility of recovering and restoring the essential values of the pastoral. Toomer reinforces this image with further description that highlights hope and rebirth, that renews the southern landscape for a moment—and, I would argue, only because the love and relationship between Carrie K. and Father John precedes and inflects this scene. He restores the landscape to wholeness and beauty: “Outside, the sun arises from its cradle in the tree-tops of the forest. Shadows of pines are dreams the sun shakes from its eyes. The sun arises. Gold-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town” (115).

Despite this hopeful ending, it is not possible to say that the positive themes of reclamation of pastoral values triumph entirely, and it is not possible to claim that *Cane*'s third section provides a resolution for the problems and struggles of the first and the second sections. This ending does not dissolve racism, oppression, gender inequality, modern isolation, or urban chaos. It is, however, important to understand how the themes of the first and second section collide and intertwine in this third section—that while there is racism and violence, there is also natural beauty, compassion, and the possibility of connection. And while there are moments of hope, there is also struggle and despair. If anything, the third section of *Cane* seems an attempt to capture in language what it is like to live among and between these themes, to seek out the values of connection and beauty while simultaneously recognizing just how temporary those moments of connection and beauty may be, and refusing to deny the evils and corruptions that haunt (and are perpetuated in) the rural South and the urban North while continually working toward understanding, rootedness, and relationship.



## 6. Conclusion: Anne Spencer, Jean Toomer, and James Dickey

Toomer, throughout the three complex sections of *Cane*, presents a significant challenge to previous iterations of the traditional southern pastoral. The first section, of course, reveals the southern landscape's beauty and richness, as many pastorals do, but it simultaneously counters and complicates the pastoral tradition in several ways. First, Toomer places black characters at the center of the pastoral, portraying them as complex, turbulent, sensitive, intelligent, and spiritual, deliberately working against a southern pastoral tradition that generally marginalized or caricatured them. In repositioning the focus of the southern pastoral to reflect a far more diverse and complicated South, and in taking authorial control of the tradition that often dismissed their agency, Toomer also mirrors Spencer's transformational pastoral work. Second, Toomer deploys an intricate structure in order to offer up multiple images of the South, painting a portrait of the South as a whole that shows it to be both beautiful and disturbing, tranquil and violent, virtuous and cruel, innocent and corrupted. Toomer's use of structure also demonstrates his similarities with Spencer, as both authors present both an idealized and a damaged pastoral vision. Both authors present the possibility of an egalitarian and communal society that values the natural world while demonstrating how racism, violence, gendered inequality, and ecological destruction due to industrialization damage their idealized vision. By revealing those damaging aspects of the South, Toomer and Spencer both undercut southern pastoral traditions that ignore those problems—including the Lost Cause legend, the plantation romance, and the Agrarian and Jeffersonian yeoman farmer tradition.

Third, through his intricate structure, which creates a dialectical interplay between sketches and poems and also between the idealized and damaged pastoral, Toomer illustrates plainly that the pastoral offers a way to articulate a set of beliefs about what the South was, what it is, and what it should or could be. For Toomer, the South was never a simplified version of

pastoral—and in his contemporary moment, the South is still not the stuff of legend. Indeed, *Cane* moves us well beyond a set of familiar images or common tropes and into a complex set of beliefs about the South. Toomer's intricate structure shows that the South is a complex world caught between the folkways and agriculture of the past and present industrialization, between the harmonious spirit of black communities and the racism, poverty, and oppression they continue to face, between internal turmoil and external threat. Thus, Toomer deploys traditional pastoral images of the South not just to countenance the beauty and richness of the southland but also to show how incomplete those images are without the complexity of southern history and the still-fraught relationships between races, genders, and classes. Finally, just as Toomer points up these complexities in the South and its people, he also transitions the focus of pastoral so that it does not blot out the rest of the world or argue for the superiority of the southern rural world, as the Agrarian manifesto often does, but rather he incorporates and reexamines the rural world's urban counterpart. Here again he proves that the pastoral can extend beyond its typical representations; in *Cane*, the pastoral appears also in that urban world—in its art and music and theater, in its buildings and parks and trees, and most importantly, in its people. In that urban world, Toomer finds the possibility of reconnection and community among people, which leads to a restoration of connections between the spirit, the mind, and the body, as well as between people, the earth, and God. In this extension of pastoral values into the urban world, Toomer is unique. His vision, in its scope and depth and complexity, challenges us to reexamine other versions of the southern pastoral, to call into question our understanding of both the South and the pastoral tradition, and indeed to question our literary categories, as Toomer's rewriting of the South surely enhances and complicates previous definitions of the Southern Renaissance.

In the following chapter, I will consider another poet whose writing also challenges traditional versions of the pastoral. James Dickey, like Jean Toomer and Anne Spencer, initially

found in the southern landscape a kind of haven and place of spiritual renewal, apart from the chaos of the modern world—and especially, for Dickey, the chaos of war, which he experienced firsthand as a bombardier in World War II and the Korean War. Indeed, in his first book, *Into the Stone* (1960), Dickey elevates the southern wilderness to the status of myth; in that landscape, his speakers become Egyptian and Greek gods, physically rejuvenated and spiritually reborn through ritual and entrance into nature's primitive rhythms. In some ways, then, Dickey's initial idealization of the southern landscape shares some similarities with Toomer's initial desire to find authenticity, beauty, and clarity in the South, and his poetry—especially his perfected pastoral poetry, wherein the speaker is made whole again through close contact and even “merging” with the land—also mirrors Anne Spencer's idealized pastorals, like “1975” and “[Earth I thank thee].” Dickey diverges from Toomer's pastoral vision, however, in that he insists upon solitude in the natural world, rather than on community, as the foundation for a perfected pastoral. And Dickey's poetry also diverges from Spencer's work in that his primary pastoral symbols are drawn from an untamed wilderness rather than a carefully tended garden.

However, Dickey's vision of the South-as-pastoral-haven evolves after his first book, as he begins to examine the social problems and injustices of the South more closely; these later poems evince similar concerns to Spencer's and Toomer's damaged pastorals. In later collections like *Buckdancer's Choice* (1965) and *The Strength of Fields* (1979), Dickey confronts the fact that even the South, which was once a tranquil haven and a place of solace, is significantly corrupted by humanity's desire to dominate the land and to hold power over other people. Additionally, these later poems further Dickey's complex and nuanced view of violence. Whereas in Spencer and Toomer, violence is almost always indicative of a pastoral gone awry, for Dickey, violence in nature can be restorative and life-giving (as in one animal's death serving to nourish another, or a dead tree bringing new richness to the soil), but excessive violence, which

seeks not reciprocity and cyclical renewal but rather domination and waste of life, corrupts and damages the perfected pastoral world. One of the central aims of some of Dickey's most ambitious poems, both early and late in his career, is to set these corruptions and injustices right, seeking out pastoral redemption and harmony once again.

## CHAPTER IV

### WILD FOR ORDER: JAMES DICKEY'S PASTORAL POETRY

#### 1. Introduction: Violence and Redemption in James Dickey's Pastoral Work

James Dickey is a formidable poet to bring into any project; during his lifetime, he was well-known, even famous, and, at various times, infamous. His public image was a study in contradictions. He appeared both serious and spectacular, ranging from the successful advertising executive for Coca Cola in the 1950s to the hard-drinking, bow-and-arrow-hunting, football-loving, man's man poet (and those descriptors are very rarely followed by the occupation, "poet," one indication of how difficult it is to classify Dickey). He cultivated an image of himself as a backwoods boy from a poor family, while his biographers note that he grew up in a suburb of Atlanta; for much of his life, he rejected the label of English professor or academic, but of course, he made his home at the University of South Carolina for over twenty years. And all of this without even mentioning that he was Jimmy Carter's choice for inaugural poet, crafting one of the most beautiful epideictic poems for such an occasion.

Additionally, and more to the point, Dickey is a formidable poet to study because of his astonishingly wide-ranging collected work. His poems encompass both the highly-crafted purity of "The Heaven of Animals" and the wild-eyed "shimmering wall of words" dithyramb of "May Day Sermon to the Women of Gilmer County, Georgia, by a Woman Preacher Leaving the Baptist Church," the heart-breaking, redemptive vision of "The Performance" and the disturbingly disconnected speaker in "The Firebombing." And then there are the metonymic banjos that twang in the mind whenever someone mentions his hugely successful novel-turned-movie, *Deliverance*.

But I have selected James Dickey for this project because I believe that at heart, at foundation, Dickey is a quintessential southern pastoral poet. His work continually reflects the ultimate values of the pastoral—those values of connection and community, harmony and abundance—as well as the reasons those values are so vitally necessary. In short, he restores those values to a world that desperately needs them, a world of ecological crises and international conflict, a world steeped in technology which increases our disconnection from other people and from the natural world. Additionally, Dickey belongs in this study due to his time at Vanderbilt; after a year at Clemson, he enrolled in 1946 and received both his undergraduate and graduate degrees from Vanderbilt. He published some of his first poems in the Vanderbilt literary magazine, the *Gadfly*. Though he did not study directly with the Agrarians, their influence and prestige at Vanderbilt remained strong, and undoubtedly he encountered their work and ideals. His own poetry reflects their pastoral concerns, though it also reflects his *rejection* of their idealized rural farmer and cozy home—Dickey’s poetry pushes much further into nature and wildness, searching not for a way of taming and cultivating the landscape, but for a way of completely immersing oneself in the wilderness, of rediscovering the raw natural world far from the constraints and stains and destructive tendencies of civilized society. His poetry, though pastoral at heart, can aptly be characterized as “primitive essentialism,” as Daniel Cross Turner describes it, which he reads as “an ironic reversal of the Agrarian mythos of the South” (37).<sup>32</sup> In Dickey’s poetry we find the impulse to go wild, to live amid the rhythms of nature rather than imposing any of the rhythms or needs of civilization onto nature, and to discover the perfected cyclical order therein.

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<sup>32</sup> Ernest Suarez, too, disconnects Dickey’s work from his Vanderbilt lineage, noting that “Dickey is not considered a latter-day Fugitive or Agrarian, but critics occasionally refer to him as the last in a line of poets associated with Vanderbilt—as a kind of afterword to the Renaissance” (“Toward”).

And so, Dickey's work also disturbs and forces us to question; his ultimate pastoral values, unlike those the Agrarians or even those of Anne Spencer or Jean Toomer, focus far more on the wilderness than on the cultivated garden or rural farm. And in that wilderness we find not only solace and spiritual restoration, but also threat and danger, risk and death. For Dickey, that danger is integral to the full experience, the full connection with the natural world. Unlike Spencer's literary garden, Dickey's natural world is not exactly a haven from suffering or pain—though in some cases it functions as such. And unlike Toomer's discovery of essential pastoral values in community, Dickey finds the source of those ultimate pastoral values first in a solitary relationship with the landscape, in one man's immersion in the natural world. Dickey turns first to the rivers and trees and skies—and to the natural cycles of death and rebirth—and only then can his speakers return to their communities to build stronger, more fulfilling relationships. The natural world is also the place where Dickey seeks out the dead, to question them, to reimagine them, to request their visions and wisdom, and ultimately to reconcile—even if only imaginatively—with them. Finally, Dickey's pastoral not only recognizes but relies upon violence and death—indeed, ritualized violence is integral to his pastoral vision. The transcendence he seeks in his work does not permit us to float above violence and death and agonies and suffering, or to evade them; rather, Dickey's poetry pushes us through the fire to come out the other side, purified, transformed, restored. That transformation, then, redeems the violence of the natural world—it reintegrates humans into those natural cycles, where before they were untethered from them, even severed. And that violence is, itself, redemptive.

This picture of redemptive violence suits especially well Dickey's first few books—particularly *Into the Stone* (1960) and *Drowning with Others* (1962). But then, in his third collection, *Helmets* (1964), and especially in and after his 1965 collection, *Buckdancer's Choice*, Dickey's pastoral vision seems to change dramatically. Certainly his aesthetics shift radically; his

poems change from highly structured verses that rely upon incantatory repetition and a loosely anapestic three foot line, to stanzas that stretch from margin to margin, broken into clauses and fragments by blank spaces, accumulating energy and force and surprise as each line spills into the next. And those later poems not only stretch across the page, but over multiple pages. The difference is positively striking between “The Heaven of Animals,” one of Dickey’s most well-known poems from his 1962 collection, and “The Firebombing,” one of Dickey’s most controversial poems from 1965—indeed, “difference” is too small a word for the utter remaking of his form. And the poet who had been so praised and honored for his work in the early part of the 1960s suddenly faced dramatically different, scathing criticism, not for his newly expansive form necessarily, but for the shift in his content. His work had become, for some, too violent, too unredemptive, too focused on death, too thrilled by war. Certainly, Dickey’s later work forces readers into very uncomfortable situations, overhearing despicable speakers, suffering through tragedy, or driving toward discomfiting absurdities. There seems to be no situation too vile, no place too frightening, no moment too violent, for Dickey’s later poems to explore.

Much criticism of Dickey’s work has thus also split into two—some scholarship focuses on his early work, and some on his later work (both of which will be discussed in further detail in the next section of this chapter). Very few critics bring the two halves of his work together—particularly his work in the 1960s and 70s. And so, we must ask a few fundamental questions, in response to this shift in Dickey’s work and in the critical landscape surrounding it. First, does the shift in Dickey’s work represent a profound change in his vision? Does that shift amount to an abandonment of the restorative, idyllic, ritualized pastoral vision of the first few books? Does the later work emerge in response to some outside force—the changing culture, the new schools of poetry (including the Beats, the confessionals, etc.), the Vietnam War, or, more narrowly, the highly critical response to his poetry? Or is the later poetry an extension of that earlier pastoral

vision into untested, difficult, sometimes almost unimaginable realms? Does the later poetry, so often situated in extreme, corrupted, painful, disconnected conditions, demand to know if those pastoral values of connection and restoration can survive?

Throughout this chapter, I will test out those questions, and I will argue that, despite the seeming gulf between the earlier and later work in both form and content, these poems ought to be read as flipsides of the same pastoral coin. The early poems establish Dickey's pastoral vision, which not only brings us into connection with the natural wild (and always southern) world in order to find spiritual and emotional fulfillment there but also begins to illustrate how that imaginative, restorative connection can bring wholeness and salvation to the worst of situations—death, loss, guilt, fear, blindness, and the chaos of war. In this division between the safe, salvific home-place and the threatening, terrible outside world, Dickey parallels Spencer's pastoral strategies; both poets create a haven in the South against outside forces (though Spencer creates her haven also against the South, as she is fully cognizant of the South's social injustices and violence, whereas it takes Dickey many more years to countenance those problems). Dickey's later poems affirm the necessity of pastoral values—particularly of restoration, reconnection, and reconciliation—by presenting us with the most extreme, most corrupted, most distorted, most disconnected versions of human experience, even and especially those experiences that happen within the South. In this way, Dickey begins to approach the violence, inequality, and destruction that Toomer and Spencer both address—though perhaps because of his position as a white, middle-class man, various critics were far less receptive to his attempts to face up to and deal with the South's painful social divisions. But these later poems that consider the worst of the South in fact drive us to seek out the restoration and reconnection of Dickey's pastoral vision; they *necessitate* it. And that pastoral vision is never absent, even in poems where it seems most unlikely or impossible.

A significant key to recognizing the pastoral through-line in Dickey's work is understanding how he distinguishes different types of violence. Violence in Dickey's work is not a simple, one-dimensional theme; rather, violence has many facets, many sides, and many uses—some of which are integral to a pastoral harmony, and some of which wholly destroy that harmony. The violence of hunting and the death of animals (or of humans) in the natural world, that violence and loss which, in the end, sustains and nourishes, which contributes to the natural cycle of life, death, and rebirth, is very much part of Dickey's pastoral. But the violence of war or slavery, for example, which involves domination, separation from other human beings, lack of respect for the natural world, and excessive use of force and excessive death, is a corruption of pastoral values. The latter type of violence—soulless, brutal, unjust (even in a just war), traumatic, cold—is what creates such extraordinary need for the values of spiritual reconnection with the land, with animals, and with other people. In early poems, Dickey relegates unjust and excessive violence to the realms of war alone, and those realms are consistently found outside the South. The South itself serves as haven and restorative reprieve from excess violence and domination. But in his later work, Dickey begins to explore the results of excess violence in the South's culture and history, as well, especially in the misuse and exploitation of nature, in the history of slavery, and in situations of domestic violence and abuse. The later work provides a far more complex vision of the South, but even there Dickey consistently attempts to right the wrongs encountered in the poems, holding fast to his belief in the pastoral's possibilities for a return to nature, to relationships, and to the divine—in short, holding fast to redemption and restoration.

In this chapter, then, I will first consider the scholarly conversation around Dickey's work more closely, in part to demonstrate that many of the claims about his early work—though they do not explicitly identify his work as pastoral—support my reading of Dickey as a southern

pastoral poet. I will also show that the schism scholars identify between Dickey's earlier work and later work is not as great as it may seem, and that his wild pastoral vision is the through-line to connect the two. I will then closely examine *Into the Stone*, Dickey's first book, as I believe his pastoral vision and foundations come through very clearly in that book. I will focus on several poems that seem to me to "round out" or give the full picture of that vision and foundation. I will then turn to three of the later poems, "The Sheep Child," "Slave Quarters," and "May Day Sermon." I have chosen these poems for different reasons. First, "The Sheep Child" strikes me as the poem most closely connected to the conventional images and tropes of the pastoral, while it simultaneously challenges the pastoral's vision of peace and harmony. Second, "Slave Quarters" evokes the legends of the southern plantation, but it also reveals the stains of racial domination and violence that permeate that history, and therefore it serves as a true test of my contention that Dickey does not abandon his southern pastoral vision even in the face of such oppression. Third, "May Day Sermon" seems to me to be the perfect hinge between Dickey's early and later work—it introduces the corrupting, domineering violence that his later poems face directly, while it simultaneously and explicitly affirms the values of his earlier pastoral. Finally, I will consider Dickey's poem for President Carter's inauguration, "The Strength of Fields," to demonstrate that he did not abandon that early vision but rather returned to it plainly and, in fact, more joyously and wholeheartedly, and that he expands his southern pastoral vision to a national one.



## 2. Critical Overview: Scholarship on Dickey's Work

Criticism of Dickey's work often falls into two categories: critics who emphasize his mystic and transcendental strains, and those who take him to task for what appear to be celebrations of violence and power over others. Loosely, the former critics are those who focus

on Dickey's earlier work (*Into the Stone*, *Drowning with Others*, and *Helmets*) while the latter critics take up his later poems (*Buckdancer's Choice*, *Falling*, *The Zodiac*, and others). While both of these critical camps have their merits, both seem to me to miss the mark—or at least, many of them have omitted the connecting thread between the earlier and later work. Those critics who emphasize Dickey's transcendental approach, for example, tend to gloss over Dickey's very real grappling with contemporary issues of war, racism, and gendered violence. Those who focus on Dickey's use of violence tend to frame it as his celebration of power, rather than understanding the nuanced approach Dickey takes, which includes both redemptive and destructive forms of violence. As Ernest Suarez notes, "Neither viewpoint can account for the Dickey oeuvre and its ideological implications, though each view can be supported by focusing on individual pieces" (*James* 111). In my view, what does account for Dickey's oeuvre is the thread that connects the transcendental and the culturally-situated poems, the celebrations of the natural world and the castigations of human corruption, and that connecting thread is Dickey's sincere belief in the redemptive possibilities of the pastoral, even in the face of war, slavery, industrial agriculture and industrialization, poverty, domestic violence, and other corruptions of humanity and the natural world.

In the first camp (those who view Dickey as a mystical poet), Dickey is considered a "shaman" or a "Chosen Man." In a useful summary, Kirschten explains that Dickey "has been called a 'mystic, a vitalist, a pantheist, an anti-rationalist,' an 'American Romantic,' a comic poet, and much more" (*James*). The underlying definition of Dickey's mystical or shamanic practices, in these reviews, is that the speaker of the poems sets out to connect with another being—an owl, a tree, a dead person, a landscape, etc.—establishes that connection, "exchanges" viewpoints with that other being in order to fully inhabit that being's experience, and then reemerges into the speaker's original place and time, transformed. In his foundational 1966 essay, based on

Dickey's first several books, H. L. Weatherby defines Dickey's method as "the way of exchange," in which the speaker exchanges his viewpoint and experience for that of an "opposite." These opposites may be found "between men and animals...between men who are opposed to each other by nationality, between the living and the dead, between men and trees, and even between men and wrecked machinery" (669-70). This "way of exchange" is a way of creating full connection, establishing a "composite vision" which blends both the speaker's and the object's perception, and then returning to the material world, bearing the wisdom of that encounter.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, critics who see Dickey as a mystic or shaman find in his poems a speaker who longs to connect with the world around him, to "merge" with the landscape, to join in the cycle of life, death, and rebirth of the natural world.<sup>34</sup> In this, Dickey appears to create archetypal, original, universal work, untethered from the cultural or social moment. Laurence Lieberman is one of the foremost advocates for reading Dickey as a mystic who transcends the boundaries of space and time, of individuality and physicality, and certainly of literary heritage or canon, in order to directly reconnect with and redeem the world. Lieberman opens one essay (tellingly titled "The Worldly Mystic") by framing Dickey as an Orphic or messianic figure who "has just returned from the abyss of nonhuman chosen otherness," and who, through his poetry, "reconnect[s] with common unchosen humanity" (65). Lieberman goes on to claim that the aim of Dickey's work is to free himself and others from limitations, in order to "make life-saving connections—all those connections which create the free interchange of spirit between being and being. The word *connect* is the central one in Dickey's new poetry" (66). In another essay,

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<sup>33</sup> Adding to Weatherby's analysis, George Lensing, in his essay, "James Dickey and the Movements of Imagination," elegantly details and demonstrates this pattern of the process of transformation in Dickey's poetry.

<sup>34</sup> Scholars focusing on Dickey's fiction have also focused on the theme of "merging" with the landscape; Casey Clabough has perhaps most thoroughly investigated these themes in his articles on *Deliverance* and *To the White Sea*.

Lieberman elaborates on the empowering results of these connections. He argues that Dickey's poetic persona does not transform into a wholly new being after connecting with animals and immersing himself in nature; rather, the speaker "intensifies and deepens the human self by adding animal powers to it" and "becomes more truly human by realizing and releasing animistic powers recognized to have been inherent in him all along but not available until the fulfilled vision of the later poems" ("James" 128). Weatherby's emphasis on "exchange" and Lieberman's emphasis on "connection" in Dickey's work—between spirits, between people—both suggest that Dickey is a poet of pastoral values, a poet who immerses himself in the natural world to rediscover our fundamental connections with the land, with God, and with others, and to expand our own sense of what it means to be human, both animal and spirit.

Robert Kirschten takes this perspective on Dickey's work perhaps to its fullest extent; his two monographs, *James Dickey and the Gentle Ecstasy of Earth* (1988) and *Approaching Prayer: Ritual and the Shape of Myth in A. R. Ammons and James Dickey* (1998), explore Dickey's redeployment of mythic rituals, rites, images, and rhythms. In his first book, Kirschten explores Dickey's work through four lenses: mysticism, Neoplatonism, Romanticism, and primitivism (a loosely anthropological term that relies on such contested, if still fascinating, works as Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*). Kirschten argues that Dickey's mysticism "emotionally unifies myriad opposites," and his Neoplatonic tendencies "reanimate the classical commonplace of motion and music" in order to revive the past or bring together multiple cultures. Dickey's romanticism enables modern readers to reenter "into nature in both its tranquil and obsessive aspects."<sup>35</sup> And finally, "his primitivism reveals once again the

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<sup>35</sup> The criticism that finds in Dickey a mystic or shaman often sets him apart from other traditions and other poetic strains; generally, these critics do not situate him within any contemporary schools or earlier traditions, with the exception of the Romantics. Arthur Gregor supports Kirschten's reading of Dickey as a Romantic poet, while separating him from his contemporaries, claiming that "the sense of the sacred,

power and value of the ritual component in human experience, especially magical methods of controlling violence” (210). Kirschten’s second book extends this reading further to incorporate more study of Dickey’s “word-magic” and use of ritual and cyclical metamorphoses in several poems, including “Falling” and “Approaching Prayer,” as well as several of his later collections. Kirschten’s analysis places Dickey squarely in the camp of the mystic primitives who seek an ultimate truth beyond language or intellect, who seek a higher level of awareness of our spiritual connection with other living beings, and who rely upon ritual (even ritualized violence and sacrifice) to reach this sacred understanding. These ideals align with the ultimate values of the pastoral, which I have outlined in previous chapters, including reconnection with the earth, spiritual relationship with the natural world, and harmony with others.

Ultimately, each of the aforementioned scholars frame Dickey as a mystical poet, often pairing him with past Romantics—including Keats, Byron, Wordsworth, Whitman, Yeats, and Roethke—those poets who call up the dead, commune with animals, reunite with their ancestral roots, merge their very atoms with the landscape, and know deeply the hearts of trees and rivers and hills. Ernest Suarez sums up this current of critical thought, writing that his advocates emphasize “Dickey’s ability to surge beyond mundane constraints. They feel Dickey’s use of the fantastic brings him closer to a more fundamental reality—‘the primitive stuff of humanity’” (*James* 111).

A second group of critics—focused much more on his later work, especially the long poems of *Falling*, *May Day Sermon*, and *Other Poems* and *The Zodiac*—provides an entirely different assessment of Dickey’s oeuvre. Kirschten explains that more recent reviews of

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fundamental in the great romantic tradition of Western literature but rare in contemporary American poetry, runs—like a beneficent river—through the body of James Dickey’s work.” Gregor adds, “Dickey deals with the magic that results when the observer sees the supernatural expressed in nature, and experiences—is intimately involved in—this transformation” (77).

Dickey's work range "from moral outrage at his use of violence to claims that his poetry is without principle or purpose" (*James* 209). They are particularly scathing about what they see as a celebration of violence in his poetry. This violent strain in Dickey's work seemed particularly egregious and offensive at the time of the Vietnam War, when many other poets were writing anti-war protest poetry; thus, Dickey seemed to them to be out of step with his cultural moment. This group of critics cannot place Dickey in a particular tradition or school, either, and this lack of relationship to other poetic traditions, along with Dickey's violent imagery and seeming lack of social conscience, fuels their rejection of his subject matter. Daniel Cross Turner writes that Robert Bly, Allen Ginsberg, and others in what Dickey called "the New York literati" were "particularly offended by what they believed to be Dickey's regional failings, his presumed racism and love of violence, including warfare, especially his refusal to condemn the politics behind the U. S. war in Vietnam" (24).<sup>36</sup>

Additionally, as Suarez argues—and his argument is persuasive, if also obvious from a later vantage point—the reason that critics rejected much of Dickey's later, more absurdly or surreally violent work (poems like "The Firebombing," "Falling," and "The Sheep Child") is that they failed to distinguish between Dickey himself and his poetic personae. Steeped in an age of confessional poetry, wherein the lines between the poet and the speaker became ever more blurred, these critics often presumed that Dickey's poems arose directly out of experience, unfiltered, and that the speakers' thoughts and beliefs reflected Dickey's own political and ideological positions. Suarez writes, "Dickey's detractors claim that his bourgeois sensibility results in socially irresponsible poetry that advocates hedonism and violence." Additionally, they found his work "symptomatic of an unreflective, sensationalistic willingness to ignore social

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<sup>36</sup> I will consider Robert Bly's scathing critique, "The Collapse of James Dickey," at more length later in the chapter, before discussing the more complex corrupted pastorals, "The Sheep Child," "Slave Quarters," and "May Day Sermon."

realities. To such critics, Dickey represents the reactionary escapism of the plantation novel, laminated with a myopic glorification of the self” (*James* 111). Linda Mizejewski’s review of *The Zodiac* reveals this perspective of Dickey as a confessional poet even in her title, “Shamanism toward Confessionalism: James Dickey, Poet,” and she finds his later work wanting because he tried to keep up his “actor-poet” persona, his shamanic act, while delving more deeply into personal concerns and traumas. She writes, “Juggling with materials that he does not want to play confessionally, Dickey slips in his act and is finally unable to achieve the distance of the public, acting figure” (411). Though Mizejewski does not seem to find Dickey’s later work in poor taste, as critics like Bly did, she still finds it lacking in Dickey’s usual technical brilliance and poetic power. And that lack stems directly from the mismatch she finds between his public persona and personal confessions. It is often difficult to see the line between Dickey and his personae (especially in poems that take up the perspective of wartime pilots, as Dickey himself flew over one hundred bombing missions in his tenure), and yet, the overall body of his work points to his adoption of multiple masks and his experimentation with multiple different voices.

And even more to the point, Dickey’s poems about the excessive violence of war, the oppression and exploitation of slavery, or the destruction of the natural world are simply not celebratory. “The Firebombing” may explore the speaker’s feelings of power as he napalms a village, but the overall impression left by the poem is distress and sadness—distress that the speaker can’t feel more guilt, that he was sent to do such awful things and was then expected never to speak of them again but instead to find some measure of anesthetized happiness, banal pleasantries, in suburban life, and sadness that we have asked our soldiers to keep our freedom, and our freedom ends up looking like a pantry full of bland canned goods, and not something more meaningful. Similarly, poems like “The Sheep Child,” “Slave Quarters,” and “May Day Sermon,” as will be discussed later in this chapter, do not rejoice in the devastation, exploitation,

and domination they portray. Rather, they emphasize the need for restored connections with the landscape, between people, and to God. Thus, I argue that this second camp misreads Dickey's intentions in his later work—that his seeming celebrations of violence are actually sly ways of condemning such violence and our glorifications of it. Dickey's work dealing with war and violence is far from unconscionable; it is in fact a desperate call for redemption and restoration to wholeness and connection.

One of the best and most important studies of Dickey's work is Daniel Cross Turner's chapter in his 2012 book, *Southern Crossings*. He takes into account both schools of thought on Dickey thus far by separating the early work (especially *Drowning with Others*, Dickey's second book, published in 1962) from the later work (especially *Falling, May Day Sermon, and Other Poems*, published in 1981, though many of the poems in that book were included in his collected *Poems: 1957-1967* as the final section). Initially, Turner describes Dickey's early work as “exhibit[ing] an essential faith in the overwhelming restorative force of merging with the natural world, a power often made manifest in scenes of primal violence and sexuality,” which can “lead to transcendence of the material limits of human experience” (23). Turner names this faith in transcendence Dickey's “primal memory” or “primitive essentialism.” However, he believes that in his later work, under the pressures of urbanization, late capitalism, the Civil Rights movement, and the Vietnam War, as well as the critical attacks on his work from the “New Left,” Dickey rejects his earlier primitivism and instead parodies it.

Turner's study is certainly the most compelling reading of the shift in Dickey's aesthetics, as well as the most sophisticated in terms of his understanding of the interactions between Dickey's work and his cultural moment. And I certainly agree that Dickey's early work displays a faith in the values of the natural world and a desire to merge or connect with that world in order to seek out transcendence of both human limitation and stifling social and cultural

restraints. However, I depart from Turner's analysis in that I do not read his later work either as parody or as rejection of those earlier values; rather, I read it as representing the opposite extreme on the continuum of pastoral values. In fact, I see those later poems as a reiteration of the necessity of those values of connection (what I have called in Toomer's work the ultimate values of pastoral, and what I will continue to call them here). Additionally, I find it a bit false to say that Dickey reacted to the outside world (of criticism and/or of cultural pressures) only in his later work; to be sure, his first book, *Into the Stone*, wrestles mightily with several of his wartime experiences (or at the very least, images from the war captured by and filtered through his poetic lens). That book also works through grief and guilt over the death of his first brother, the brother who had died before Dickey was born, and without whose death he may not have been conceived. Thus, Dickey's early work also countenances outside forces and pressures; the threads of the disrupted or corrupted pastoral—those disruptions caused by excessive, domineering violence and inexplicable loss—are already very much a part of Dickey's first iterations of his pastoral vision, and, as I have argued earlier, those disruptions create the need and the desire for the spiritual fulfillment found in the natural world. Dickey's first book already establishes both the crying need and the answering call.

Additionally, viewing Dickey's overall body of work as pastoral makes it possible to realign the earlier and later work along a spectrum that stretches from idealized pastoral to corrupted pastoral. In the earlier work, Dickey establishes a binary between the idealized pastoral of the southern wilderness—a perfected pastoral of "home"—and the corrupting forces of excess violence and domination at work abroad, during the war. Mythologizing the South as a haven is, perhaps, one way to heal from the psychic traumas of war, to recover a safe place, even if it is imaginary. (This strategy bears some similarity to the haven that Anne Spencer creates in her literal and literary gardens, where she finds some safety apart from the violence and discord of

racial and gendered inequality.) But in his later poems, Dickey begins to delve more deeply into southern history and outside perceptions of the South, recognizing that it is not—nor has it ever been—a wholly uncorrupted, idyllic world. (And again, here, his work parallels Spencer’s damaged pastoral poems, which also countenance the violence and suffering of black people and women in the South and beyond.) This turn, from idyllic southern pastoral to corrupted southern pastoral, can also be described using Svetlana Boym’s categories of nostalgia, restorative and reflective, discussed further in the introduction to this project. Restorative nostalgia, according to Boym, “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home,” and it “does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition.” Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, “dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity.” In sum, “restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt” (xviii). Thus, Dickey’s early work, in *Into the Stone* in particular, can be read as a manifestation of restorative nostalgia, a transhistorical construction of a primitive, abstracted, idealized world that stands as the site of spiritual, universal truth. But these later poems turn toward reflective nostalgia, discovering the impossibility of returning to an ahistorical or transhistorical South, a South that never existed, a South that was always full of ambiguities and problems, racial and gendered violence and oppression, much more akin to the historically situated world of war that Dickey began to explore in his first book. Thus, Dickey’s oeuvre is not so distinct as many critics would have it, and neither is Dickey’s later work only parodic of his earlier work. Rather, the poems as a whole represent an evolving conception of the South as a pastoral landscape—from a purified haven to a world disrupted, even corrupted, by human domination and exploitation.



### 3. *Into the Stone and Other Poems*: The Perfected Pastoral Circle

James Dickey's first book, *Into the Stone and Other Poems* (1960), opens on a prophetic, haunting promise, an explicit effort toward transcendence and hope: "All dark is now no more." This line, the beginning of "Sleeping Out at Easter," casts its light over the book as a whole—*Into the Stone* is (among many other things, including the introduction of James Dickey's most persistent themes) a book that seeks out hope and restoration through connections to the natural southern landscape, as well as in connections with animals and other people, both dead and living. These themes are (perhaps surprisingly, given their different circumstances) very much in line with Spencer's idealized pastoral, reflected especially clearly in her poems "Substitution," "1975," and "[Earth, I thank you]." In "Sleeping Out at Easter," Dickey asserts a belief in the redemption and unity of all things, in the reconciliation between the natural and the human, between the material and immaterial. The final poems of the book, "Into the Stone" and "The Landfall," also promise the same kind of reconciliation and hope. Both poems end on the word "love," and both poems turn the depicted union between the speaker and a woman into literal birth, metaphorical rebirth, and, ultimately, salvation. In the fulfillment found in the union between a man and a woman, amid the reconciliation with the land and the divine, Dickey also reflects Toomer's major themes in *Cane*. For both Toomer and Dickey, women often represent a chance at physical, emotional, and spiritual fulfillment while simultaneously offering a chance to merge with the bounty and beauty of the southern land itself. The distinction between the two, perhaps, is that Toomer depicts pastoral fulfillment found first in relationships with people (not just women) which then opens his characters up to the world around them; Dickey, on the other hand, searches first for a sincere connection with the landscape, and only later completes the pastoral fulfillment in building relationships with others.

And yet, also as in Toomer's *Cane*, many of the poems in Dickey's first collection between "Sleeping Out at Easter" and "The Landfall" complicate this salvific pastoral mythology. The most obvious complications—even oppositions—to Dickey's pastoral are found in the sections titled "War" and "Death, and Others." The violence witnessed and reported (or reimagined) in the former section clearly runs in opposition to the cyclical, redemptive violence of Dickey's pastoral, and those poems cry out for rescue, reconciliation, and transformation. The poems in "Death, and Others" also mourn the losses of those taken too soon, unjustly, and the speakers in those poems attempt to trade places with the dead, to understand the loss from every angle, and to eventually, imaginatively, redeem those losses. (Again, here, Dickey reflects Spencer's and Toomer's damaged pastorals—these poems of extraordinary violence bring to mind Spencer's "White Things" and Toomer's "Blood-Burning Moon," while the poems of loss and mourning are reminiscent of Spencer's "For Jim, Easter Eve" and Toomer's "November Cotton Flower," though it is not until much later that Dickey will countenance this kind of violence and loss in the South itself.)

But other poems, too—even those in the sections titled "Family" and "Love"—sometimes refuse reunion and demonstrate poignantly and terrifyingly the gaps between the living and the dead, between one human and another, between humanity and the land, between the spirit and the body. In these poems, the hunger for union and wholeness becomes clear and central—the need for such a redemptive vision in "Sleeping Out at Easter" and "Into the Stone" is fully established. Thus, darkness, blindness, suffering, loss, and death take center stage in several of the poems, but they do not negate Dickey's pastoral vision. Rather, they render that vision of the restorative southern landscape entirely necessary. And these poems are not without the hope of the pastoral vision; they, too, gesture toward it even in the worst of circumstances. The imagination of the speaker strives toward perfecting what is ruined, reconnecting what is broken,

revitalizing what is dead. Imagination in this book, then, is the restorative force; it is the core of Dickey's pastoral vision.

Below I present a diagram (Fig. 2) to illustrate the pastoral vision begun in Dickey's first book, his effort to redeem all damaging corruptions and reincorporate them into a perfect pastoral circle. Dickey is, perhaps ironically, absolutely wild for order. As he writes in his collection of essays, *Self-Interviews*, his central poetic concern is

the relationship of the human being to the great natural cycles of birth and death, the seasons, the growing up of plants and the dying of the leaves, the springing up of other plants out of the dead leaves, the generations of animals and of men, all on the heraldic wheel of existence. (68)

What is inside the circle is part of this heraldic wheel, part of the perfected pastoral, the idealized and redeemed southern world toward which most of Dickey's poems strive. What is inside the circle is also, for many reasons, abstracted; it is difficult, after all, to study the details of history or the particulars of the South and maintain the perfected vision of this world. What is outside the circle, then, are those details or forces that threaten to disrupt Dickey's pastoral, those forces which he gradually begins to face more directly in his later work.

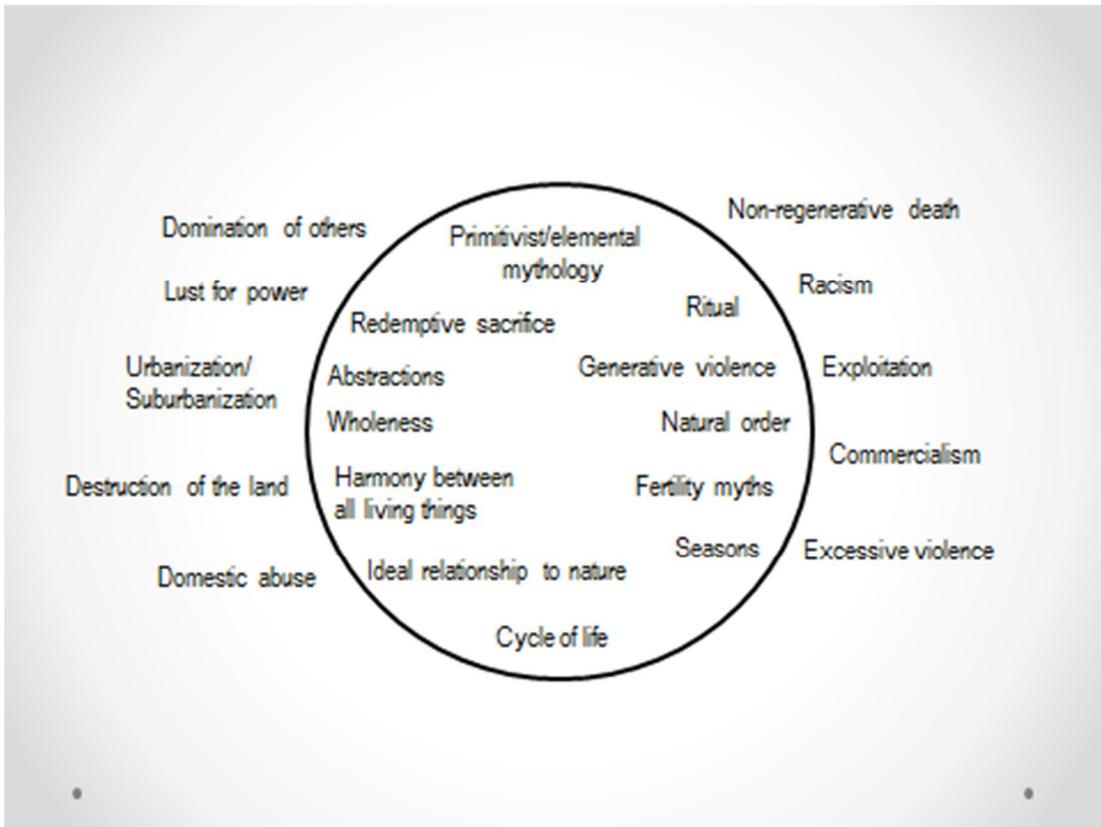


Figure 2. Dickey’s Perfected Pastoral Circle and Outside Corrupting Forces

In this section, I will consider one poem from each of the four sections in the book. The four sections are titled “Family,” “War,” “Death, and Others,” and “Love,” but, as even the brief analysis above shows, these titles only loosely categorize the poems, and indeed, the themes indicated by the titles spill out and over the boundaries of these sections. Thus, poems that evoke love and kinship are found in the sections on death and war, while death and loss appear repeatedly in the sections on family and love. Perhaps this spilling over, this tangling of themes, is inevitable; certainly the intertwining of death and life, love and loss, demonstrates the “old Dickey theme” of transcendence and pastoral connection, of violence redeemed and the redemptive nature of violence. By examining closely four poems—“Sleeping Out at Easter,” “The Performance,” “The Other,” and “Into the Stone”—and discussing others along the way, I

hope to fill out and demonstrate the nuances of Dickey's original pastoral vision, his perfected circle, the foundation from which later poems grow, and the lens through which Dickey's work as a whole should be read.



The situation of "Sleeping Out at Easter" is far from dramatic; the poem considers the briefest moment of dawn, after a man who has been camping out one spring night, wakes up to find that his army blanket is not yet covered with dew, and his right hand, which had been buried beneath him while he slept, has fallen asleep and just now begins to tingle as the blood returns. And yet, Dickey transforms this simple, mundane moment into a psalmic, nearly holy meditation on the restoration found by reconnecting with the natural world, as well as the resurrections enacted by writing itself. Throughout the six incantatory, echoing stanzas, the speaker awakes to find the earth transforming itself, magnetically pulling in the light, illuminating the speaker and revitalizing his vision. The first stanza paints the world as emerging from darkness, renewed:

All dark is now no more.  
This forest is drawing a light.  
All Presences change into trees.  
One eye opens slowly without me.  
My sight is the same as the sun's,  
For this is the grave of the king,  
Where the earth turns, waking a choir.  
*All dark is now no more. (37, 1-8)*

The first several lines of this stanza emerge as pronouncements: single, end-stopped lines that leave no shadow of doubt, no darkness at all. These pronouncements, made more emphatic by the fact that the first two syllables of each line are both stressed ("All dark," "This forest," "All Presences" "One eye," "My sight") and by the incantatory anapestic rhythm, evoke the voice of a prophet; they have near-biblical strength. And Dickey enforces that sense of the prophet-calling-

out-of-the-wilderness by positioning the speaker multiply in this first stanza. The speaker is not only on the ground, witnessing the world's transformation into daylight, but the speaker is also the center of this world, ritually reenacting the resurrection of Christ, and immersing himself in the world's renewal. (The title, of course, is the first indication of this mythic ritual; "Easter" leaves little doubt that this poem will center on that archetypal resurrection.) The speaker does not claim to be the generator of this renewal, but he is deeply and profoundly part of it; in his ritual of sleeping out the night before Easter, he replicates that first Christian resurrection. Additionally, the speaker can see from the sun's perspective, as well. Ronald Baughman notes that the "play on 'sun' suggests that the narrator has gained the sight of the Son of God as well as nature's source of light and life. He achieves not only a union with nature...but also a perception of the creative source of life" (28). He sees from the sky, from the ground, and through the forest, as those mysterious "Presences"—are they ghosts? Angels? Spirits?—change back into their earthly, material forms. Though the speaker rests in "the grave of the king," he also views the world from the height of the sun—and through the eye of God—and so his vision is total, all-encompassing.

In the second stanza, Dickey adds more to the sensory experience of the world's reawakening, as his speaker reawakens with it, and he deepens the connection between the physical and spiritual worlds. First, "Birds speak, their voices beyond them / A light has told them their song" (9-10). Even these birds reach out beyond the material world, reconnecting with intangible, spiritual symbols—their voices do not come "from them," but are rather "beyond them," from "a light," and the reference to that light again points us back to the godlike eye of the sun in the first stanza. In the following lines, Dickey pushes this reconnection further, uniting the animal, human, and spiritual worlds:

My animal eyes become human  
As the Word rises out of the darkness  
Where my right hand, buried beneath me,  
Hoveringly tingles with grasping  
The source of all song at the root.  
*Birds sing, their voices beyond them.* (11-16)

The fusion between worlds is not only described but embedded in the verse's syntax. The "animal eyes become human" while simultaneously "the Word rises out of the darkness," and in that parallel Dickey establishes relationship between physicality and spirituality. But the next lines push that relationship further, where the speaker's "right hand" becomes the fulcrum, the central link, between darkness and light, death and life, between animal, human, and spirit. To parse the verse's sentence steals away much of its beauty, but it does help to reveal more clearly the complexity of this pastoral melding between wilderness, speaker, and divinity. The speaker's hand was in darkness and "dead" (asleep, literally, but also "buried," and so metaphorically connected to the world after death), and at this moment of dawn, it begins to "tingle," to awaken with the resurrection of the "Word." The Word is, of course, the Christian symbol for both creator and created, for the spoken language that brings the world into being, and for the divine breath that gives life. The "Word" also directly connects the physical and spiritual worlds, as this symbol also represents the embodiment of God in Christ.<sup>37</sup> And Dickey's use of the "Word" (rather than Christ or other names for the embodiment of God) also establishes the link between the physical and the spiritual in *language*. Syntactically, the speaker's hand and the Word rise simultaneously from the same darkness; they are more deeply connected than simply parallels for

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<sup>37</sup> In using "the Word," Dickey makes reference to the opening of the Gospel of John, thus reinforcing the argument that in this poem one of Dickey's primary aims is to reconnect the spiritual world to the physical, to see spiritual rebirth in a physical reawakening, to embody divinity in earthly things. John 1:1-5 (NIV) reads, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it."

one another. The next lines reinforce that connection, as well. In the somewhat awkward adverb, “hoveringly,” Dickey places the speaker’s hand between worlds—between the dark earth and the resurrected spiritual world, between “the root” and “the song.” The hand pulls the “root” of “the source of all song” into the light—that hand, then, is the link between land and people and God. The repetition of the first line of the stanza at the end endows it with further significance, and it ties the speaker more closely with the world around him and with the intangible mysteries. If the speaker grasps the source of all song, even the song of the birds, then he has grasped both the physical world’s beauty and the mysteries of the beyond, and he has envisioned the connections between those worlds in writing—language, like the hand, is the lynchpin.

In some ways, it seems that the second stanza should be the conclusion of the poem—it has already melded worlds and gestured toward transcendence; it has already connected the intangible to the tangible. But the third stanza interrupts that transcendence. In some ways, Dickey introduces doubt and hesitation in this verse; in other ways, though, he begins to permit his transcendent vision room to grow and strengthen. The stanza begins with an odd command, seemingly disconnected from what came before: “*Put down those seeds in your hand*” (17). Italicized, this line (like the others which have been italicized throughout) seems to come from out of the blue, perhaps from God. It seems to know what the speaker (and the reader) doesn’t: that there are seeds in his hand. Where did they come from? What are they? And yet, this line does connect to the previous stanzas, as it draws attention back to that hand that was so crucial in the second stanza, the hand that linked worlds together. This awakening hand, it seems, has more power than Dickey gave it in the second stanza—it contains the germs of new life, the seeds of “trees” which “have not yet been planted” (18). The speaker, though, hesitates here, considering what has not yet happened, perhaps doubting that it will, speaking in the conditional:

A light should come round the world,  
Yet my army blanket is dark,  
That shall sparkle with dew in the sun.  
My magical shepherd's cloak  
Is not yet alive on my flesh. (19-23)

The light that was so transformative in the first and second stanzas, the light that taught birds to sing and changed murky forms into trees, is here not yet fully present. Significantly, it has not yet reached the speaker's "army blanket"—and that image serves as a harbinger of Dickey's later poems about war, wherein light is often hard to find, and must be imagined in order to transform the scenes of devastation into scenes of hope.

That Dickey, two lines later, transforms that army blanket into a "magical shepherd's cloak" is a strong indication of this poem's pastoral nature—this evocation brings together soldiers and shepherds, and indeed changes soldiers *into* shepherds. Thus the pastoral here does what Paul Alpers, in his thorough study, claims it does—its conventions bring people together under the tropes of this genre or mood (Alpers uses the etymological root word of convention—"convene"—to make this case), and it allows poets to speak (even to sing) and to recreate themselves as shepherds. And yet, in this stanza, arguably the nadir of the poem, that transformation has not happened yet. The speaker awaits it, hopes for it, but does not yet find it "alive" as a physical reality; it is not yet part of the "flesh." And so, at the conclusion of this stanza, the repetition of that first line, "*Put down those seeds in your hand,*" becomes all the more important (24). The command now makes more sense, as it directs the speaker to begin to *enact* that transformation, to do the planting (or the writing) that is necessary to grow the transformed world.

The fourth stanza is wholly italicized, and it seems to come in its entirety from a divine voice beyond the speaker. It speaks in the second person, and in part, this stanza reads as a

command to the poet himself—it reads as semi-mystical instructions for writing poetry, for creating Dickey’s pastoral vision:

*In your palm is the secret of waking.  
Unclasp your purple-nailed fingers  
And the wood and the sunlight together  
Shall spring, and make good the world.  
The sounds in the air shall find bodies,  
And a feather shall drift from the pine-top  
You shall feel, with your long-buried hand.  
In your palm is the secret of waking. (25-32)*

Here again, Dickey makes the speaker’s hand central to the pastoral vision. It is no mistake that the hand of the planter is the hand of the poet, that the hand that plants trees also composes language. Both acts “make good the world.” Both acts create growth and life, and both strive for transcendence over death. Held in the “purple-nailed fingers” are the sources of life—from that clasped hand comes both “the wood and the sunlight,” metonyms for earth and spirit. After the speaker’s hand opens, and the renewal of spring has begun (no accident Dickey’s doubled meaning of “spring” in this stanza), then “the sounds in the air shall find bodies.” In this line, Dickey parallels the revelations of light with the clarifying power of language; much like the way that the sunlight brought the trees back clearly to vision and illuminated the singing birds, the written language gives “bodies” to the sounds in the air. Language, too, gives shape and form to sound—and it can illuminate or create restorative connections between the physical and spiritual realms. Thus, in the speaker’s hand which both plants and writes, Dickey finds “the secret of waking.”

Only in the fifth stanza does Dickey’s speaker begin to consider his return to other people; in Dickey’s pastoral, the person must find union with the landscape and the animals first, in order to restore the connections between the soul and nature, and only then can that person

reconnect with other people. Having heard the voice of the divine and understood the full flowering connections between all living beings, having seen the revelations of the dawn and understood how to again “make good the world,” the speaker finds himself raised from “the king’s grave,” resurrected, and “turn[ed]...to light” (33). And so, the speaker now turns homeward. He imagines a woman awaiting him at the window, seeing him “huddled and blazing,” in that shepherd’s cloak now illuminated by the dawn (35). And he imagines his child, still asleep, dreaming the song the speaker has heard the birds sing, with such finely tuned hearing that he can listen to the song even “in the egg of a bird” (37). And the child’s dream, too, draws connections, as the sun speaks to him through the dream, and tells him “that song / Of a father returning from darkness” (38-9). In this stanza, too, the first line is repeated at the end, and now the line seems addressed not only to the speaker but to his child, as if the spiritual, salvific light that has transformed the speaker will also transform his family: “*For the king’s grave turns you to light*” (40). Thus, in this stanza, Dickey’s pastoral vision has nearly come full circle—the wilderness has been resurrected by the dawn, and that resurrection has awakened and restored the speaker, has given him access to mystery and transcendence. And now, the speaker can return to his family, to the world of other people, carrying that momentary transcendence back to his relationships, restoring and enriching them as well.

What is perhaps most compelling about this poem is how it hovers over, lingers on, even dwells in the precise moment of transformation—from darkness into light, from sleep into waking, from uncertainty to clarity, from fragments to wholeness. In part, Dickey accomplishes and underscores this hovering through the poem’s structure, particularly through the repetition and return of whole lines which, in different contexts, accumulate meaning. This repetition occurs in each stanza; the first line is always also the last, sometimes verbatim, sometimes slightly changed, and occasionally lines from previous stanzas appear again later. The sixth and

final stanza, once again entirely italicized, is a collection of lines from the previous stanzas, reworked and woven together:

*All dark is now no more.  
In your palm is the secret of waking.  
Put down those seeds in your hand;  
All Presences change into trees.  
A feather shall drift from the pine-top.  
The sun shall have told you this song,  
For this is the grave of the king;  
For the king's grave turns you to light. (41-8)*

Perhaps this kind of repetition seems like overkill, hammering the reader over the head, exclaiming, “Here is transcendence! Transcendence!” Certainly critics like Peter Davison have noted that, in Dickey’s first few books, several poems “leave the reader with the feeling that the poem has begun at the wrong place, or ended too late, after the reader’s attention has already been used up” (47). And it is true that the poem could have ended after almost every stanza and still driven home its point of pastoral renewal and revitalization. And yet, in the case of this poem, the repetition underscores the ultimate aim of the pastoral in Dickey’s work—that all beings, in an idealized world, will be connected. And repetition enacts that connection. It brings together previously disparate pieces of the poem, resituating them, deepening and expanding their meaning, enabling readers to see them united in a new context.

The final stanza, through repetition, is a union of all previous stanzas, creating the crowning pinnacle of the poem’s connected pastoral. It creates its own condensed cycle, moving from darkness and death to light and rebirth. For example, the first line again attempts to banish the darkness (but still evokes darkness by including the word “dark”) and the final line of the stanza succeeds, ending on the word “light.” These last eight lines distill the pastoral vision into

its purest form thus far. Peter Davison's comment on Dickey's overall body of work seems particularly relevant to this stanza:

Dickey's work is a search, in a sense, for heaven on earth. He seeks order and resonance in the inchoate...[in order] to discover some sort of relation between the human and animal worlds, a bridge between the flesh and the spirit, and, more than these a link between the living and the dead. (46)

Taken as a whole, "Sleeping Out at Easter" is one of the single clearest representations of Dickey's perfected pastoral vision; he positions this poem deliberately as the first poem in his first book. It creates the light that will shine through all other proclamations.<sup>38</sup> This poem shows no doubt, no hesitation, in establishing the pastoral vision of consummate connection with the earth and its cycles, as well as with the spiritual world accessed through those cycles. Dickey's other poems in *Into the Stone*, while they set out to explore different facets of human life, including some of the darkest, most troubling, most jarring and inhumane moments, still seek out the vision of this first poem, this genesis of Dickey's southern pastoral. Like Anne Spencer's "1975," "Sleeping Out at Easter" is, in some ways, Dickey's *ars poetica*, his own creation myth—the creation of his poetic world, the creation of his vision, and the creation of himself as a poet.

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<sup>38</sup> This poem is still printed first in the selected poems from *Into the Stone* in his collected *Poems, 1957-1967*. However, "May Day Sermon" serves as a prologue in that later collection; it is printed first, apart from all the other poems. This reordering may represent a shift in the way Dickey wanted readers to view his poems; Joyce Carol Oates believes this shift means that "Dickey does not want the reader to enter the world of *Into the Stone* with the innocence he himself had entered it; that celebration of forms is all about outshouted by the eleven-page sermon" (84). Even so, I would argue that "Sleeping Out at Easter" still represents the clearest-eyed version of his ideal pastoral, and that this vision should influence the way we read his later work, including "May Day Sermon," in part because I do not think it can be argued that *Into the Stone* only represents innocence or a simple celebration of forms. *Into the Stone* also attempts to wrestle with darkness, violence, suffering, and death. That kind of wrestling makes "Sleeping Out" all the more important and essential in understanding Dickey's efforts toward transcendence. And, as will be discussed later in the chapter, "May Day Sermon" in fact reinforces Dickey's pastoral vision and does restore a kind of innocence to the poetic world it creates, despite its explicit, gory violence.



The poems that follow “Sleeping Out at Easter” venture into murkier territory. One poem countenances the near-loss of a child, as his father waits in the hospital for signs of his recovery; another considers a boy laying at the edge of a well, imagining his dead brother’s face there in the water, wondering if they might exchange places and faces; another meditates on the legacy of that dead brother in his talent at making string constructions on his hands, now passed down to the speaker’s son. These poems are much grimmer, but they make a continual effort to return to the ordinary vision of “Sleeping Out.” They strain toward life, toward relationship, toward healing and reunion. Disturbing as they are, they focus their energies toward restoration, even when that restoration is in doubt (or even when it seems impossible, as in the reconciliation between the speaker and his long-dead, never-known brother).

The final poem of the first section, “The Vegetable King,” mirrors the situation of “Sleeping Out at Easter” in several ways; the speaker is again sleeping outside one night in the spring, participating in a ritual that brings about the renewal of the earth. Alone, the speaker reconnects with the natural world, leaving his wife and child indoors, and in the morning, he returns to them, restored and ready for a stronger, more fulfilling relationship with them. But “The Vegetable King” is not simply Dickey’s “Sleeping Out: Redux.” Rather, this poem continues the course of the book—its descent toward death, before the restoration of the final section—and in so doing, it extends Dickey’s pastoral vision to encompass the darker, more difficult aspects of that vision, including sacrifice and violence. In “The Vegetable King,” Dickey reveals the shadow side of “Sleeping Out at Easter.” This poem examines the long, dark night of violent sacrifice required to come to the point of restoration. In some ways, then, Dickey expands his perfected pastoral in this poem, creating a fuller image of the natural process of death and rebirth.

For much of “The Vegetable King,” Dickey focuses on the violence necessary in redemption. And so, it may be closer to the heart of Dickey’s pastoral vision—the sum total of it, rather than simply the perfected part of it—than “Sleeping Out” can be. Dickey’s “heraldic wheel” requires death and life, sacrifice and rebirth, for the completion of his pastoral world. But I would also point out that Dickey’s placement of this poem, at the conclusion of the first section rather than the beginning, is intentional—it is only after the joy and celebration of “Sleeping Out at Easter,” only after the promise of the resurrection and rebirth of the world, that one can gather the courage to face the long night of violence and suffering. Additionally, “The Vegetable King” serves as a bridge between the hope of the first section and the impossible agonies of the second section, titled “War.” It again offers hope of renewal, but it allows reader to begin to contemplate the role of suffering and death in this world, as well as to consider the differences between the kinds of sacrifice and death that restore the world, and the kinds of sacrifice and death that are unnecessary, wasteful, tragic, without redemption. “The Vegetable King” is therefore an essential poem in understanding the entirety and the logic of Dickey’s pastoral vision, which stands in stark opposition to the needless and destructive violence in the poems on war which follow it.

As Robert Kirschten, among other critics,<sup>39</sup> has pointed out, many of Dickey’s poems reference fertility myths. Kirschten finds that the “dialectic” of sacrifice and renewal “pervades many mythological narratives that depict the death and resurrection of divinities.” Kirschten highlights “The Vegetable King” specifically, noting that the speaker “dreams himself into the eternity of a natural cycle” (xvi). In “The Vegetable King,” the fertility rite is central, and Dickey emphasizes the fertility myth of Osiris, the Egyptian god murdered and dismembered, and only restored by Isis’ tears which flood the Nile each spring. Dickey spends substantial time on the

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<sup>39</sup> See also Laurence Lieberman, “The Worldly Mystic,” and Dave Smith, “The Strength of James Dickey.”

requisite and eventually redemptive violence in this myth. Indeed, the poem's narrative begins in deepening evening, rather than in the renewed morning, and Dickey spends most of the stanzas in the darkness, in the speaker's disturbing dream that unites him with the "chosen man / Hacked apart in the growing cold / Of the year" (33-5). The speaker, imagining himself as "the drowned god," brings back the "red, the blue, / The common yellow flower out of earth" (31-2). These lines seem promising, hopeful, but Dickey suspends the moment of his return to wholeness throughout the poem, remaining instead in the broken, agonized darkness of death. Initially, he does not picture himself as resurrected with the springtime. Rather, he walks more like a ghost through "a woman's rooms / Where flowers on the mantel-piece are those // Bought by his death" (39-41). The sacrifice, it seems here, is total; the speaker has given his life to and for the world. And his resurrection is suspended further in the next several stanzas; he refuses to move beyond blinking for a long while in the morning, contemplating the renewal that he has participated in and experienced:

I would not think to move,  
Nor cry, "I live," just yet,  
Nor shake the twinkling horsehair of my head,  
  
Nor rise, nor shine, nor live (48-51)

Eventually, the speaker recognizes that he must return to the house, to his family, to "a human love / Cherished on faith through winter" (58-9). That love has survived the winter, has survived death, and will sustain him. And yet, even in the final three stanzas, even after the speaker has returned home, that death lingers, hovers, balances next to life carefully. In the penultimate stanza, Dickey's speaker asserts, "I am in death / And waking. Give me the looks that recall me" (66-7). Breaking the line on "death" emphasizes just how present the chill of death remains; the human connections will "recall" him, continue his waking into rebirth, but the cycle is not

complete without that memory of death. Thus, Dickey's vision does not ever fully escape the sacrificial death that restores life; rather, because that death remains close, hanging in the balance, the domestic life of "flowers upon the table, and milk" is sweeter, dearer, richer.

Ronald Baughman argues that in some of the poems in this first collection, Dickey's "attempt to defeat death through love achieves success." But in other poems, "when he moves to nature," as in "The Vegetable King," "he again seems uncertain about whether forces of life or death prevail in him" (8). While the effort to transcend death is clearly present in Dickey's work, particularly in an idealized pastoral like "Sleeping Out at Easter," I would argue that Dickey also recognizes the necessity of death as part of this natural pastoral cycle, that death and violence in the natural world are a key part of his pastoral vision—they are a redemptive, rather than a destructive, force. Therefore, *both* death and life prevail; together, like shadow and light, like night and day, they create the wholeness of his vision. What is perhaps surprising is that very few scholars, with the exception of Peter Monacell,<sup>40</sup> have connected the use of fertility myths to the pastoral in Dickey's work. However, I think it is plain that the restoration of the human spirit in connection with the renewal of the earth is a central part of the pastoral ideal, and that Dickey's poems in this first collection—particularly "The Vegetable King"—argue for a return to the natural order, where death regenerates life, where winter gives way to spring, where rot and decay nourish the newest blooms. Those images are central in understanding Dickey's pastoral of redemptive violence.



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<sup>40</sup> Monacell astutely connects the fertility rites to pastoral, though he spends much of his article arguing that Dickey's work, especially "The Firebombing," represents the "death of the pastoral" or an "antipastoral elegy," mourning the loss of empathy for others due to warfare nature and the loss of connection with the wilderness because of the domestication of the landscape in suburbia. All these points about "The Firebombing" are quite valid, but I think the pastoral is actually alive and well throughout much of Dickey's work, including the later, much darker and more complex poems, which I demonstrate in subsequent sections of this chapter.

The distinctions between Dickey's disparate portrayals of violence become clear further into the collection. The fact that some violence—like the violence of fertility rituals, the death and rebirth in the natural order, the violence of the predator-prey relationship—is redemptive and generative is plain from his poems in the first section. And that redemptive violence is made even clearer through the contrast Dickey creates with his poems on the domineering, isolating, horrifying violence of war. The war poems do strain toward relationship, connection, and redemption—particularly through the repeated use of circular images (in enclosures, rings, coins, the moon, and the sun)—and Dickey's imaginative leaps occasionally offer solace. However, nowhere in these poems does the restoration and hope of "Sleeping Out" or "The Vegetable King" appear. As in Spencer's deeply disturbing poem "White Things" or as in Toomer's equally disquieting sketches "Karintha" or "Becky," the absence of restoration makes the deaths portrayed irredeemable and purely awful. And in Dickey's poems like "The Enclosure" and "The Performance," the disconnections, sacrifices, deaths and pain are rendered hollow, devastating, even meaningless. Dickey, like Spencer and Toomer, portrays excessive and unjust violence as entirely destructive, far outside the realm of the idealized pastoral.

For example, the section's first poem, "The Enclosure," portrays a pilot, on the way to his aircraft, who sees a group of Philippine Island nurses in a compound, behind a closed, guarded fence. That image of the women stays with him, and as he flies, he imagines them trapped, like "prisoners," "whisper[ing] in panic unto us / To deliver them" (55, 22-3). He cries with lust for them, alone in the cockpit. He continues to dream that the women, sleeping under their mosquito netting, can hear his cry, his voice, "inmixed" with the thunder of the engines, though he is flying away from them, west, toward "the thunderstruck mainland" (49). The pilot, described alternately as a man in a "kingly chair" and a child carried off by the engines, is plainly exhausted by the war. In the cockpit, he hides his face in his hands, as "the drained mask fell from [his]

face” (14). It is also plain that he longs for some kind of connection, some kind of relationship; his detailed dream of the women, in their trembling, gauzy nets, with their floating, “light-worthy” hair, amply demonstrates that longing. And yet, despite his desire for restoration and connection (or perhaps because those desires are so palpable throughout each stanza), this poem is particularly desolate and lonely, especially in contrast to the poems analyzed above. In this poem, for example, there is no renewed morning—there is only the night through which the pilot flies, and the moon to accompany him. There is no salvific earth, no birds and trees; the only description of the land we have is that of the “sand-dust at our backs,” near the “sick-tents” and the “nailed wire” of the enclosure. And here there is no return to home, to the South, to family, to joy; the pilot is “a man...suspended above them” (27), “a man sat away in the moonlight” (45). In the air, the pilot is separated, severed from those below, both enemies and friends, and far away from the salvific southern landscape. Throughout most of the poem, the tone and the images create a scene of desolate disconnection, an insurmountable loneliness.

In the final lines of the poem, the pilot does land, and he does connect—but that connection is disturbing, unclear, perhaps violent, perhaps brutal. Later, “at peace” and in the passive voice, the speaker explains that he was “led” to “shuck off [his] clothes” (55) and “To pray to a skylight of paper, and fall / On the enemy’s women / With intact and incredible love” (62-4). The speaker’s language attempts to render this moment of connection with “the enemy’s women” as desperately beautiful, even reverent, some kind of fulfillment of his desires described throughout the poem. But simultaneously, the language betrays that beauty and reverence, countering any sense of solace or sincere relationship. The pilot, for example, prays to a flimsy skylight, a weak substitute for and a barrier to the marvelous night sky above the speaker in “The Vegetable King,” which in that poem is full of “sparkling animals of light” and “gods / Which move through Heaven” (61-3). Additionally, after the speaker’s prayer, Dickey breaks the line on

“fall,” and so emphasizes multiple connotations of that word—not only physical descent (frightening enough for a pilot), but also a spiritual “fall from grace,” an echo of original sin. That “fall,” so spiritually ruinous, is on multiple women—just as the speaker does not distinguish between the many women in the enclosure, so he does not distinguish between these “enemy women,” either, which, in a more generous reading, may indicate that he sought sexual union with many of them, and, in a less generous reading, suggests that these many sexual encounters are indistinguishable, merely physical, with no emotional connection or depth of feeling. Even in the final line, which attempts to equate the fall with “intact and incredible love” and so redeem the speaker, the language betrays him; the adjectives here are muddy at best in their meaning. An “intact” love may be one that is whole, not shattered by wartime experiences, but an “intact” love may also be a love that is not shared, a “love” that is one-sided. “Incredible” betrays the speaker further; while an “incredible” love may suggest an amazing love, it may also mean that this love is, simply, “not credible,” not to be believed. Thus, though the language here does offer multiple interpretations, these final lines cannot evade the hints and suggestions of rape. And rape is the ultimate perversion of relationship and connection.

“The Enclosure” leaves little doubt that, from departure to flight to landing, the experiences of war are horrific, unredeemable, filled with death and the violence of domination. The violence Dickey portrays in his poems about war—from bombings to beheadings to rape—is not the redemptive violence that is so much a part of his natural, idealized pastoral. It does not have a restorative function; it is only destructive. And it is not only destructive to those wounded or killed; several poems illustrate just how deadening and deadly the war is for all involved, including soldiers and survivors.

While it may seem almost too obvious an argument to make—Dickey’s war poems demonstrate the horrors of war by illustrating the kind of violence that leads to no redemption—I

make the argument because I believe these war poems serve two essential functions in this book, and in Dickey's oeuvre as a whole. First, they serve as the counterpoint, the diametrical opposite, of Dickey's restorative pastoral. They illustrate the world without salvation, without connection, without the natural world's perfected wholeness, without spiritual solace and regeneration. Additionally, the lack of redemption in these war poems—all of which take place abroad—underscores the fact that Dickey finds solace and salvation only at home, in the southern wilderness, the site of his perfected southern pastoral. Finally, these war poems make Dickey's pastoral vision *imperative*—they demonstrate just how necessary that pastoral of renewal is in a world otherwise filled with chaos and unredeemable, almost unspeakable violence. They illustrate the desperate need to return home, to the South, to its natural cycles of death and rebirth, to its mythic, consistent rhythms. Indeed, Dickey's pastoral vision enables us to reconsider even violence, by resituating it in its proper place, as a part of the great "heraldic wheel," with regenerative power and therefore with meaning.



Perhaps the most devastating poem of all Dickey's war poems in this first collection is "The Performance," though it is also the poem that comes closest to transcending the trauma, desolation, and meaninglessness of war. Its transcendence comes from the friendship depicted between the speaker and the central figure in the poem, Donald Armstrong, as well as from the speaker's transformative imagination, which draws on pastoral myths of renewal and rejuvenation. And it comes, too, from Dickey's remarkable techniques of lineation and structure. In its use of transcendent imagination and redeeming structure, Dickey's "The Performance" parallels Spencer's pastoral strategies in "Substitution," supplanting the awful reality with the rejuvenated imagined world. In the first four stanzas, Dickey's speaker narrates his memory of "the last time [he] saw Donald Armstrong," at sunset one evening on the Philippine Islands (59,

1). These stanzas present a strange mix of emotions—affection and humor tinged with fear and foreboding.<sup>41</sup> For example, the first stanza opens:

The last time I saw Donald Armstrong  
He was staggering oddly off into the sun,  
Going down, off the Philippine Islands.  
I let my shovel fall, and put that hand  
Above my eyes, and moved some way to one side  
That his body might pass through the sun (1-6)

Here, Dickey's diction and syntax create a portentous scene; the phrase "the last time," of course, foreshadows imminent loss, and Armstrong's "staggering oddly off" makes him seem both vulnerable and shaky, not at all well. And the modifier, "going down," interrupts the sentence, a bit out of place, so that it seems to apply to both the sun and to Armstrong. And of course, "going down" is no good phrase for a pilot. The speaker's actions are as yet unclear, but following these ominous lines, the pause he takes, letting his shovel fall and offering something akin to a salute, seems very much like something done out of respect for the dead. Dickey reinforces the reader's fear in the final line, referring to Armstrong not as a man but as a body, and as a body that passes. Indeed, without the context of the next stanzas, this opening reads as both mournful and frightening.

The second stanza begins with the same kind of ominous note: "I saw how well he was not" (7). But Dickey abruptly changes the scene, adding humor and surprise:

I saw how well he was not  
Standing there on his hands,  
On his spindle-shanked forearms balanced,  
Unbalanced, with his big feet looming and waving

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<sup>41</sup> Dickey achieves in this poem the "strongly mixed emotions" he endeavored to reveal in his poems; he remarks, "What I have always striven for is to find some way to incarnate my best moments—those which in memory are most persistent and obsessive. I find that most of these moments have an element of danger, an element of repose, and an element of joy" (qtd. in Kirschten, *James*, 2).

In the great, untrustworthy air  
He flew in each night, when it darkened. (7-12)

The sense of foreboding is not exactly dispelled in this stanza, either—Armstrong is still “unbalanced” in the “untrustworthy air” into which he will fly only a few hours later, “when it darkened.” But the speaker’s affection for Armstrong is clear, and his gentle ribbing—of Armstrong’s “big feet looming,” his skinny “spindle-shanked forearms”—seems kind, and brotherly, and funny. The third stanza replicates this mixture of affection and threat. Again, the landscape enters, just briefly, to remind us of its barrenness: “Dust fanned in scraped puffs from the earth” (13). And Armstrong’s blood, going to his head, “turned his face inside out,” but only as if to “demonstrate its suppleness / Of veins, as he perfected his role” (14-16).

Abruptly, though, in the third stanza, the foreboding threat becomes real. Dickey shifts from this memory to describing the very next day, when Donald Armstrong was executed by beheading, and buried in a grave “he had dug for himself, under pressure” (25). The death is horrible; Dickey’s description is spare, stark, ghastly. He describes Armstrong’s head, for example, which “rolled over upon / Its wide-eyed face, and fell / Into the inadequate grave” (22-4). In his execution, there is neither magic, as there was in Armstrong’s performance, nor respect for him, as the speaker showed earlier; here, “the enemy’s two-handed sword / Did not fall from anyone’s hands / At that miraculous sight” (19-21). The writing of Donald Armstrong’s death is the lowest, darkest point in the book as a whole; it is certainly Dickey’s starkest representation of the tragic waste and horror of war.

And yet, in the concluding four stanzas of this poem, Dickey transforms this horrific moment of Armstrong’s execution, relying on his imagination to restore those values of the pastoral—delineated in “Sleeping Out at Easter” and “The Vegetable King,” in particular—to this scene. In essence, the final four stanzas of the poem attempt to redeem this violence through

human connection and relationship, through a magical transformation of the landscape, and through full restoration of Armstrong's dignity. After the speaker learns of Armstrong's beheading, "months later," he pauses again, putting his hand to his brow (again the gesture of salute), and imagines the scene differently, triumphantly:

[I] imagined him, there,  
Come, judged, before his small captors,  
  
Doing all his lean tricks to amaze them—  
The back somersault, the kip-up—  
And at last, the stand on his hands,  
Perfect, with his feet together,  
His head down, evenly breathing,  
As the sun poured up from the sea (29-36)

This imagined scene mirrors and transforms the earlier scene; here, Armstrong again performs, but now, he is not awkward, "unbalanced," struggling while the blood rushes to his head. Instead, he is "perfect" and "evenly breathing," in full command of his body and his actions. He is not a joke, but rather a dignified soldier performing "all his lean tricks." Thus, in these lines, Dickey restores to Armstrong his dignity and his agency. His captors are "small" compared to his large heart, his amazing control, his pure self-possession. And though it is a very small moment, it is important to note the description of the sun, here, "poured up from the sea." This image also mirrors and transforms the first stanza—indeed, it is turned upside-down, as if to demonstrate that Armstrong's perspective is the right one, the clarified and knowing one.<sup>42</sup> Upside-down, Armstrong sees the sunset as a sunrise, the sun changing direction and moving up into the sky, beginning a new morning. Thus, quietly, subtly, Dickey again introduces the restorative themes

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<sup>42</sup> For this reading, I have extended Linda Mizejewski's eloquent and compelling analysis; I am certainly indebted to her understanding of Armstrong's inverted vision as the perfect one. In her essay on Dickey's later work, *The Zodiac*, she refers back to "The Performance," naming it Dickey's best and most memorable poem (418-19).

of “Sleeping Out” and “The Vegetable King”—this dark moment, now transformed in the speaker’s imagination, will lead to renewal, to salvation.

In the penultimate stanza, Dickey reinforces the presence of these renewing pastoral values by portraying the executioner as someone deeply moved by Armstrong’s valiant, elegant performance:

And the headsman broke down  
In a blaze of tears, in that light  
Of the thin, long human frame  
Upside down in its own strange joy (37-40)

The executioner and Armstrong share in the same light—and in fact, again through subtle, brilliant craftsmanship, Dickey has made Armstrong the *source* of the light. In this inverted world, the sun pours up from the sea and from Armstrong himself; no longer does his body “pass through the sun,” as in the first stanza, but rather the light radiates from him. The headsman reflects Armstrong’s “strange joy” and light in his “blaze of tears.” Additionally—perhaps astonishingly—Dickey also transforms this scene through humor, returning to and mirroring the brotherly affection he creates in the early stanzas. He imagines Armstrong’s tricks as so perfect, and the executioner as so bewildered and amazed, that, if he had not been corrected, the headsman might “have cut off the feet / Instead of the head” (42-3). In this small joke, seemingly so out of place, Dickey reinforces the connection built between Armstrong and his executioner; they share an oddly joyful moment, similar to the humor and surprise that appeared amid foreboding in the earlier stanzas. Lieberman elucidates the importance of this connection, explaining, “Armstrong’s acrobatics transform the killing relation between them into a saving relation, a forgiving relation. Both souls are saved” (“James” 109-10). The human connection, the restoration of relationship—as in Dickey’s pastoral poems—is the final fulfillment of pastoral

redemption. Thus, not only has Dickey transformed Armstrong's death into something regenerative and meaningful, he has also remade this act of violence into a redemptive one, and Armstrong stands in the place of those figures of sacrifice, fertility, and restoration, a Christ or Osiris figure.

Dickey confirms Armstrong's place as a sacrificial, redemptive king in the final stanza, when Armstrong returns his feet to the ground,

In kingly, round-shouldered attendance,  
And then knelt down in himself  
Beside his hacked, glittering grave, having done  
All things in this life that he could.<sup>43</sup> (45-8)

Dickey's use of the adjectives "kingly" and "glittering" are, of course, no mistake; the words echo the speaker and the sky in "The Vegetable King" directly. They connect Armstrong again to the fertility myths of the king who dies to restore the earth, and is himself restored. Dickey hints at Armstrong's salvation in the phrase, "knelt down in himself," which is a description not only of surrender but also of contemplation and spiritual centering. Additionally, Dickey has transformed the grave from one that was earlier described as "inadequate" to one that is now "glittering." It is, finally, not a happy ending—the "hacked" grave reminds us of the terror Armstrong suffered, physically digging his own grave. As Robert Kirschten notes, most of Dickey's poems, even the most ecstatic, retain their hold on pragmatic reality (*James* 3). But the speaker's imagination—and Dickey's careful crafting—has infused the wretched, devastating reality of Armstrong's death with subtle, rejuvenating glimmers of a restorative pastoral vision. "The Performance," therefore, is a poetic act of imaginative restoration, of pastoral renewal. It calls upon natural imagery,

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<sup>43</sup> This line marks another of Dickey's recurring themes—the sense of a life completed, doing all that is possible in an earthly life. Dickey's poem for Carter's inauguration, "The Strength of Fields," to be discussed later in this chapter, ends with an echo of this early poem's conclusion: "My life belongs to the world. I will do what I can" (50).

human connection, and the archetypal myths of sacrifice and rebirth in order to restore one of the most tragic and disturbing moments in all of Dickey's oeuvre.



The following section, "Death, and Others," returns to Dickey's home, the wild and natural spaces of the American South, its forests and backyards and sun-bright fields, and the memories of a childhood spent on marshes and in the woods. The speakers are no longer pilots fighting overseas, but instead they are men at home, men who reflect on the losses of friends and family members. But in reflecting upon these deaths in poems such as "Uncle" and "The Other," discussed below, Dickey again stirs up his pastoral vision; as in "The Performance," that vision works its way into the darkest, most unbearable, most confounding moments, in order to seek some redemption from loss, to find meaning and restoration *in* that loss. In these poems, Dickey comes nearest to Spencer's sustaining pastoral vision in poems like "For Jim, Easter Eve" and "Requiem," wherein she, too, finds solace and reconciliation in natural images and metaphors.

For example, in the section's first poem, "Uncle," Dickey portrays a dying man, struck down with pain, with "punishing fires" in his joints. The uncle wants to dance, to throw aside his cane, to sway with and stamp on the ivy that overtakes his yard. And in the speaker's vision, that dance would be the victorious, transcendent dance transforming him into "a human fire-works," or "the Great Bear dancing in heaven / in broad daylight, for joy" (21-3). (The reference to the constellations, here, echoes the transcendent experience of the speaker in "The Vegetable King.") But the pain is too much; the earthly body breaks down and keeps the uncle from his spiritual liberation and his literal connection with the natural world. Instead, he is forced into a contemplative dance, a different kind of union with the "ravenous" growing world; from his seat, he must watch the ivy creep toward his house, imagining his communion with *its* dance, as it takes over the walls and windows and rafters. But the speaker takes the uncle's contemplation

one step further; drawing again on the pastoral vision of a spiritually fulfilling union with the natural world, even (or especially) in death, Dickey creates the uncle's ecstatic transcendence over pain and suffering and toward wholeness and joy. In the final stanza, the ivy lifts the uncle's bed—"his marriage- and death-bed," the bed that represents multiple phases of his life—into the air, raising him toward the sky. And the uncle now swings and dances; the natural world makes this last joyful act possible. In the final lines, he is fully transformed, resurrected:

The leaves rise up in his eyes,  
And he may be sitting there saying  
A word as alive as an angel's  
*Increase, increase, increase.* (53-6)

His parting gift to the world is a blessing; he, too, assumes the role of the sacrificial king, resurrected, and restoring abundance to the world. The leaves, the sign of new growth and expanding life, are now fully connected to him, *within* him, rather than outside and separate. And as in "Sleeping Out at Easter," the "word" is what makes this restoration possible; the incantatory repetition of "*increase*" brings life back to the world. Thus, in this poem, Dickey reinforces the pastoral pattern established throughout the collection, in what initially appear to be widely disparate poems. A poem about camping out, a poem about the death of a fellow soldier, and a poem about an uncle dying all trace the same pattern of darkness and loss recreated as light and rebirth, enacted by or through the central mythologized figure of sacrifice and redemption. The speaker of "The Vegetable King," Donald Armstrong, and the uncle carried off by ivy each, in Dickey's vision, redeem the violence, chaos, and unjust losses of the world.

The centerpiece of this section, "The Other," also follows and reinforces this mythic, redemptive pattern. In this poem, Dickey returns to memories of childhood, and particularly to his struggle to make sense of the death of his older brother, who died before Dickey was born,

and without whose death Dickey may not have been born. The ghost of his brother haunts many of the poems in this first collection, including “The Underground Stream” and “The String.” In “The Other,” the adult speaker returns to his child self, “holding onto myself by the hand,” guiding him once again through his difficult, awkward transition from “rack-ribbed,” boy to a muscled, powerful man, a “bull’s heavy, bronze-bodied shape.” And the adult speaker also guides his younger self through his complicated relationship to his angelic, godlike ghost of a brother, revealing the meaning of the lessons his brother brought to him that the younger self could not understand. In this poem, Dickey adds to his personal mythology—his speaker serves as the hero on his journey, the brother as the sacrificial king and the spiritual guide—and he connects that mythology directly to the pastoral world. The speaker and the angel-brother meet in the woods, a pure place away from the interruptions of others, in autumn, that season between the full bounty of summer and the death-chill of winter. This seasonal landscape symbolizes their intertwined lives: the speaker, growing into the vibrant summer season of his life, and the brother, returning from winter’s grave, meet in the middle. The wild forest is, once again, the place of spiritual reconnection and restoration; the brother’s return, and the ethereal songs he plays on the harp, serve as signals to the young boy that he should look beyond his physical self, that he will find peace, rest, and love in the connection with the natural and spiritual world. Thus, “The Other” is one more representation of Dickey reimagining an inexplicable loss in order to incorporate it into his elemental, restorative pastoral mythology of sacrifice and redemption.

The opening stanzas of the poem enact the speaker’s return to his younger self, recalling his desperate wish to become a man, to “raise up a man’s shape upon me” (72, 11). In order to transform his “chicken-chested form” into a man with “the breast of a statue” and “armor-cast shoulders,” the boy swings his “too-heavy ax-head” over and over again, throwing all his weight and effort against a “great, dead tree.” This desire to grow, to build muscle, is rooted, it seems,

not just in vanity, but in a kind of competition with his dead brother, or at the very least a desire to impress him. In the third stanza, the brother appears, “a king-sized shadow / Who looked at me, burned, and believed me : / Who believed I would rise like Apollo” (19-21). The brother encourages him, believes in him, but also overshadows him. This overshadowing is reinforced in the next few stanzas; Dickey leaves the description of the younger boy swinging his ax, and he turns instead to focus wholly on the angelic, astonishing brother. The next time that the young boy is mentioned, he is again, literally, in shadow. The brother, meanwhile, descends to the younger boy, leads him to his house, and, “With a great harp leant on his shoulder, / [He] began in deep handfuls to play it” (29-30). In that music, the brother recreates and reconnects the world—connecting spirit to body, land to people, God to earth. Dickey’s diction for the music encompasses all directions, all of life and death. Indeed, the word “up” appears three times in five lines, a surge of “ups” to contrast with and overcome the constraints of the physical world:

A sail strung up on its spirit  
Gathered up in a ruin in his arms,  
That the dog-tired soul might sing  
Of the hero, withheld by its body,  
Upsprung like a magical man

To a dying, autumnal sound. (31-36)

Though everything appears dead or dying, as “leaves stood everywhere within falling,” the music conjures restoration of the “ruin,” rejuvenation of the “dog-tired soul,” and resurrection of the “magical man.”

Two stanzas later, this ecstatic vision of everything reconnected reaches its apex, echoing the incantatory conclusion of “Sleeping Out at Easter” in its promise of vibrant, unified resurrection:

Reason fell from my mind at a touch  
Of the cords, and the dead tree leapt  
From the ground, and together, and alive.  
I thought of my body to come;  
My mind burst into that green.  
My brother rose beside me from the earth,

With the wing-bone of music on his back (44-50).

In these lines, Dickey again draws the circle of his vision that encompasses decay and new green life, the natural and the spiritual world, the mind, the spirit, and the body. However, the adult speaker recognizes new meaning that the younger speaker has not yet realized. The young boy believes he can thwart mortality with an Apollonian set of arms or a bronze statue's chest, but he misses the point of this moment of reconnection and restoration. The essential key to immortality is the eternal, cyclical nature of life. This perfected moment of rebirth ("my mind burst into that green") occurs not because the speaker has developed mighty arms, but because the brother has given his body to the earth and is now able to return, like "The Vegetable King's" Osiris, restored and kingly and luminous. In the final stanzas, the speaker returns to his present-day, older, and wiser self, and sees the lesson he missed when he was young—and even regrets all the energy spent building up his muscle. That powerful body, he mourns, is only "a creature to keep me dying / Years longer" (72-3). Meanwhile, "the light, looming brother but more / Brightly above me is blazing" (67-8). And his brother's message, his music, spilling from trees in "utter, unseasonable glory, is finally clear:

Telling nothing but how I made  
By hand, a creature to keep me dying  
Years longer, and coming to sing in the wood  
Of what love still might give,  
Could I turn wholly mortal in my mind,  
My body-building angel give me rest,  
This tree cast down its foliage with the years. (71-7)

This final stanza illustrates Dickey's rededication of himself to the pastoral vision of a perfected cycle of life, death, and rebirth, and to a vision of connection between the natural and spiritual worlds, a connection built of love. The angelic brother sings of what that love "still might give," if the speaker will venture back in memory and forward in his life to discover it. But he will only discover that love, that union between body and spirit, nature and God, if he stops fighting against mortality and instead demonstrates a willingness to surrender to the cycle—to cast down his leaves, to rest, finally, and to "turn wholly mortal"—and in that surrender, to find reconnection, redemption, and resurrection. And so, in this poem, Dickey also attempts to come to terms with his brother's death, reimagining it not as an unjustifiable loss, but rather as a restorative myth. In so doing, he transforms his brother from an unknowable stranger or an insuperable competitor into an intimate spiritual support and guide. The brother's death, once inexplicable and guilt-inducing, is now reincorporated into Dickey's perfected, harmonious circle.



In "The Other," Dickey reclaims the death of his brother and reconnects his brother to himself and to the world, and so this poem serves as a precursor to the next section, "Love." Throughout this section, Dickey's speakers return to the land of the living, and they return from the redemptive but isolated pastoral of the wilderness to enter into relationships with other people. Specifically, these poems explore erotic and intimate relationships between men and women. Very often, these poems depict the speaker and his intimate other separated by some gulf or chasm, and the poem tracks their movements towards one another, towards wholeness. These reunions mostly take place in an unbounded, elemental landscape, far from civilization and its conflicts, industry, urbanization, and so on. This kind of union in an untainted pastoral landscape is, of course, reminiscent of the efforts and desires of Jean Toomer's narrators especially in the

first section of *Cane*; his male characters go to the rural South seeking some kind of ultimate connection to the land through spiritual and sexual connection with women like Carma and Fern (though in Toomer's work, this kind of union is often thwarted by the various intrusions of a harsher reality, including violence, sexual abuse, fears of miscegenation, and intellectual separation).

For Dickey, too, the connection between the speaker and his beloved is very much a part of the mythic pastoral world; in part, that connection is the ultimate fulfillment of that mythic world, its goal and conclusion, and in this last section, he ensures that no harsh reality prevents that union. In these poems, Dickey focuses more on building his own personal mythology, replete with his now familiar symbols of initial isolation and eventual redemption and fertility—shadows, blindness, the moon, the water, light, birds, song, angels, circles and centers. Some of the poems in "Love" strain toward the primal, the mythic, the universal, the abstract—and this straining tone, this selection of abstract words and vague images, alerts us that we are back in Dickey's elemental circle, the circle of harmony and redemption and the natural cycles of death and rebirth. This elevated language is markedly different from the poems which confront specific instances of injustice, loss, or fear; the poems about loss dwell primarily on the specific, the detail, the concrete object or particular image, even as they try to make sense of those instances and reincorporate them into the "heraldic wheel."

The poem which stands as the clearest representation of Dickey's vision of love as the final redeeming and restorative force in his pastoral is "Into the Stone." "Into the Stone" is to Dickey's final section what "Sleeping Out at Easter" is to his first section; both poems emblemize one particular facet of Dickey's pastoral vision. In "Sleeping Out," as discussed earlier, the speaker's relationship to nature is restored, made holy, and it sustains him in his return to human relationships. In "Into the Stone," the speaker's relationship to a woman he loves

provides the restorative, redemptive force that enables him to overcome doubts, losses, and fears, and even to transcend death.

The very title of the poem (also the title of the collection, perhaps for this reason) incorporates implications of both death and rebirth. The implications of the phrase “into the stone” are multiple. For example, what goes “into the stone” are fossils, creatures or natural objects forever embedded in stone and thus in a way memorialized. And epitaphs, too, are etched “into the stone,” and those stones are reminders of the dead, monuments honoring and commemorating them. But those things that are etched into or embedded into stone also survive in perpetuity, perhaps even eternally, and so what goes “into the stone” may live—in history, in imagination, in the world’s record. And, of course, Dickey also refers to the moon in this title, that stone emblem that presides over this collection. As Ronald Baughman explains,

When stone imagery is related to the moon, it usually announces the poet’s rise beyond the world of death and loss; when it is on the earth or in water, the stone often represents the boundary separating the worlds of life and death, the boundary through which one must pass, as in “The Underground Stream.” (27)

In “Into the Stone,” both meanings are present—the speaker does push through the boundaries between death and life, dark and light—but its emphasis is primarily on the moon as emblem of transcendence and union, the “rise beyond the world of death and loss.” In this poem, the moon—gathering the energy of daylight, reflecting it gently back to earth—symbolizes the ultimate guide through the darkness, the lamp that pulls us out of the night and into the resurrection of morning. The moon is also, archetypally, a feminine symbol, as well as an emblem that unites earth and sky, its gravitational pull moving the waters, and the earth’s pull

holding it in thrall, in its orbit.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, Dickey plays on the fact that the moon always has two sides, one dark and one light, contained in the same “stone.” Therefore, the moon is a symbol of sexual union, the joining of day and night, and the connection between the dead and the living.

Overall, “Into the Stone” is the heraldic wheel in motion—the poem as a whole turns over from night to day to night, from life to death to rebirth, from earth to moon to earth. And the force behind that circular, circulating motion is love. In fact, each stanza is a microcosm of that turning wheel; the opening stanza establishes this pattern:

On the way to a woman, I give  
My heart all the way into moonlight.  
Now down from all sides it is beating.  
The moon turns around in the fix  
Of its light; its other side totally shines.  
Like the dead, I have newly arisen,  
Amazed by the light I can throw.  
Stand waiting, my love, where you are (1-8)

This poem begins with the heartbeat of a living speaker, a heart so alive and fully surrendered that it reaches into and up to the moon—the first sign of a connection between the earth and the sky, between the speaker and the natural world. The moon, then, returns that rhythm, that pulse, drenching the speaker in his own heartbeat. The motion of the first three lines illustrates the kind of unifying movements that establish connections throughout the poem—those connections that establish the foundation of Dickey’s pastoral. The following two lines connect light and dark in the moon’s single sphere; on one side, it is dark, but it “turns around in the fix / Of its light” and the other side “totally shines.” Then, Dickey moves toward metaphorically connecting and reuniting the living and the dead, as well as introducing his pastoral “heraldic wheel” of death and

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<sup>44</sup> Ronald Baughman, Howard Nemerov, and Joyce Carol Oates, among others, have noted the central significance of moon imagery in Dickey’s work.

rebirth. In this stanza, the speaker is “like the dead,” but in later stanzas, the dead are more closely connected, more present, and they are resurrected through the speaker and his living, loving body. Thus, the first stanza establishes the patterns of connecting motion, relationship, and reunion that will continue to recur throughout the rest of the poem.

In fact, every stanza of “Into the Stone” travels through a tiny cycle of life, death, and rebirth; the poem creates a wheeling motion as it circles through these phases and weaves them more tightly together. In this way, Dickey creates a kind of teleological helix—the poem spirals upward, repeating its circular path but wending its way closer to the ultimate moment of restoration, just as the speaker continues to walk toward the woman, moving closer to love’s ultimate fulfillment. As a further example of this spiraling pattern, in the second stanza, the speaker moves “amazed” across the land toward the woman, and that motion, that impending union, both suspends death and resurrects the dead: “No thing that shall die as I step / May fall, or not sing of rebirth” (14-5). Again in the third stanza, Dickey traces the circle, connecting life and death through the imagery of day and night more closely; the speaker comes through “the fire of the sun, dead-locked / With the moon’s new face in its glory” (17-8). The day, with its fire and its “dead-lock” on the moon, is less glorious than the morning of “Sleeping Out” or “The Vegetable King”—in fact, it appears menacing and dangerous. But in this poem, the moon, like the sacrificial gods of earlier poems, receives the day’s fire and transforms it to glory, so that the speaker and the world can be reborn into a new, more brilliant morning. With this promise of transformation, basking in the moon’s glory, the speaker experiences another moment of rebirth: “I am he who I should have become” (19). And this rebirth is echoes and repeated in the world around him, just as it has been in Dickey’s other poems of pastoral renewal: “A bird that has died overhead / Sings a song to sustain him forever” (20-1).

In the fourth stanza, Dickey reflects on previous encounters with this natural cycle of life, death, and rebirth, which may well be a reflection on previous poems wherein he attempted to enter into that cycle and see its completion—to fully experience renewal and rebirth—but only caught a piece, a shadow or a glimmer, of that full circle. “Each time,” Dickey repeats, “the moon has burned backward. / Each time, my heart has gone from me / And shaken the sun from the moonlight” (25-6). In these lines are moments of failure—the moon waning and turning its face away, taking its promise of new and gentled light with it, and the speaker’s heart is not filled or received, instead casting a shadow over the moon, erasing that light of transformation. But the conclusion of the fourth stanza, and the entire last stanza, demonstrate the reason for these previous failures—the missing element of love. Dickey’s final lines return to his prophetic, incantatory voice, signaling that here he is rounding out his myth of transformation:

The dead have their chance in my body.  
The stars are drawn in to their myths.  
I bear nothing but moonlight upon me.  
I am known; I know my love. (37-40)

Even more than the conclusion of “Sleeping Out,” in which the natural and spiritual worlds are knitted together through repetition, these four concluding lines of “Into the Stone” represent the apex of Dickey’s search for wholeness and connection—between people, between people and the land, between the living and the dead, between the spirit and nature and the body. The speaker again stands in the place of a Christ or Osiris figure, a pastoral redeemer, in whom “the dead have their chance.”

But the transition from “The Vegetable King” is important to note, here—the speaker is no longer “in death / And waking,” asking those close to him to “recall” him fully. In these lines, he is fully awake and alive, resurrected and embodied, the dead resurrected with him. He is

Christ risen but yet in the flesh; he is Osiris restored to his body and bearing with him the return of spring. And he is not solitary, but united with all those who were lost to him in death; they connect to him so intimately that they are part of his body. The natural world, too, is restored to order out of chaos; the stars, “drawn into their myths,” are newly aligned. Their placement, within myth and story, signals the return of reason and meaning to the earth and sky. And with this return of order and clarity, the speaker’s burdens are lifted. All those burdens of death and disconnection, of suffering and guilt, of confusion and isolation, which accumulate through tragedies of war and family losses and which Dickey reveals throughout the collection—all these are redeemed and relieved in these four lines, if only temporarily. For this moment in the collection, the speaker bears “nothing but moonlight,” the gentlest and easiest of lights to bear, the light which does not scorch or burn. The reason for this redemption is made plain in the circular, reciprocal final line: “I am known; I know my love.” In this line, Dickey completes his pastoral vision with full realization of the element partially missing from other pastoral poems—love. That love represents full connection and understanding between himself and another human being, and that reciprocity, that mutuality, completes the circle. The preceding stanzas, with their microcosms of life, death, and rebirth, have their telos in this line’s perfect circle of love and connection.

Thus, “Into the Stone” completes the cycle of the whole book, as well as the search for total renewal, for full relationship, for spiritual and physical fulfillment. With its mystical reconnection of a woman and a man in the center of a reordered, patterned natural world and a redeemed spiritual world, this poem is Dickey’s most hopeful, most promising assertion of his pastoral vision. Baughman observes that “Into the Stone” represents

an unusually optimistic examination of love; normally Dickey’s treatment of all aspects of what he calls the “man-made world” is fraught with emotional strains and complexities

[that] primarily result from his speakers' struggles for meaningful survival. Yet in the nature-centered universe Dickey finds a source for genuine spiritual wholeness, at least initially. (27)

Dickey does not place "Into the Stone" as the final word, perhaps to indicate that the singular transcendent moment of that poem is, after all, ephemeral, fleeting, almost impossible to sustain. Indeed, "The Landfall," the poem that does end the book, also seeks out love's transcendent leap, but it returns to the difficulties and agonies—big and small—of day-to-day existence, including sunburn, blisters, suffocating heat, and the pain of childbirth—even as it also includes the ecstasy of sex and love's strong, generative magic. While "The Landfall" carries echoes of "Into the Stone" throughout, it simultaneously indicates that Dickey's pastoral vision will continue to be buffeted by struggle, strain, and difficulty. And "The Landfall" also opens the door to future poems, poems that continue to explore the world outside Dickey's "heraldic wheel," outside the perfected circle.



*Into the Stone*, as a collection, mirrors the smaller cycles and movements of Dickey's pastoral poems, and, taken all together, the collection represents his entire pastoral vision, which strains toward the "genuine spiritual wholeness" Baughman describes. The structure of the book as a whole is cyclical, a movement from restored relationship with the spirit and the wilderness, to darkness, doubt, unredeemable violence, and loss, and then back again to restored relationships with nature and with other people, especially the fulfilled and perfected relationship with a woman.<sup>45</sup> Dickey has created, in individual poems and in the book as a whole, a cyclical pastoral

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<sup>45</sup> The cyclical nature of Dickey's first book mirrors the cyclical structure of *Cane*, and thus both works point toward the importance of both countenancing violence, destruction, and death—those things that ultimately disrupt and destroy the pastoral world—as well as making the effort to find the source of redemption and enacting that pastoral redemption in their work. Though both authors find redemption in different sources, and while Toomer's *Cane* ends on a far more ambiguous note, this similarity in their

mythology of renewal and redemption. He has journeyed to the depths of abhorrent violence and sought to redeem it through imaginative, brilliant acts, and in the end, he has left the scenes of war to return to the redemptive, essential violence of the wilderness. He has encountered and sorted through the inexplicable losses of close friends, fellow soldiers, and family members, and, in the end, he reconnects with them through memory and spirit, finding them alive in himself. In his poems, the dead still live, and his speakers present second chances at wholeness and redemption for both the dead and the living who carry their memories. Dickey's pastoral universe is the heraldic wheel, and, in this first collection, he centers that universe in the disappearing wilderness of the American South.

In the next section, I will consider several of Dickey's poems from later collections, poems which seem, initially, to depart from his heraldic wheel. Aesthetically, these poems break away from Dickey's restrained anapestic line, expanding into his "shimmering walls of words," and making the poems more explosive, unexpected, sometimes ragged, sometimes bewildering. These poems involve grotesque, disturbing, and even repulsive situations and narrators, and they seem to destroy any sense of the mystical or redemptive power Dickey built in his first collection. As noted in the section on criticism of Dickey's work, scholars have argued that these poems represent aberrant psychology, a kind of confessionalism, or a parody of Dickey's earlier work. However, I argue that the point of these poems is to highlight the corruptions of his pastoral world—particularly the corruptions in the history and archetypes of the American South—as Spencer does in her damaged pastorals, and as Toomer reveals in his crystallized images of

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cyclic pastoral visions is important to note. Indeed, Toomer explicitly described the importance of the cyclical nature of *Cane*, connecting that circle directly to the pastoral in his references to simplicity and complexity, different regions, and spiritual redemption: "From three angles, *Cane's* design is a circle. Aesthetically, from simple forms to complex ones, and back to simple forms. Regionally, from the South up into the North, and back into the South again. Or, from the North down into the South, and then a return North. From the point of view of the spiritual entity behind the work, the curve really starts with Bona and Paul (awakening), plunges into Kabnis, emerges in Karintha etc. swings upward into Theatre and Box Seat, and ends (pauses) in Harvest Song" (qtd. in Weeks-Baxter 70).

violence and suffering. Thus, Dickey's later poems focus on unnatural and dominating violence—against slaves, against women, against animals, and against the natural world. These corruptions come from an imbalance of power, a disconnection from the heart of the pastoral, a lack of understanding of our interconnectedness with others and with nature. The poems, I believe, are vehemently not *celebrations* of this kind of separation and violence. Rather, the poems are meant to disturb and disquiet, to challenge and create anguish, and to reveal excesses of violence that are unredeemable. And so, akin to Dickey's war poems in *Into the Stone*, these unsettling poems are intended to leave both his speakers and his readers longing for redemption, for some kind of reconciliation with others and with nature, and for a return to spiritual, physical, and relational wholeness and connection.



#### 4. “The Sheep Child,” “Slave Quarters,” and “May Day Sermon”: The Perfect Circle Broken

Dickey's early work (his first book and his second, especially, with its iconic poem, “The Heaven of Animals”) mostly idealizes his homeland, the American southern landscape, as a place that restores wholeness, that reconnects the human spirit to the natural world and its perfected, divine cycles. Even when tragedy strikes close to home, as in the untimely death of Dickey's brother before he was conceived, Dickey reimagines—indeed, mythologizes—those events in order to redeem them, in order to incorporate them into those perfected, divine, natural cycles, in order to reconnect to their lives and spirits. The southern landscape serves as reprieve from the unredeemable violence of war, and restoration of the corruptions of society. However, in creating this vision of the Southland as an idyllic, restorative home, Dickey ignores or excludes the very real problems, corruptions, and unredeemable violence of the South itself. Only in his later work does he, as Spencer and Toomer did before him, finally turn toward these intrusions into his

idealized world; only later does he face the racial and gendered inequalities and violence that are as much a part of the South's fabric as its lush, alluring wilderness, its green valleys and wild rivers.

Among other poems in Dickey's later work, "Slave Quarters" (from *Buckdancer's Choice*, published in 1965) and "The Sheep Child" and "May Day Sermon to the Women of Gilmer County, Georgia, by a Woman Preacher Leaving the Baptist Church" (first collected in *Poems: 1957-1967*) all represent attempts to face the complexities, inequalities, and destructive violence of southern history and culture. By "deal with," I mean both to look at these inequalities squarely, without blinking or glossing over, and also, eventually, to transform and redeem them—to somehow restore even these most egregious sins and failings into the pastoral circle. These poems received widely disparate reviews and they were interpreted in astonishingly different ways. For example, *Buckdancer's Choice*, which includes "The Firebombing" and "The Fiend" and "Slave Quarters," three of Dickey's most disturbing poems, received the National Book Award for Poetry and the Melville Cane Award from the Poetry Society of America in 1966. In his *New York Times* review of *Buckdancer's Choice*, Joseph Bennett lauds the book precisely for these unflinching, unsettling poems. He argues that "The Firebombing" carries "elements of sublimity" and "authenticity," and he marks it as "one of the most important poems written postwar." Additionally, he describes "Slave Quarters" and "The Fiend" as poems of "superb intensity, with the same clarity, the same controlled flow of emotion."

At the wholly opposite end of the spectrum is Robert Bly's furious and relentlessly castigating review, "The Collapse of James Dickey." This review circulated quickly, and it changed (not for the better) public perception of Dickey's work. Bly, one of Dickey's acquaintances and fellow poets, had reviewed him favorably a few years prior, but he leaves no stone unturned in this 1966 tirade. Bly focuses on the same poems as Bennett, but he does not

find them powerful or sublime, clear or controlled. Instead, he writes, “I thought the content of the book repulsive. The subject of the poems is power, and the tone of the book is gloating—a gloating about power over others” (33). He describes the civilians killed in “The Firebombing” as “objects of sadism.” As to “Slave Quarters,” Bly finds it shot through with unquestioned racism, and he equates Dickey himself with the poem’s speaker: “The poet feels that the old South treated the Negro pretty much all right. He accepts in fact all the Southern prejudices, and by adding artistic decoration to them tries to make them charming” (34). Bly goes on, ending by critiquing Dickey’s southernness as an emotional and stylistic failing, and his politics as appalling; Dickey is, he writes, “a huge blubbery poet, pulling out Southern language in long strings, like taffy, a toady to the government, supporting all movements toward Empire, a sort of Georgia cracker Kipling” (38). In Bly’s estimation, Dickey’s later work—equated with his own ethical code—fails on all counts. He reads Dickey as a backwoods racist southerner without empathy, remorse, or complexity of feeling toward the South’s history of slavery; as a hawk who revels in holding military power over others; as a sadistic misogynist whose female characters are objectified and destroyed without a trace of guilt. As Henry Hart describes this review in his biography of Dickey,

According to Bly, Dickey had evolved from a poet writing sensitive mythical poems about nature to a remorseless brute who cared only about making more money than his peers and who took a sadistic relish in Parnassian power. Although Dickey’s reactions to the Vietnam War and to the military were not consistently jingoistic, and although his attitudes toward the Old South were deeply ambivalent, Bly’s broadside typecast Dickey in the literary establishment for decades. (346).

I cite these two polarized reviews by Bennett and Bly to highlight the extreme reactions—both laudatory and condemning—to these confounding, complex, and disturbing poems. But I also bring them up to demonstrate that both miss the mark in their assessments. As

Ernest Suarez has amply demonstrated, Bly's misreading (perhaps deliberate, in his anger at Dickey's refusal to firmly establish himself as against the Vietnam War) stems from his conflation of Dickey with his personae, reading his work as confessional rather than as experimenting with various points of view. And though Bennett reads the poems with a bit more sympathy, he, too, seems to equate Dickey himself with his speakers, and what he ultimately values in the poems are their "authenticity" as well as the lack of "falsehood."<sup>46</sup> Indeed, he explains that the power of Dickey's work arises from his psychological processing of memory and direct experience:

As if flamed by an instant train of gunpowder, the range of Dickey's life span now produces poetry of simultaneously fused brilliance: incidents of a 20-year-old war, of a 30-year-old schoolroom rise unaffectedly from the deepest level of his consciousness. The effect is open, direct and personal.

Therefore, both reviews, at opposing ends of the spectrum, align Dickey with his speakers and assume that he holds the same belief systems they present.

In neither review is there room for polyphony, ambiguity, or the Bakhtinian centrifugal force of language—an undercutting of the speaker while he speaks, with doubt and uncertainty creeping in to the storylines. And yet, in several of Dickey's most disturbing later poems, that Bakhtinian uncertainty and destabilization of unified meaning is hard to miss. Dickey's speakers are ambivalent, complex, torn—and the poems shift, subtly, in perspective, so that we see from both the speaker's perspective and slightly outside the speaker's perspective, or we see from multiple perspectives and moments in time in a single poem. We must question our loyalties, our sympathies, our beliefs, as each poem progresses. In "The Sheep Child," for example, there are two speakers—one is a southern man who relates the legends he has heard (and hearsay thus adds

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<sup>46</sup> Daniel Cross Turner's study of Dickey's later work is especially useful in correcting the confessional reading, though, as described earlier, I depart with his reading of Dickey's later poems as parodic primitivism.

another layer of uncertainty), and the other is the half-lamb, half-human infant, preserved in formaldehyde and stored at a museum. The first speaker's account is both complicated and undercut by the sheep child's own voice (which may well originate in the speaker's imagination, and therefore his own consciousness is divided). "Slave Quarters" centers on a present-day white man exploring a plantation in ruins, imagining what it would have been like to have been the master and to have sexually exploited his female slaves. The speaker's monologue is riddled with questions, his movement impeded by constant hesitation, and he seems unable to locate himself in time or to fully come to grips with southern history. Thus, far from advocating slavery or glorying in power, "Slave Quarters" presents dark desire and self-loathing, dread and uncertainty. "May Day Sermon," spoken by a female Baptist minister who is leaving her congregation, is perpetually circling, repeating, searching for salvation and restoration, but embedded in the sermon is a story of domestic violence and murder. And so, both sides of the sermon—the grim details of abuse and the wild joy of salvation—call one another into question. In short, in none of these longer, later poems is the message as plain and single-minded as Bly or Bennett imply; rather, Dickey incorporates doubt and subversion throughout, facing the excesses, horrors, and the violence of oppression in southern history while simultaneously seeking out something that can be salvaged, seeking out a way to bring those excesses and violent encounters back within the perfected pastoral circle.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Of course, in those later collections, too, are Dickey's poems that attempt transcendence, that soar above the earth and transmute speakers into birds ("Reincarnation (II)"), that transform the tragic accident of a flight attendant into the myth of a fertility goddess ("Falling"), that use electric wires to illustrate and celebrate our interconnectedness ("Power and Light"), that await some blinding light of transformation from earth or sky ("The Flash"). These poems, too, fit under the rubric of Dickey's pastoral vision, as they accelerate toward union and redemption, and though they are more complex and some more beautifully rendered than some of Dickey's work in his first collection, they proceed in many ways through the same journey and reach for the same ends. For that reason, as well as limitations of space, those poems will not be discussed in depth in this chapter, but they do connect to and forward my overarching argument about the pastoral throughline in Dickey's work.

Perhaps it is part of Dickey's achievement that he has made the voices of his personae so believable that reviewers on either end of the spectrum convince themselves that his writing contains one singular voice that conveys a "direct" or "personal" memory, and so points toward some centripetal unification of meanings or messages. And yet, it is essential that we do not miss the parody (as Turner has clearly highlighted) as well as the doubts, anxieties, and conflicts presented in these later poems. There we find Dickey wrestling with his nostalgia, with the unraveling of his belief in a pure and uncorrupted southern world. One useful way to view this turn in Dickey's work is, of course, through Boym's categories of nostalgia, restorative and reflective. While the earlier work represents Boym's category of "restorative nostalgia," an unreflective desire for a return to an absolutely pure and safe home and a belief that such an uncorrupted place once did exist (and could perhaps exist again), the later work turns toward "reflective nostalgia," the kind of nostalgia that lives in ambiguity and tension, that includes a genuine longing for a perfected world but simultaneously recognizes the contradictions and problems that have always already been part of the homeland. Reflective nostalgia may attempt to reconcile these two perceptions of home, or it may simply provide a more complex vision of the past and our relationship to it. In these later poems of reflective nostalgia, then, Dickey still presents the longing for more perfect, untainted world, and that longing connects directly to nostalgia for his imagined pastoral. But he moves out of the world of abstraction and into a world of surreal detail and stark violence, taken to the imaginative limits of excess and corruption, and so the later poems dwell in ambiguity and contradiction.

Finally, I believe that Bly and Bennett—as well as more contemporary critics of Dickey's work—miss the mark because they neglect to connect these later poems to his earlier work, to see the arc of his work now moving away from a simplified, nostalgic understanding of the South as an edenic, primitive wilderness and toward a more complex, historically-aware, contextualized

South that is not immune from the dramatic changes and transgressions of the wider world. It is vital to consider these later poems in light of Dickey's earlier work and his vision of the South as the center of his perfected pastoral circle, in order to more fully understand them and their contribution to his evolving pastoral, just as it is essential to understand the relationship between Spencer's idealized and damaged pastorals, as well as Toomer's structural interplay between the averted gaze and the crystallized image, in order to attain a more comprehensive understanding of each poet's approach to the southern pastoral. I argue that Dickey's later poems present corruptions of his earlier idyllic southern pastoral, as well as his attempts to wrestle and negotiate with those corruptions, to understand them and perhaps to exorcise them. And again, the absence of clear, unadulterated redemption creates the longing for that originary world of perfection, salvation, and restoration—which Dickey will return to more directly in later collections, especially in *The Strength of Fields*.

In this section, I will closely examine “The Sheep Child,” “Slave Quarters,” and “May Day Sermon” in order to show how Dickey presents corruptions of the pastoral and where he locates the causes of these corruptions. Primarily, Dickey's southern pastoral vision is challenged, tarnished, or destroyed in these works by a lust for power over others or by an excess of violence, as well as by unbridged rifts between races and genders and between people and the natural world. In these three poems are seeds of the discontent appearing in multiple other poems in Dickey's later work, including “The Firebombing” and “The Fiend.” Thus, in these poems, we find the perfected pastoral circle broken, or broken into, by unredeemable and excess violence and by inequality and injustice. Dickey takes up the savage stereotypes of the South—backwoods deviants, plantation exploitation, and uncontrolled violence and abuse—not so much to “set the record straight” or to toy with his own critics (like Bly), though he does work toward both of these goals. More than either of those aims, though, these poems work to reveal the

severest corruptions of the ideal southern pastoral; to highlight just how wide the gap is between people and the natural world; to demonstrate that the capitalist and industrialist ideals of the New South are, in fact, disruptive and destructive; and to face up to the history of racial and gender oppression in the South.



If the idyllic pastoral is a perfected dream, then “The Sheep Child” is its opposing, monstrous nightmare.<sup>48</sup> The poem describes “farm boys wild to couple / With anything,” an over-sexualized distortion of the yearning in Dickey’s earlier poems to connect with nature. Using “the outrageous device of the literal,” as Ronald A. Sharp argues, Dickey draws nature as explicitly female, playing in the first stanza on the word “mounds”: “mounds of earth      mounds / Of pinestraw” (3-4). And he uses the farm boys’ uncontrolled lust as the extreme end of “the Romantic quest to unite with nature” (Sharp 213). Dickey’s portrayal is not simply a rendering of stereotypes of backwoods southern boys; it is also the furthest extreme in imagining the landscape as feminine, both wild and virginal, maternal and nurturing, as Annette Kolodny demonstrates that American literature has done for centuries. Thus, Dickey’s poem also underscores the dark, exploitative, insidious threads running through the American—and here, specifically southern—tradition of pastoral.

The poem becomes more monstrous yet, as the speaker begins to reveal in his halting, hesitating, choppy lines what curbs these boys’ desire: the legend of the sheep child. The rumor of this half-human, half-sheep, a “woolly baby / Pickled in alcohol” (12-13) and preserved in an Atlanta museum, is apparently the only thing that keeps the farm boys from having sex with

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<sup>48</sup> Ronald A. Sharp and Turner both make the case for reading this poem as a version of pastoral; Sharp argues that this poem draws on the conventions of the pastoral singing contest as well as the pastoral elegy, and Turner contends that it represents a satirical reversal of the “pleasant pastoral myths” of the South.

animals. The speaker can barely finish his sentences, and Dickey's lineation and mid-line caesuras, along with the covert setting he establishes, convey the hideousness of the secret:

In the hay-tunnel dark  
And dung of barns, they will  
Say I have heard tell

That in a museum in Atlanta  
Way back in a corner somewhere  
There's this thing that's only half  
Sheep like a woolly baby  
Pickled in alcohol because  
Those things can't live his eyes  
Are open but you can't stand to look  
I heard from somebody who... (6-16)

Not only do these lines—and the entire first half of the poem—establish the carnivalesque horror of the sheep child, taking even the seediest rumors of southern backwoods deviance to their very limit, but they also underscore a significant second point, one perhaps more essential to understanding the poem as a whole. That second point is the gradual disconnection from the natural world taking place throughout the South, as the “New South” builds its industry and urban centers, as people move away from the rural areas and the wilderness. The chasm between people and nature widens, then, as those farm boys learn to fear their own desires and the natural world, rather than discovering how to connect with it authentically and spiritually and to restore themselves and their relationships based on that connection. The speaker goes on:

But this is now almost all  
Gone. The boys have taken  
Their own true wives in the city,  
The sheep are safe in the west hill  
Pasture (14-21)

Since the boys have moved away from the rural South, the speaker tries to assure himself and his listener that “the sheep are safe in the west hill / Pasture,” and that this deviant sexual behavior is “now almost all / Gone.” However, the tone of disquiet remains: the “almost all” lingers at the end of the line, unsteady and less convincing. And whatever “this” is that is nearly gone is not entirely clear: are the deviant behaviors gone? Are the rumors and legends disappearing? Or are the rural and wild landscapes also implicated here, vanishing, as more cities and factories are built? Additionally, this third stanza is also unsettling because of the way the boys’ marriages are portrayed; in Dickey’s description of the boys who have “taken / Their own true wives,” he again includes sexual overtones, making the wives the new substitute for the boys’ sexual release. The women (intentionally or not) are depicted as stand-ins for the sheep—and, in that light, we can see that these relationships are not right or whole, either. As the pastoral vision of *Into the Stone* indicated, a full spiritual immersion in nature is required before fulfilling human relationships can begin; here, both the spiritual relationship with nature and the emotional connections with people are missing, and a much more devastating cycle is at work.

In this poem, “rape of the land” is not a metaphor—that idea, too, is taken to its “illogical extreme,” as Turner describes it, and that violent domination of the wilderness and its animals ripples out into the boys’ later lives and relationships, creating more suffering, more isolation.<sup>49</sup> Their disconnection from nature stems, paradoxically, both from the urgent desire for *and* the fear of connection. The boys’ desire for connection, combined with their newly-discovered sexuality, drives them “wild” (and Dickey’s use of the word “wild” is no mistake here—it ties them to animal instinct and wilderness, ungoverned by the rule of society, as well as to madness). And in turn, they reject that wildness, fearing their own lack of control and the impossibility of

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<sup>49</sup> Dickey’s connection between the rape of the land and domination of women is far more overt, but it reflects similar ideas throughout Toomer’s *Cane*, as in the sketches “Karintha” and “Fern,” as well as in the poems “Face” and “Portrait in Georgia.” Both authors establish just how dangerous and dehumanizing violent corruptions of the pastoral world can be, particularly for women.

sustaining connection with the natural world once they have despoiled it. Because the boys have substituted a ruinous sexual connection with the land for a spiritual one (and they only prevent themselves from penetrating animals because of the myth of the sheep child, rather than actual love or respect for other creatures), they represent the very worst result of a corrupted relationship to nature. Their literal interpretation of physical immersion in nature is a distorted, destructive, non-regenerative one. Indeed, it leads to a (nearly) stillborn monster, which, as Sharp argues, presents “a stunning moment in the long history of pastoral: the moment when the ideal of pastoral harmony can live only as a monster, only in the artificial and rarified atmosphere of the museum, pickled in the preserving fluid of myth because stillborn in the world itself” (214).

In the second half of the poem, Dickey gives voice to the sheep child itself, through the imagination of the first speaker. The first speaker asks, “Are we / Because we remember, remembered / In the terrible dust of museums?” And then he conjures the sheep child’s memory, in a monologue strikingly reminiscent of Dickey’s earlier work, in its sacred overtones and formal, even ethereal sentences (made more otherworldly by the italicization of the whole—much as Dickey italicized the refrains from a divine voice throughout the poems of *Into the Stone*). The sheep child’s voice also echoes Dickey’s early work in his loose three- and four-beat lines, and even in his diction, using Dickey’s oft-employed words like “blazing,” “moonlight,” and “woods” and “fields.” Indeed, the sheep child’s long, italicized speech begins with a biblical reference: “*I am here, in my father’s house*” (27). This reference to the “father’s house” brings to mind the Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead, and Christ’s promise that his death and resurrection is for the salvation of all: “My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?” (John 14:2 NIV). The sheep child’s monologue continues in the same vein as Dickey’s early work, in its gorgeous descriptions of the natural world; he describes his mother who “stood like moonlight / Listening

for foxes,” (30-1) and his own birth in the “summer sun of the hillside,” where he “saw for a blazing moment / The great grassy world from both sides” (40-2). He goes on, as “the hill wind stirred in [his] wool,” to create an image of connection and completion in his own body: “My hoof and my hand clasped each other” (44-5). The language of this monologue is seductively beautiful; Laurence Lieberman writes, “The sheep child is a vastly better poet than the narrator, exceeding him as the superhuman exceeds the human” (“James” 126). And it is true that the sheep child’s language is far more colorful, his story far more structured and elegant, his sense of beauty and sacredness far more apparent than the initial speaker’s more mundane, stammering, incomplete thoughts.

But Lieberman, it seems, has been so persuaded by the beauty of the sheep child’s language that he has missed the horror of the moment, the painful separation of men from the land and God, and excessive violence they commit. In describing the rape of his mother, the sheep child says,

*It was something like love  
 From another world that seized her  
 From behind, and she gave, not lifting her head  
 Out of dew, without ever looking, her best  
 Self to that great need. Turned loose, she dipped her face  
 Farther into the chill of the earth, and in a sound  
 Of sobbing        of something stumbling  
 Away, began, as she must do,  
 To carry me. I woke, dying (31-9)*

Lieberman recasts this moment of “coupling” as a beautiful, fulfilling moment for the ewe, and the farm boy’s sobs as a reaction to her passion:

The ewe experiences a perfect fulfillment of being; the farm boy, “stumbling away,” is sobbing, haunted, driven wildly afraid by the profundity of her experience. His fear is mixed with guilt for having committed the forbidden act. The ewe takes her place alongside “Crazy Jane” in the gallery of mindless sexual heroines in modern poetry in

English. The farm boy's amazement and terror at her unexpected passion dramatize, in an original and unpredictable way, the mystery and depth of female sexuality. ("James" 126-7)

This reading, I think, swerves away from the central point of the poem, as it does not fully account for the depth of the problem Dickey conveys. What the sheep child is actually describing is an evolving scene of horror, fear, guilt, loss, and eventual painful, fatal disconnection—and those emotions do not just stem from his own death and ghastly preservation, but in the grisly rape of his mother, and in the constant dissatisfaction, suffering, and spiritual hollowness of the men who have moved away and the farm boys who cannot connect, rightly, with the land. I find no evidence that the sheep feels a "fulfillment of being" or "unexpected passion." Rather, Dickey's formulation of the moment makes it initially unclear who is sobbing—and her face "dipped.../ Farther into the chill of the earth" seems *dispassionate*, if anything, and far more like an omen of the death to come. Carrying of the impossible, ill-fated child, "as she must do," is the result of rape; it is a burden, and not a gift.

And even if the sheep felt nothing (though one must have very little empathy not to think of this wretched violation against an unwilling participant as causing pain), we must read through the sheep child's elegant language to understand that in his story, nothing and no one is redeemed or saved, resurrected or restored to wholeness. The sheep child's "immortal waters" are actually formaldehyde solution in a glass jar, and his home in his "father's house" is a dusty shelf in an unlit backroom of a museum, where "no one comes." His experience of the afterlife is, then, the opposite of resurrection and restoration—it is endless isolation. And his isolation and the horror of his story emblemize the destruction of the southern pastoral through corrupt relationships with the land and its creatures. As Turner describes,

Dickey's museum houses the horrors of southern mythology, preserving the residual grotesqueness of the pastoral mythos that has been museumed away. The uncanny deadness of the southern past is preserved in formaldehyde solution even under the auspices of the utopian vision of the New South, the crown jewel of which is the slickly urban, highly commercialized Atlanta. (44)

Thus, in part, "The Sheep Child" is a parody of the ultimate pastoral values of connection with the land, spiritual fulfillment, and strengthened relationships with others that Dickey established in his first book. As demonstrated in the sheep child's monologue, those values are reversed; connection with the land becomes literal and turns into excess violence, spiritual fulfillment turns into eternal isolation in a pickling jar, and strengthened relationships change to loneliness kept intact by dark secrets.

But Dickey goes beyond self-parody to make the larger point that in the contemporary South, the pastoral and its attendant values and possibilities for restoration are slipping away, disappearing into the industrialized and urbanized cities, dissipating into fear and loathing, into misunderstanding and excessive violations against the land. The poem serves as a warning about and a condemnation of those things that block us from full, spiritual relationship with the land, and the final stanza of the poem, still spoken by the sheep child, drives this message home. In this final stanza, Dickey opens once again by alluding to the "father's house," but that reference is followed by multiple phrases and descriptions that undercut the idea of heaven. That house is full of "dust" that "whirls up in the halls for no reason / When no one comes" and it is "piling deep in a hellish mild corner" (49-51). Additionally, the sun, the sign of renewal and rebirth in Dickey's pastoral vision, cannot reach the sheep child in his jar, reiterating the fact that his eternal preservation in the museum is a version of hell. Only "the sun's grains" filter through to his shelf, and there, "they fail at my closet of glass" (53-4).

The sheep child is not the only casualty of the dissolution of the idyllic pastoral; he goes on to describe the terror and isolation that those farm boys now experience. Alive in the minds of those farm boys, whether they leave for the city or not, the sheep child has become like a menacing wolf that drives the boys away from the land, away from the animals—the legend serves as a way to keep them from further violation of those animals, but in the process it creates a gulf between the men and the wild that will not be bridged. The final lines of the poem emphasize the boys’ isolation—as they stand in for all people who have violated the land or those who have disconnected from it:

*They go into woods into bean fields they go  
Deep into their known right hands. Dreaming of me,  
They groan they wait they suffer  
Themselves, they marry, they raise their kind (59-62)*

Dickey’s sheep child seems to hex the boys here, condemning their excessive desires and their greed, warning them and their descendants against the life apart from the land and from true relationships with others. Again, their sexual desires combine with destructive impulses that end in a masturbatory loneliness. The dramatic caesuras, created by both commas and extra space, emphasize their separation from the land, from others, and from the values of the pastoral, and insomuch as “they suffer / Themselves,” these farm boys resemble Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost*, who claims, “Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell” (4.75).<sup>50</sup> This final reference places us squarely opposed to the redemptive heaven of Dickey’s idealized pastoral. And, as the first section of the poem indicates, the boys’ marriages are no way out of hell; they are not hopeful indicators of connection but rather a kind of empty arrangement that stifles true connection and maintains separation from others and from the natural world. The phrase “their kind”

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<sup>50</sup> This phrase also evokes Robert Lowell’s speaker in “Skunk Hour,” a poem which, as Sharp persuasively argues, also portrays a ruined pastoral world.

underscores this separation, as well—they do not associate with anyone but “their kind,” an absorption into humankind that neglects all else, including reconciliation with the land and any restorative honor for the sheep child who continues to dissolve in the darkness of his “immortal waters.”

The stagnation and loneliness at the end of this poem go beyond parody; the final stanza presents sorrow, regret, misunderstanding, and deep separation. Sharp argues that “the attitude toward what has been lost seems closer to a kind of anguished longing than to nostalgia, as though the failure to achieve a satisfactory relation—let alone union—with nature were experienced as a raw and painful diminishment” (211). That loss of connection, and the subsequent anguish and suffering, are part of Dickey’s transformed reflective nostalgia, a way of facing the ambiguities and failings of the world, and especially his southern homeland, while still longing for a world restored and perfected. Dickey directly confronts the problems of violation of the southern landscape in “The Sheep Child,” and that confrontation reveals corruption of his pastoral vision, even while the poem reinforces the longing for a tranquil, restored relationship between the natural world and the human world.



In “Slave Quarters,” Dickey further confronts the crumbling of his pastoral vision, this time by delving into the history of the southern plantation, both its elegant outer beauty and its suppressed horrors. Dickey’s poem is long and winding, hesitating and sometimes stilted; like the first speaker in “The Sheep Child,” the speaker of “Slave Quarters” approaches the central, painful topic of excess violence and oppression from the edges, hesitating and wandering. In the end, Dickey finally confronts the horrific abuse of power of taking ownership of other human beings while refusing to acknowledge their humanity. In many ways, Dickey’s “Slave Quarters” shares parallels with Toomer’s “Blood-Burning Moon.” For example, both Toomer and Dickey

slowly work up to the horror created by racial oppression, though it is always present in the background—for Toomer, racial violence and oppression is the backdrop of all of the first section of *Cane*, until it finally explodes in the final sketch, while for Dickey, the poem meanders and hesitates until it finally must face the stark facts of slavery's violence and dehumanization. Additionally, both poets demonstrate that the horrors of slavery have never been entirely expunged from the South (or the nation), no matter their desire to find a restored pastoral world. For example, the character of Bob Stone, for Toomer, represents the tenacity of postbellum racism, and the simple fact that Dickey's present-day white male speaker—situated at least fifty years after Toomer's *Cane*—continues to be fascinated by the plantation master's exploitation again underscores the insidious and long-lasting hold of racism. Recognizing these parallels is important, as they demonstrate that Dickey's poem actually works to reveal the horrors of slavery and continuing racism, rather than—as critics like Bly contend—endorsing racism and misogyny.

And in fact, Dickey's poem details (though somewhat obliquely) the worst abuses in the system of slavery; the speaker, imagining himself the master of the plantation, envisions the rape of female slaves and the subsequent refusal to recognize the children he fathered except as property. As Joyce Carol Oates points out, Dickey includes the central question of the poem, the crux of the present-day speaker's concern, in the poem itself: "How take on the guilt / Of slavers?" How does a white man in the late twentieth century come to grips with the awfulness of the "peculiar institution"? How does he understand the power and the shame, the abuse and the suffering, of that whole bygone world? And is that world, in fact, gone? And how does he align this history with his belief in the redemptive purity of the southern landscape? In taking up this topic, Dickey further separates himself from the vision of the Agrarians, as many of them wished to deny the existence of racial injustice and to dissociate the South of the yeoman farmer from the plantation tradition.

“Slave Quarters” is, on the whole, a very difficult poem, one that slides back and forth in time through the speaker’s imagination, from the contemporary moment to the past. It also slides in and out of different minds, first imagining what it would be like to be a master, then a slave, then a slave’s child fathered by the master, then the father/owner himself, and finally returning to the present speaker’s mind. And it shifts in space, circling around the outskirts of the plantation, moving through the cotton fields, and gradually closing in on the titular slave quarters. Few critics spend time with this poem; some mention it briefly, placing it in the middle of a list of other poems, without much commentary. For example, Dave Smith places “Slave Quarters” amid other poems which are “regional” and “record the end of old ways (hence, perhaps, of ‘southernness’)” in their themes (“James” 80). Linda Mizejewski lists “Slave Quarters” among several other, much more celebratory poems in which “artifices of showmanship and magic save us...from sentimentality, pain, or self-pity” (410). While I concur with Smith that “Slave Quarters” is distinctively regional, focused as it is on specifically southern history, I have trouble aligning this poem’s obsession with power, guilt, and abuse with a poem as magical and entrancing as “Power and Light.” Though Dickey certainly does not romanticize the history of slavery in this poem, I am not sure that the poem offers salvation, either. It is certainly not as salvific and restorative as “The Performance”; rather, its unsteadiness in the face of excess violence seems more in line with poems that countenance the horrors of war, like “The Enclosure” or “The Firebombing.” “Slave Quarters” *does* attempt to imaginatively restore the world of the old southern plantation from its present-day ruins, but it does so in order to demonstrate just how ruined and ruinous that world always was. Additionally, in the imagining, the speaker makes clear just how present the history of the plantation still is in the South. Though Dickey makes very few references to contemporary racial injustice, the implications of the imagined plantation, the oppressive dynamic between the white male speaker and the black

slaves, and the long list of complex questions at the conclusion of the poem all indicate that the problem of racism and exploitative violence is far from resolved in the present-day South.

“Slave Quarters” is composed, loosely, of four sections: 1) the change in time from present to past, and into the mind of a slave master, via the speaker’s imagination, 2) the pastoral contemplation of the landscape’s beauty, though strewn with insidious hints of the violent rape to come, 3) the transition into the mind of slaves and toward empathy, while betraying the speaker’s racist beliefs, and 4) the transition back into the mind of a slave master who cannot admit to his violent crime of rape nor look his own son in the eye and acknowledge him as human. I will track the evolution of the poem through these four sections, as they illustrate Dickey coming to grips with the violence of southern history and as they reveal the indelible scars slavery has left on the imagined southern pastoral.

Dickey opens the poem placing the speaker amid the ruins of the “great house.” He stands “in the sun / Room, near the kitchen of air,” and so, from the very first, Dickey makes use of the line break to play with the recurrent imagery of day and night, light and dark (234, 1-2). Dickey uses the daylight and the ability to see clearly (literally and metaphorically) to comment on his exposure of the plantation’s secrets. As the first section progresses, the speaker begins to imagine himself in the dark, in “moonlight made by the mind / From the dusk sun” (10-11). In that conjured night, Dickey’s speaker slides out of his contemporary world and into the mind of the slave-owning plantation master. Dickey embellishes the plantation owner with several predictable details, drawn straight from the pages of a plantation romance: he is a “coastal islander, proud of his grounds, / his dogs, his spinet / From Savannah, his pale daughters” (26-8). Later in the poem, Dickey will add other clichés: copies of Walter Scott’s books, a tight bunch of lace at his daughter’s throat, the stiff decorum she displays playing Mozart. But under the cover of darkness, Dickey also presents the more insidious side of the slave owner, what he initially

calls “the madness of Owners,” the madness that draws him to the slave quarters to enact one of the worst displays of tyrannical power. The speaker imagines reveling in that intoxicating power through multiple images. Initially, his “imagining loins / Rise” with that power (3-4); later, the dogs in the yard sense his power and “smell / For once what I totally am, / Flaming up in their brains as the Master” (11-13). And finally, near the close of the first section, the speaker feels a wild, aggressive ecstasy begin within him:

I can begin to dance  
Inside my gabardine suit  
As though I had left my silk nightshirt

In the hall of mahogany, and crept  
To slave quarters to live out  
The secret legend of Owners. Ah, stand up,  
Blond loins, another  
Love is possible! (31-8).

Dickey makes the sinister irony of the “secret legend of Owners” plain throughout this first section; though the speaker seems exhilarated by power, Dickey’s language undercuts that power and reveals it to be inhumane, deceptive, and ruinous. First, as the speaker imagines himself sliding naked through the moonlight, the dogs smell him and recognize what he “totally” is. The multi-layered meaning of this recognition is clear—the dogs may sense his total grasp on power, more a “master” than ever, but they also recognize his animalistic lust. Additionally, this pun reduces the master to a dirty philandering “dog.” Second, in an odd moment, the speaker claims that “there was this house / that fell before I got out,” an indication that the plantation house and all its secrets and all its violence became the master’s grave, emblemizing his undoing, as well as his final loss of power. Finally, Dickey follows the speaker’s exclamation, “another / Love is possible!,” with a quick explanation that the master’s “thin wife would be sleeping / Or would not mention my absence,” a clear indication that the slave owner deceives his wife and himself

(38-9). In fact, the (single) reference to the owner's wife calls into question his entire understanding of love. Earlier, Dickey equates the owner's desire for his slaves with "madness," but throughout the section—and even more, throughout the poem—it becomes plain that "madness" is only an excuse made to cover the owner's exploitation. His use of irony illuminates the failure of the owner's excuses, as well as his doubts and guilt. Thus, the irony demonstrates the centrifugal force of his language, where meaning spins out of the speaker's control and where the singular interpretation of a scene becomes impossible.

The second section attempts to redeem the plantation (and so, too, to redeem the master) through depictions of the landscape's beauty and the natural world's wholeness. Following the speaker on his long, hesitating walk between the "great house" and the slave quarters, Dickey conjures the idyllic pastoral in the details of the grounds, in the half-moon above, in the silvered fields, and in the skittering sand crabs and wheeling gulls. As he moves farther from the genteel restrictions of the house, the speaker sees the world as freer, more complete, renewed. For example, the speaker sees the "moon made whole in one wave" (59) when the half-moon is reflected in the water, and he sees the gull above "turning the corner / Of wind" until he "receives himself like a brother / As he glides down upon his reflection" (81-3). But even those pastoral details—of connection, of halves made whole, of a plantation at peace and freed from restraint—are undermined by the speaker's hesitations and intentions. Dickey's word choice again undercuts the speaker, introducing violent, ruined images amid the peaceful night—the moon is threatening, "burning" away time and blowing the roof off the slave quarters (50). The sea grass is a "dark lively shipwreck" (56) and the tidal pools are "stale" (75). And the speaker finds his mirror image not in a noble creature (as in *Into the Stone*, where the speaker is often associated with the owl-king), but rather in the fiddler crabs, who are "bug-eyed" and "sneaking a light on the run / from the split moon" (68-70). The crabs dart into the shadows, avoiding the gulls who hunt them

from above, just as the speaker moves stealthily through the fields, hiding. Thus, the imaginative attempt to restore the plantation grounds to their former glory instead only serves to demonstrate what is already ruined. The plantation is, in fact, the “dispossessed garden of the chattel,” in Lewis Simpson’s term, and what Dickey later calls “the dark wrecked hovel of rebirth” (118) and “the dispossessed ground” (136).

As the speaker continues his walk toward the slave quarters in the third section, the poem takes an unexpected turn, making an attempt to connect with and understand the position of the slaves who work the fields. This section of the poem seems, initially, to shift toward empathy and admiration, but instead it raises grave doubts about the speaker’s capacity for understanding and connection. Early in the second section, the speaker asserts that his body holds “a color not yet freed,” a complex line that contains an attempt at sympathy, a belief in universality among humankind, and an appropriation and misreading of the experiences of slaves. This line directly follows the image of a gull gliding toward his own reflection on the water, receiving “himself like a brother,” an image which underscores the attempt at universality, brotherhood, and understanding. In order to more fully access and understand the experiences of slaves, the speaker then tries to shed his own skin and the genteel strictures of his position, and take up instead the perspective of “Africa.” But throughout this transference of perspective, the speaker (perhaps unwittingly) demonstrates his own racism, his equation of black people with “instinct,” and his limited ability to understand them—in fact, the speaker only recognizes the slaves in relation to the white owner, rather than as human beings on their own terms. For example, Dickey’s speaker initially equates “throw[ing] / Obsessive gentility off” with a slave’s exit from the Middle Passage. The speaker proclaims that “Africa” rises “upon me like a man / Whose instincts are delivered from their chains” (87-8). In a generous reading, we might view this comparison as an attempt at empathy and connection, but these are incomparably different

moments, with obvious differences in degrees of agency and power. And of course, African people who survived the Middle Passage found themselves in bondage, not freed, on American shores. The absurd mismatch between a white owner scampering naked through his fields and a man surviving the crossing of the Atlantic and enslavement only renders the speaker vainglorious, short-sighted, and ultimately racist.

Dickey's later comparison between the enslaved people and the "great beasts" of Africa that the first slaves remembered is another attempt to connect and empathize, but again, ultimately a failed attempt. The speaker lists many animals—elephants, "incredibly poisonous snakes," lions, wildebeests, giraffes, elands, cheetahs—and uses them to emblemize the minds and memories of the first slaves who were forcibly removed from their homes. The speaker clearly admires these "great beasts" and seems to mourn for them (the lost beasts and the slaves themselves, who have had to forget these animals); indeed, he turns from the beauty of his own plantation to remark that the slaves' home was, in fact, "Eden." And he appears remorseful that these animals have been reduced, forgotten, made into shadows and emblems rather than living in their full glory:

Lion wildebeest giraffe all purchased also  
When one wished only  
Labor  
    those beasts becoming  
For the white man the animals of Eden  
Emblems of sexual treasure all beasts attending  
Me now my dreamed dogs snarling at the shades  
Of eland and cheetah (128-35)

But here is precisely the problem; despite his admiration of the wild animals, the speaker has managed to conflate these animals with his slaves, to elide the distinction between the animals of Africa and the men and women ripped from their homeland. He atones for reducing slaves to

“labor” and “sexual treasure,” but even so, he still is unable to view the slaves as fully human; he can only call them “labor” and “emblems of sexual treasure,” after all. Indeed, the syntax of the stanza makes it nearly impossible to discern which lines are about animals and which are about people, and what “beasts” refers to. The lions, wildebeests, and giraffes are not, after all, the labor force of the plantation, and neither are they the owner’s “sexual treasure.” The blurring of the referents—animals and people—for the word “beasts” betrays the speaker and reveals the racist underpinnings of his beliefs. The black slaves on his plantation are equated only with instinct and animal. His efforts at empathy and connection clearly fall short, once again.

And that failure to connect and understand is Dickey’s point in this poem. After all, disconnection between people and failure to empathize renders the idyllic pastoral impossible—and so, the southern plantation, seen from this perspective, cannot be romanticized or redeemed. “Slave Quarters” is fundamentally about the destruction of the ideal southern pastoral, and the speaker’s failure to see those around him as definitively human is a direct cause of that destruction. Indeed, it is not just the imagined plantation owner who cannot see the slaves as inviolate and fully human; the present-day speaker, who creates that owner in his imagination, also questions his ability to fully connect and to fully value others—including women (the imagined wife and daughters) and people of color (the imagined male and female slaves). The doubling of the speaker—simultaneously past and present—is one of the most disruptive of Dickey’s tactics, and one of the most disturbing. The failure of the historical South to live up to the idealized pastoral is clear, but Dickey’s present day speaker forces us to question the possibility of that idyllic world—and the redemption and relationship it offers—in the present and future.

The final section of the poem pushes this question—the question of consequences for failing to see slaves as human—to its very limit. First, though the poem (blessedly) does not

directly portray the owner's rape of his female slave, it is made evident in the fact that the woman has a child nine months later—and though we are not shown her suffering as a slave and victim of rape directly, the pain of childbirth and the knife she holds between her teeth “to cut the pain” stand as emblems of that suffering (139). That the speaker barely countenances her suffering is one plain evasion of connection, one truly inhumane omission in the poem. The speaker does consider her child—*his* child—at length, though, in a series of questions that build in intensity and swirling confusion, self-loathing and recriminations, desire and worry. That child—“who belongs in no world”—raises the speaker's awareness of just how far apart they stand, just how wide the chasm is between him and the others who live and work on the plantation. The speaker recognizes himself in the child—“my hair in that boy / Turned black    my skin / Darkened by half”—but continues to deny him, will not meet his gaze beyond “an instant.” And so the speaker must question that disconnection and denial, despite the fact that this child is his own blood; he must ask himself how he could live with that knowledge and do nothing, what he would feel, seeing his son exploited or knowing the injustice he will face—whether it is doled out by his own hand or by the hands of others. The questions he raises do not only belong to the past, the history of the plantation, either; the speaker returns to the present to acknowledge the fully reverberating echoes of slavery in the contemporary South and its prevalent racism. What happens, for example, when the speaker's imagined descendants have to wait tables, or sit “in all-night cages / Of parking lots,” or work in a chain gang “on a tar road... / Until the crickets give up?” (161-66). Dickey traces the roots of racism and unequal opportunity back to the system of slavery, but he does not leave it in the past. In this penultimate stanza, he demonstrates that the long threads of racism extend to the present moment. Children—even those who belong to the slave owner's lineage—are still denied, and their descendants, too, face the same strains of injustice and rejection.

In the final stanza, Dickey draws all of the poem's concerns together, connecting the past to the present, leaving the clear light of day for the secretive, exploitative cover of night. In these lines, Dickey demonstrates the continuing destruction of the pastoral ideal, as well as the unraveling of the romanticized narratives of southern history and idealized images of the southern landscape. Every moment of the present is stained with the sins of the past, and every line points toward the impossibility of a redemptive pastoral while racial injustice and violent exploitation persists:

What happens when the sun goes down  
  
And the white man's loins still stir  
In a house of air still draw him toward  
Slave quarters? When Michael's voice is heard  
Bending the sail like grass,  
The real moon begins to come  
Apart on the water  
And two hundred years are turned back  
On with the headlights of a car?  
When you learn that there is no hatred  
Like love in the eyes  
Of a wholly owned face? When you think of what  
It would be like what it has been  
What it is to look once a day  
Into an only  
Son's brown, waiting, wholly possessed  
Amazing eyes, and not  
Acknowledge, but own? (167-84)

In this last stanza, the evidence of the ruined, irredeemable pastoral world is everywhere. The white male speaker still positions himself as lustful, animalistic exploiter—still drawn toward “slave quarters,” even two hundred years later, and still he gives no mention of the slave women themselves, cannot countenance their humanity. The “real moon,” which the speaker earlier tried to reinvent as whole, to represent a tranquil, restored world, here “comes apart.” The false images, the facades and fictional narratives, cannot hold. The past, and all its devastations and

cruelties, return with the flip of a switch, revealed in the beams of a car's headlights. And finally, what should be love between a father and child turns to hatred—and that hatred, syntactically, comes from both sides, both the heart of the father/owner and the eyes of the child/possession. In this final series of questions, as a kind of summation of the whole poem, Dickey makes it plain that exploitation, injustice, and racism have ruined not just the idyllic southern pastoral of the past; the continuing racism and exploitative desires in the present day render impossible the restoration or renewal of the pastoral world, with its attendant, required values of connection to the land and true relationships with others. "Slave Quarters" is Dickey's most direct approach to racial oppression and violence in the South. That the present speaker imagines himself in the place of the plantation master demonstrates Dickey's awareness—and profound unease—that oppression and violence did not end with emancipation.



In one of his longest, most extraordinary poems, "May Day Sermon to the Women of Gilmer County, Georgia, by a Woman Preacher Leaving the Baptist Church," Dickey again returns to the unraveling of the pastoral. Though the scenario is quite different from either "The Sheep Child" or "Slave Quarters," the material for the poem is similar. Dickey again draws on stereotypes and caricatures, this time of southern mountain folk, including a one-eyed mechanic on a motorbike; a pale red-headed girl; the girl's father, a religious fundamentalist who recites all of Obadiah and beats his daughter with a willow branch; and the narrator, a fervent revivalist preacher (though Dickey twists this stereotype a bit, making her a woman and a Baptist deserter).<sup>51</sup> Dickey wields these southern stereotypes of supremely strict (and wrongheaded)

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<sup>51</sup> "May Day Sermon" is a lyric, dithyrambic extension of Dickey's earlier narrative poem, "Cherrylog Road," in the collection *Helmets* (1964). (In fact, the actual Cherrylog Road runs straight through Gilmer County, the setting of "May Day Sermon.") "Cherrylog Road," like "May Day Sermon," reverses Dickey's typical pastoral pattern of reconnecting with the landscape first in order to fulfill the soul, and then

religiosity without mercy and the legendary revivalist tradition perhaps in part to parody them and to mock those who hold such stereotypes, as he makes his characters outrageous, extreme, and well-nigh impossible to believe. But more importantly, Dickey uses this material and the perspective of the woman preacher to point us back toward his original pastoral vision and to highlight the reasons for its undoing. The fundamental reason for the crumbling of the pastoral vision in “May Day Sermon” is the same as it is in the other poems—excessive violence and domination, even in the name of God, in this case, as the father justifies his abuse through a misreading of scripture. And it takes the woman preacher’s completely astonishing, outward spiraling, all-encompassing sermon in order to restore the pastoral vision, as she moves beyond Old Testament law and instead preaches a far more feminist gospel of renewal through desire, love, and union with nature, using the legend of the red-headed girl and her one-eyed mechanic as her exemplar.<sup>52</sup> Thus, “May Day Sermon” explores *both* the corruption of the pastoral vision due to excessive violence *and* its restoration through love—and, in a fairly astonishing twist, through retributive violence and redemptive death. In this poem, Dickey illuminates a pathway back toward wholeness and redemption, a pathway out of the violence, domination, and ruin that have stained the southern landscape and southern people, particularly the people who traditionally have not held agency or power (in this poem, the women of Gilmer County), and it empowers those people to reclaim the pastoral tradition and its promises of redemption and renewal.

The title of the poem itself points toward these themes, as “May Day” signifies the renewal of spring, and the woman preacher “Leaving the Baptist Church” points toward a new

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reuniting with other people in stronger relationships. In these two cases, the love of two people revitalizes their spirits, and the landscape is then restored by and through that love. Thus, “Cherrylog Road” is an earlier foray into the territory of “May Day Sermon,” where the legend of the mechanic and the red-headed girl serve as a basis for a new theology and a new pastoral vision, one which enriches and renews the spirits of the listening congregation.

<sup>52</sup> This kind of renewal, found through love and a restored connection with the natural world, echoes the themes and images of Spencer’s “Before the Feast at Shushan” and several of Toomer’s pieces from *Cane*, most notably “Carma,” “Fern,” and “Georgia Dusk.”

path toward salvation, outside of traditional religious strictures. But for the first few pages of the poem, the title is the only sign of hope, along with a single shaft of light that enters the dim and musty barn, the initial setting of the poem. Indeed, the first several stanzas are deeply, darkly frightening, a slow burn of suspense as the father's impending violence and the daughter's terrifying suffering become clearer. At the opening, the minister immediately inverts the traditional view of God's goodness and mercy, as she intones: "Each year at this time I shall be telling you of the Lord / —Fog, gamecock, snake, and neighbor—giving men all the help they need / To drag their daughters into barns" (3).<sup>53</sup> That barn itself is ominous, with a fox hide stretched across the door and a "snake in the rafters" licking up the last of the sun. Just a few lines further, the preacher further upends traditional views of God, conflating him with that snake, the emblem of the devil: Jehovah is "Down on His belly," "descending" and "creek-curving," slithering through fog. The father is convinced that his daughter, in fact, has brought that evil down on them; the condom he has found, the evidence of her illicit meeting with the one-eyed mechanic, is compared to "a serpent / under the weaving willow" (3). But Dickey evinces the father's own evil, defunct soul, as he mimics the Crucifixion by hanging his daughter from tractor chains by her arms and hair, and lashing her with the switch. Thus, throughout the first few pages of the poem, Dickey makes it explicit that this rural world is not Eden, but is its direct opposite, far more like the Garden of Gethsemane, where the girl screams and sobs. In fact, the girl tied up in the barn is "dancing / On the red clay floor of Hell" (3-4). The vision of the South as an edenic pastoral is entirely disrupted; domestic violence and extreme religiosity has turned this place into a hellish nightmare.

Despite the gruesome beating the preacher describes, and despite her father's insistence that this punishment fits the Old Testament prophets' calls for repentance ("her father screaming /

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<sup>53</sup> Due to the length of this poem, I will cite quotations by page number rather than line number.

Scripture CHAPTER and verse beating it into her with a weeping / Willow branch”), the daughter hangs onto her own beliefs, her own convictions about the salvific holiness of love. Dickey uses competing imagery to underscore the fierce tensions between their ideals, as well as to highlight the father’s destructive corruption of the pastoral and the daughter’s creative and empathic conceptions of love. The father’s convictions, for example, are represented by the tractor and its chains, the tractor

gaslessly straining believing  
 It must pull up a stump pull pull down the walls of the barn  
 Like Dagon’s temple set the Ark of the Lord in its place change all  
 Things for good, by pain. (4).

This imagery equates the father’s undertaking with the fall of the Philistine temple, destroyed by Samson. And though Samson’s act served as vindication for the Israelites and displayed God’s power and victory over all other idols and peoples, the act also destroyed Samson himself. The comparison between the barn and Dagon’s temple, then, emphasizes the father’s righteous indignation, the way he equates himself to biblical prophets. Simultaneously, however, this allusion emphasizes the father’s hellbent impulse to destroy this rural place and everything in it, including his daughter and himself. Additionally, Dickey makes the lifeless tractor into the father’s symbolic ally. The tractor, of course, represents agriculture, which is necessarily a transformation and taming of nature, but its presence in this poem may also indicate the destruction of wildness. Finally, the father’s excessive accusations, religiosity, and punishments all point to him as the figure who destroys the pastoral world. Reciting Obadiah (the minor prophet who foresaw God’s punishment of Esau’s descendants, the Edomites who lived, significantly for this poem, in the mountains), he drowns out his daughter’s screams, as well as the natural world’s sounds of sympathy. Additionally, her father heaps punishment on her for,

apparently, every illicit relationship that has ever been, including “Bathsheba and David,” “the woman taken / Anywhere anytime,” even the “virgin sighing” over imaginary sexual encounters (6). This excess and dominating violence put him in the same category as the boys who violated helpless animals and the slave owner who exploited and raped his slaves. The father’s cruelty connects him directly with these other corrupted and corrupting antipastoral figures.

By contrast, the imagery associated with the daughter’s desires is imaginative, creative, restorative, and above all, associated with the vitality and sympathy of the natural world. The gnats in the barn, for example, though small and powerless in comparison to a tractor—and perhaps even irksome—watch over the daughter, and in this moment, they swarm together to make an image of hope for the girl while she endures the beating: “Gnats in the air they boil recombine go mad with striving / To form the face of her lover, as when he lay at Nickajack Creek / With her by his motorcycle looming” (4). Either her creative imagination or the empathy of the natural world is at work here, and in either case, creation triumphs over destruction. The gnats reappear throughout the poem, tiny messengers who bridge the natural and spiritual and physical worlds, who provide hope and live ecstatically, fully, and entirely in community. They are significant symbols, reflecting and amplifying the girl’s own quest for love and fulfillment; very often in the poem, they run parallel to her. For example, she is “dancing with God” and simultaneously

gnats in their own midst and fury  
Of swarming-time, crowd into the barn their sixty-year day consumed  
In this sunset die in a great face of light that swarms and screams  
Of love (5)

Here the gnats, creating an image out of their swarm, cram a whole life of love and ecstasy into a short day, and in so doing, they reflect the intensity, “fury,” beauty, and spirituality (“a great face of light”) of the girl’s love.

And the gnats are not alone in their sympathetic symbolism; throughout the poem, Dickey pairs the girl and her lover, reunited and free, with eroticized images of the natural world rejuvenated and resurrected. For example, the preacher depicts the one-eyed mechanic, flying down the road on his motorcycle, at the center of a world coming alive all around him. She proclaims that just as “spirit / Enters his sex,” just as his soul is connected to and through his physical love and desire, so too do the “butterflies, amazed, pass out / Of their natal silks” (7). And so too the “tight snake takes a great breath bursts / Through himself and leaves himself behind.” Just as the man expands (literally and figuratively) and “beholds [how] his loins / Shine with his children forever burn with the very juice / Of resurrection,” so too the river, the trout, the roosters, the snakes, the weasels, and all other creatures find renewal and rebirth. This pattern recurs throughout the poem; whenever the girl screams, whenever the mechanic rides, whenever they conjure one another’s faces or physically reunite, the natural world responds in sympathy. The pastoral world is restored through their love and connection.

Certainly, the girl’s defiance, along with her spiritual connection to her lover and to the natural world, thwarts her father’s punishment, and throughout the poem she becomes the emblem of transformation, renewal, and resurrection. For example, though she screams in pain during the whipping, she also continues to turn that pain to ecstasy, replacing the beating with her memory of lovemaking at Nickajack Creek. Several times throughout the poem, the speaker exchanges full sentences for choppy, accelerating language that mimics a sexual climax, until the preacher claims that the pain she feels is the sweeter pain of intercourse, and that eventually “she feels God’s willow laid on her, at last, / With no more pressure than hay” (8). Her ability to

transform pain into renewal—and not, significantly, through repentance, but rather through adherence to her values of love, physical fulfillment, and spiritual connection—makes her the embodiment of pastoral values.

That she embodies the pastoral values of restoration and balance becomes even clearer when, after the beating, she finds her father in the house and kills him with both a hatchet and an icepick. This claim seems counterintuitive, even absurd, initially—how can a murderer embody pastoral values? And so it is imperative to remember that for Dickey, violence itself is not antipastoral; while excess violence and the violence of domination destroy the pastoral world and its values, that violence which sustains, renews, and creates harmony and balance enhances and rejuvenates the pastoral world. The daughter's murder of her father is—surprisingly, perhaps—the latter type of violence because it puts an end to his reign of terror and domination and, in that correction, it restores balance. Indeed, in this act, and in her own subsequent death, the daughter transforms from a victim of violence into a fertility goddess, and each year her mystical return with her lover brings the beginnings of spring to Gilmer County. She is, after all, “blood-beast and Venus together,” the complete union of the blood of the body, the beasts of the land, and the goddess love, the reunification of the physical, natural, and spiritual worlds (6).

The language surrounding the murder, full of Dickey's ironic twists and pastoral symbolism, serves as further evidence underscoring the justice of the daughter's act. For example, just before his daughter whacks him with the hatchet, the father recites Obadiah, and despite his intent in that recitation, the words turn against him and find him accused. The preacher incorporates these words directly from his mouth (which has not yet happened in the poem), illustrating that the condemnation he has doled out will come back on his own head, that even though he does not recognize himself in this prophecy, it is, ironically, meant for him who proudly destroys others:

O daughters, he is rambling  
In Obadiah the pride of thine heart hath deceived thee, thou  
That dwelleth in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high  
That saith in his heart O daughters who shall bring me down  
To the ground? And she comes down putting her back into  
The hatchet (9)

Earlier, the preacher calls for words to be finally “let out of the Bible’s / Black box” (4), freed from the letter of the law and literal interpretation, and here, through the use of irony, the words have been freed. They are free to wheel back around on their speaker, to condemn him who condemned without mercy, who misunderstood the meaning of justice, love, harmony, and forgiveness. The daughter, though she does not speak, employs those words against her father, in the kind of violent act that restores justice and balance. She demonstrates amply that the pride of his heart deceived him, that though he thought he could not be brought down, she is the one to do it.

Dickey underscores this ironic use of biblical language with two further allusions, both of which place the daughter again in the position of the pastoral world’s avenging angel. The preacher notes, first, “it is easy for a needle to pass / Through the eye of a man bound for Heaven,” playing on the biblical proclamation, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24 NIV). The irony here is thick—the original context, of course, implies that selfish or self-serving hypocrisy prevents a man from entering heaven. The father certainly displays this kind of hypocrisy and self-aggrandizement in his certainty that he is the Lord’s spokesman, judge, and jury. The daughter, then, inverts Jesus’ proverb; since he cannot pass through the eye of the needle, following the righteous path, she stabs a needle (an icepick, in the poem) through his eye. Her vengeance is, in fact, poetic, and her retribution seems divine. Thus, despite any misgivings raised by the abhorrent violence of this scene, Dickey’s speaker underscores her righteousness

and her restoration of balance and harmony in the world. Her righteousness (or her assured forgiveness) is emphasized in the second biblical allusion: after she leaves the scene of the murder, she “naked goes / Without further sin through the house” (9). The language here is strongly reminiscent of Jesus’s words after rescuing an accused adulteress from death by stoning. In the gospel’s account, Jesus halts the Pharisees from carrying out their execution by saying that those without sin should be the first to cast their stones. When no one is left to condemn her, he says to her, “Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11 NIV). In the preacher’s language, the daughter is paralleled with the accused adulteress, and both are forgiven, but even more than that, the allusion underscores the fact that the girl was not involved in adultery, and so she is further absolved of guilt. The woman preacher’s words after the girl’s murder are very much like Christ’s, and the girl’s nakedness further symbolizes that cleansing, her innocence thereafter. Thus, Dickey’s ironic use of biblical allusions signals the girl’s vindication and resituates the murder as a pastoral renewal.

Additionally, the speaker employs natural imagery throughout her description of the murder, and those natural images echo the images used in Dickey’s foundational, idealized pastorals. The moon, so often an emblem of renewal and mystic power in Dickey’s poems, here returns as a parallel to the daughter’s weapons: “each hones itself as the moon does new by phases” (9). Thus, the icepick and hatchet become symbols of renewal, of excess pared away and light sharpened. Additionally, throughout the scene of the murder, fog begins to swirl, “floating unchanged into the house coming atom / By atom,” and after her father dies, the daughter circles through the house, beginning to embody that fog, “floating in and out of all / Four rooms [she] comes onto the porch on cloud-feet” (9). Throughout Dickey’s body of work, fog represents an altered, mystical, renewed state, an element that blends water and air and subsumes the earth and all those who walk on it. In “Fog Envelops the Animals,” an earlier poem from

*Drowning with Others* (1962), the fog surrounds the speaker and enables him to merge into nature and then to reemerge, baptized and transformed. Lieberman suggests that in order to merge with the natural world, the speaker must “divest himself of those aspects of humanness that unfit him for animal beatitude,” and that “the fog is the medium of purification” (“James” 124). Thus, fog “allegorizes,” as Turner explains, “fusion with the elements, [or] the phenomenon of ‘merging’: the assumption of the individual into the essence of nature” (26). In “May Day Sermon,” too, fog recurs throughout the poem as a symbol of transported mysticism, of divine presence on earth, of the union of all things physical and spiritual. Significantly, the fog never enters the barn while the father beats and screams at his daughter; when the fog does near the father, “his legs [are] blown out” by it, a signal of violence (blown out like a landmine gone off) and death (a snuffed candle). However, the fog does follow his daughter throughout the rest of the poem, gently immersive, just as it follows her lover, coming over him as he rides toward her to take her away from that hellish scene. Thus, the fog in this poem accumulates further meaning; it signals the transformative power of love between the girl and the mechanic that will renew the earth and the preacher’s congregants, and it emblemizes the return to wildness, the merging with the essence of nature.

In the last few pages, Dickey reiterates the central meaning of the preacher’s sermon: that the return to wildness is salvation, that the redemption of the pastoral world happens through love and true union, that excising dominating violence from that world—and replacing it with holy connection to nature and to others—is a return to God. The girl and her lover speed away on his motorcycle, leaving all violence and suffering behind them. They meet their death on the road, snagged by “the insane vine / Of the scuppernong,” but their death is imagined as an immediate assumption into nature, creating an eternal union, and the preacher emphasizes their yearly resurrection in the spring (11). Thus, like the speakers of “Sleeping Out at Easter,” “The

Vegetable King,” and “Into the Stone,” as well as Donald Armstrong in “The Performance” and the speaker’s brother in “The Other,” the red-headed girl and her lover take their place in Dickey’s pantheon of fertility gods and pastoral saviors.

Again in these last pages, Dickey mythologizes the lovers through the surrounding imagery. The imagery of fog recurs, returning year after year, layering over the farm animals as they stampede away, set free from domestic servitude each year by the girl’s spirit: “the stalls fill once / More with trampling like Exodus” (11). The animals gradually return to their wild natures; the mice leave the barn and “wade the fields like the moon,” the horse learns to drink from streams like the deer, and the bull wanders the woods under the moon. The fog lays over the lovers as they accelerate away from the farm, the girl’s packed clothing streaming behind them, flying out of her saddlebags. They are “stoned out of their minds on the white / Lighting of fog singing,” and their joy radiates outward, infecting all the creatures of the earth, even creating miracles of rebirth and renewal: “peanuts and beans exchange / Shells in joy” (10) and “all the chicks she fed, each year at this time / Burst from their eggs as she passes” (11). And though they have driven off the road, “the creek bed appeared to bear them out of the Bible / ’s farm through pine-clouds of gamecocks where no earthly track / Is, but those risen out of warm currents” (10). All of nature supports their joyous exodus, and they in turn restore the world as their resurrected souls pass through it. Even Dickey’s famous owl-king here sees them on their way, under symbolic moonlight turned gold. The owl watches over them

when God takes the stone  
Blind sun off its eyes, and it sees sees hurtle in the utter dark  
Gold of its sight, a boy and a girl buried deep in the cloud  
Of their speed drunk, children drunk with pain and the throttle  
Wide open, in love (11)

Thus, for the speaker, the lovers' story is a way of accessing again the primitive world beyond civilized society, before the rules of religion or the strictures of culture came into being.

Throughout her sermon, and especially at the poem's conclusion, she admonishes the women of Gilmer County, her congregation, to "listen" to the earth, to the whispers of the lovers and the echoes of the motorcycle engine in spring, to the animals speaking to themselves of holiness. She tells them to pass the story onto their daughters, to carry forward this myth of hope and love. But even more than that, she exhorts them to live out the myth, to become it, to follow in the lovers' path back toward wildness and renewal, resurrection of the spirit and pure existence in nature:

Listen O daughters turn turn  
In your sleep rise with your backs on fire in spring in your socks  
Into the arms of your lovers: every last one of you, listen one-eyed  
With your man in hiding in fog where the animals walk through  
The white breast of the Lord muttering walk with nothing  
To do but be in the spring laurel in the mist and self-sharpened  
Moon walk through the resurrected creeks through the Lord  
At their own pace the cow shuts its mouth and the Bible is still  
Still open at anything we are gone the barn wanders over the earth. (12-13)

These last lines call the women back to Eden, back to the search for the perfected pastoral. The women of this church, breaking from traditional orthodoxy, are gone, absorbed into the wilderness, into the mist and the moonlight. The barn, which symbolizes domestication and suffering in the poem, "wanders over the earth" like Adam and Eve ejected from Eden, exiled from heaven. The women, on the other hand, follow the lovers, the icons of this new fertility myth, local legends transformed into spiritual guides. In so doing, they restore the connection between the physical, the natural, and the spiritual; they reconnect their souls and their sexuality. The lovers, the woman preacher, and the congregants restore the wild, holy pastoral to a rural

world gone awry with an insistence on patriarchal control, with domination of daughters and wives, animals and fields.

On the whole, “May Day Sermon” is a restorative pastoral, but it is far more complex and full of tension than his earlier idealized poems like “Sleeping Out at Easter.” Throughout the poem, Dickey’s language is always threatening to go wild, to escape the speaker’s control. The poem sometimes strains a reader’s sense of credulity, and certainly her patience. Occasionally, the images border on the ridiculous (why, for example, are the women always envisioned as naked except for their socks?), and the language borders on the redundant (describing the girl’s clothes flying out of the saddlebags, Dickey deploys six different verbs in a row). The fervent tenor of the sermon does, as Turner suggests, seem parodic at times, poking fun at stereotypical backwoods revivalists and sweating, exhortative Southern Baptist preachers (even if this one is a woman on her way out of the church). Additionally, because of these centrifugal forces of language, the speaker is betrayed by some of the implications and connotations she raises. Her overly-eroticized language approaches the comic at times, thereby undercutting the seriousness and significance of her message and perhaps rendering her feminist theology of earthly sensuality less holy, less credible. For example, Dickey employs the word “coming” throughout the poem, too often to be a mistake (and too much in general). Also, when the girl recalls her rendezvous with her lover, she shouts out the several nicknames she has for him, including those abutting the absurd, “God-darling” and “angel-stud” (4). Much later in the poem, Dickey describes their liaison, with her lover placing his hand “in her young burning bush” (8). These mixtures of biblical allusions and sexual connotations strain the reader’s sense of the woman preacher’s message as a serious counter to Old Testament profundity. And yet, that nearly-comic admixture is, perhaps, part of the point. Daniel Cross Turner notes that the pastor

subverts patriarchal control over the Word by willfully conflating religious and erotic language throughout her sermon...In the culturally grounded mythic tale she constructs, a young woman serves as the purveyor of the primitive, thereby usurping the masculinized power of primal violence and sexuality. (37)

And in fact, the poem's unorthodox theology (in some ways directly connected to ecofeminist theology, creating an unexpected connection with Anne Spencer's work) insists upon reconnecting the erotic to the natural and spiritual worlds, to create a fuller, richer, more holistic spirituality, to establish stronger connections with God.

Indeed, the story of the lovers becomes a parable—far-fetched in places, full of odd comedic moments and dark violence, but overall, a parable nonetheless of earthly and spiritual connection and subsequent renewal. The daughter's murder of her father, for example, undermines patriarchal control of the Word and restores justice and balance to the earth. The pure connection between the lovers and their subsequent death becomes a sacrificial rite that nourishes and renews the world. By the end of the poem, the caricatured Christian God (with his "great white father- / head") cannot find the lovers, and he cries, dwelling on the old myths of "judgment and flood / And the promised land" (12). But the lovers have already found and reestablished the "promised land"—"the animals are saved" without Noah and the Ark, and all their voices rise in unison with the lovers. The hogs squeal, the bull lows, the weasel dances, and the wind prophesies, and the barn—emblem of domestication, suffering, and captivity—falls like Jericho. The wildness of the sermon is part and parcel of Dickey's "primitive essentialism." The wildness restores the poem to Dickey's perfected pastoral circle, where all things—nature, humanity, sexuality, spirituality, violence, love—are again part of that great heraldic wheel.

This poem is one of Dickey's foremost achievements because it incorporates his distinctive southern images and characters, his exultant and expansive style, his sense of humor, his unflinching portrayals of the many uses and misuses of violence, and his far more direct

portrayals of the realities (and stereotypes) of southern history and culture. “May Day Sermon” does not present a stable narrative, and it certainly has its pitfalls and parodic moments. And in stark terms, it also presents the corruption of the pastoral world by excess violence, religious extremism, and domination over the natural world. But compared to Dickey’s other corrupted pastorals, including “The Sheep Child” and “Slave Quarters,” this poem offers us a way beyond corruption and back toward salvation and wholeness and connection with nature and divinity. “May Day Sermon” incorporates nearly all of the features that make Dickey a distinctive and celebrated poet while simultaneously managing to reestablish his vision of a perfected, wild, idealized pastoral.



Throughout this section, I have worked to demonstrate that Dickey’s poetry after *Into the Stone* resists and disrupts the binary that first book created—that the South is a pastoral haven, and the world outside the South is the source of corruption and excessive violence. In these later poems, Dickey directly confronts the excessive violence, domination of nature, and suffering within the South itself, much as Spencer and Toomer had done in their work before his. But, as “May Day Sermon” demonstrates, he is unwilling to entirely give up on the possibility of discovering that ultimate perfected pastoral vision amid the landscape and people of the South. Though his restorative nostalgia unravels after his first collection, the reflective nostalgia in his later poems allows room for both the dissolution of ideals in the face of modern conflicts as well as the sincere longing for a restored, redemptive, and connected world. His 1979 collection, *The Strength of Fields*, brings together these strands of Dickey’s work in more tempered, subdued tones; incorporating the imagery of industry and urban life, Dickey still presents the longing for union with the natural world and the resulting restoration of the spirit. In the following, final

section of this chapter, I will discuss the title poem, “The Strength of Fields,” as one example of how Dickey sustains his pastoral vision for the South—and for the nation—throughout his career.



#### 5. Coda: “The Strength of Fields”

Dickey’ wrote “The Strength of Fields” for Jimmy Carter’s presidential inauguration. Such an occasion obviously places tricky and multivalent constraints on the poet; while the content of the poem may include subversive moments or some pointed political commentary, overall, inaugural poems are inspiring (sometimes blandly so) and accessible (sometimes to the point of banality), intended both to honor the newly elected president and to speak somehow in a unifying and inclusive voice for a diverse and sometimes divided society. As “occasional verse,” these poems are “traditionally public, communal, and written with the intent to be shared in performance,” as Jason Camlot notes, and, like Robert Frost’s poem for John F. Kennedy’s inauguration, they ought to “articulate the public, official spirit and dutiful sense of purpose.”

In reviewing Dickey’s work, especially those poems written in the late 1960s and early 1970s (including the poems of corrupted pastorals discussed above, as well as such controversial poems as “The Firebombing” and such ecstatic fatal rhapsodies as “Falling”), it is not difficult to imagine Dickey as capable of performance; in fact, he was a captivating, electric reader of his own poems. And his performance often extended beyond the stage; he made himself well-known as the brazen loudspeaker for poetry across the U.S., the life of the party, the hard-drinking womanizing Romantic poet, some combination of Lord Byron and Walt Whitman brought to life. (His thinly-disguised, third-person-as-actually-autobiographical 1965 *New York Times* essay, “Barnstorming for Poetry,” both discusses and performs his overwhelming personality.) But all of these facts about Dickey, including his off-stage reputation and his poetic persona, lead to one question: why choose Dickey for a presidential inauguration? Reading poems like “The Sheep

Child” or “May Day Sermon” for such an occasion would be anathema; their wildness, their surreal landscapes, and explicit sexual and violent scenes are simply too *vivid*, too extravagant, too individual, and too full of tensions and condemnations to suit the occasion, and the “dutiful sense of purpose” or communal spirit is muddy at best, parodic at worst. The almost-ex-Baptist preacher speaker of “May Day Sermon” is, despite (or because of) her fervent beliefs, quite obviously not a unifying Christian voice; the speaker of “Sleeping Out at Easter,” by contrast, is too private and too mystic to fully communicate a communal message. Thus, it is difficult not to nod with Linda Mizejewski when she comments, a bit sardonically, “President Carter certainly blessed an unusual inaugural poet” (409). And yet, perhaps Carter and his staff saw in Dickey not just the most well-known and lauded southern poet of the time, but also the same effort toward hope, unity, and redemption that I see in tracking his pastoral vision from his first book onward. Even though Dickey’s later poems take up controversial themes and disturbing content more and more often, that insistence on the eventual reconnection of all beings in the world is ever-present, a resilient underground river welling up in even the darkest, deepest places.

No matter the reason that he was chosen, Dickey rose to the task; though “The Strength of Fields” is not his finest work, by my mind—probably because his more natural habits of exuberance and thrill and dramatic contrast had to be constrained for the occasion—it is a remarkable poem that manages to extend his pastoral ideal to a national audience, that braids together many of the most positive and idealistic moments of his previous pastoral iterations, and that places his perfected pastoral at the center of our human quest for meaning and purpose. In Dave Smith’s review of this poem, he does not use the word “pastoral,” but he alludes to nearly all of the elements that have compassed Dickey’s pastoral vision throughout his oeuvre:

Dickey...skates the thin ice of fear and trembling, courageously and believably assuming the role of the Chosen Man doomed to bring back from the psychic underworld the secret

of life's fertility and renewal. There is no dramatic occasion or plot save the presiding ghost of the monomyth's rite of passage but the poem has the force of the private man's public declaration of faith in the earth and the dead who speak to us....Straight through Dickey speaks with the power of a man who has seen beyond the surfaces of things and, as hard as it is to say it, he redeems us. ("Strength" 354)

Smith highlights this poem's emphasis on fertility, renewal, faith in the earth, connection with the dead, and ultimate redemption—and later he notes that this poem is not a solo note, but rather it is embedded in a whole collection of poems which also emphasize redemption and renewal. All of these elements point directly back toward the pastoral, and so it is evident that Dickey has not abandoned his pastoral vision at any point throughout his career—and here he has brought it to a national platform. "The Strength of Fields" not only celebrates the southern landscape and reconnection between people, the earth, and God, but that also extends that pastoral vision wider, to encompass symbols of industry and urban life, and to deliver a message of the interconnectedness of all beings to a national audience. In this poem, Dickey continues and reinforces his southern pastoral vision, but he also extends his vision beyond the South, no doubt something Carter also hoped to do.

Even Dickey's epigram for "The Strength of Fields" gestures toward inclusivity and hope of restoration, and it succinctly captures the mythic pattern he employs throughout his work: "...a separation from the world, / a penetration to some source of power / and a life-enhancing return." He attributes these lines to Arnold van Gennep, a French folklorist and ethnographer who influenced Joseph Campbell in his work on archetypal myths. Van Gennep's lines, from *Rites de Passage*, appear universal, all-encompassing, a way of naming every journey, and in particular, the journey the poem depicts, centered on one speaker living through one night, as he questions his solitude, his connection with others, and his purpose in this life, on this earth. Even the

epigram, then, searches for the threads that connect each individual story, reaches for some sense of unity and universal understanding.

Formally, the poem's first dozen or so lines appear scattered, somewhat aimless, a kind of wandering around the page:

Moth-force a small town always has,  
Given the night.  
What field-forms can be,  
Outlying the small civic light-decisions over  
A man walking near home?  
Men are not where he is  
Exactly now, but they are around him around him like the strength  
Of fields. The solar system floats on  
Above him in town-moths.  
Tell me, train-sound  
With all your long-lost grief,  
what I can give.  
Dear Lord of all the fields  
what am I going to *do*? (1-14)

The images, too, reinforce the sense of wandering, flitting uncertainty, not least because of the repeated image of the moths. The moths are a “force” in the first line, but they are an emblem of both creation and reduction—they mimic the floating solar system, but in so doing, they reduce the majestic vastness of the universe down to their small, fragile wings. The moths also, in some ways, reduce Dickey’s usual vision of the wilderness; these “town-moths” are a far cry from the grand owl-king that usually presides over his mythic universe. And yet, these tiny, mundane winged creatures are perhaps more akin to Dickey’s concept of humanity in this poem—including our fleeting time on earth and our search for the metaphorical light—than the powerful, fierce, silent owl, so at home in the dark. Indeed, the central figure of this poem, the speaker walking through the town, is guided like the moths by the “civic light-decisions.” The tensions for this

speaker are plain; he is solitary amid society, he is lonely amid many, and he is lost even following these guides. There are hints that he will rejoin that society, that he will find his place—after all, the men of the small town, like the “strength of fields,” are all around him, supporting him, even if they are, this night, unseen. But these first fourteen lines do not resolve these tensions; rather, they conclude on the ultimate questions of duty and purpose, the meaning of a single human life amid the earth’s vastness.

The speaker then turns, like the moths, directly to the street-lights, “blue-force and frail” but with a secret power seemingly drawn from deep under the earth. In an echo of his earlier poem, “Power and Light,” wherein electricity serves as a metaphor for the connection between all beings, the speaker in this poem asks the street lamps how to draw energy from the earth itself, how to find his power: “tell me how to do it    how / To withdraw    how to penetrate and find the source / Of the power you always had” (16-18). The language here draws directly on Van Geppen’s epigram, identifying again the archetype of the hero’s journey, and so, despite the speaker’s solitude (talking, after all, to God and to streetlamps rather than other people), he is connected by his archetypal desires and experiences to all the other “sleeping men” around him.

And then, as if this universal question has unlocked some deep well of knowing, we come to the first epiphanic moment of the poem. As if addressing the whole of the scene, from the tiny moth to the wide vast field, to the moon and all “hoping men,” the speaker asks: “You? I?    What difference is there?” (22). Here, the speaker finds his first revelation of the connection between all things, the same life-force within them. He adds, in what is perhaps one of Dickey’s loveliest moments: “We can all be saved / By a secret blooming” (22-3). From this moment forward, the speaker reveals, slowly, like time-lapse photography of a flower opening, the discovery of his own purpose, his own salvation on this earth. After this apex, the poem continues to build on this discovery and it continues to build the connections between people, the

earth, the sea, the skies, and the divine, resituating everything in relation to everything else, drawing parallels between the moon and the brain, the sea and the fields, the sun and the stars, the dead and the living, the trains and the moths. And formally, the poem begins to take a firmer, tighter shape, less scattered and more sure-footed than the opening lines:

The stars splinter, pointed and wild. The dead lie under  
The pastures. They look on and help. Tell me, freight-train,  
When there is no one else  
To hear. Tell me in a voice the sea  
Would have, if it had not a better one: as it lifts,  
Hundreds of miles away, its fumbling, deep-structured roar  
Like the profound, unstoppable craving  
Of nations for their wish.

Hunger, time and the moon:

The moon lying on the brain  
as on the excited sea as on  
The strength of fields. (29-40)

Indeed, this is one of Dickey's great lists, reminiscent of his earliest poems but finer and sharper in its imagery, and in this inventory of the natural and man-made world, he builds those connections and the energy that will propel him toward his next and ultimate discovery. It is as if, in the middle of the poem, the whole universe begins to cohere, to reconnect, and to provide the speaker with all the energy and wisdom and clarity that he needs to move forward, to understand, finally, what he is going to *do*. The "Lord of all the fields" answers the speaker's query through the language of the whole, connected world, both wild and domesticated, both rural and urban. In this list, Dickey enacts his pastoral vision of the connectedness of all things, and he expands it to include those things—trains, streetlamps, towns, even nations—that were before seen as intrusions or disruptions of the wild pastoral landscape. This Whitmanesque poem, then, strains to extend the unifying vision, to embrace not just the southland and its creatures but the nation as a whole.

Dickey concludes the poem with what is perhaps his clearest vision of the pastoral's promise. He does not here include the same kind of violence and death that his earlier pastorals required, perhaps because of the occasion, though he does include a muted but palpable sense of the self-sacrifice necessary not only to find salvation for oneself, but to work toward the redemption and restoration of all beings:

Lord, let me shake

With purpose. Wild hope can always spring  
From tended strength. Everything is in that.  
That and nothing but kindness. More kindness, dear Lord

Of the renewing green.

That is where it all has to start:  
With the simplest things. More kindness will do nothing less  
Than save every sleeping one  
And night-walking one

Of us.

My life belongs to the world. I will do what I can. (40-50)

Hope, strength, kindness, selfless devotion: these final lines articulate Dickey's assurance that these fundamental values, represented in the "renewing green" of the restored pastoral, lead to redemption. In the end, the speaker is, again, the "Vegetable King," the sacrificial king who makes all things new. And yet, there is in this poem a stronger sense that the "Chosen Man" is, in fact, each person and being on earth, that we are tied together in an intricate web made better and stronger by kindness, by those "simplest things." The final lines drive home the overall message of Dickey's perfected pastoral: through individual efforts toward bettering the world, we reconnect to both the renewed green world and the "Lord of all the fields," the "Lord of the renewing green," and through that reconnection, we can extend kindness to one another, and thereby we save each other and ourselves. The perfected pastoral vision is, in short, a desire for a

redeemed, renewed world that fully connects people to one another, to God, and to the earth and its creatures.



## 6. Conclusion: Anne Spencer, Jean Toomer, James Dickey, and Eleanor Ross Taylor

Throughout this chapter, I have established Dickey's pastoral vision as connected to and reflective of the pastoral visions of Anne Spencer and Jean Toomer, while also highlighting their divergences and differences. Dickey's early southern pastoral vision, for example, wherein the southern wilderness serves as a haven and retreat from the outside world's excessive violence and waste of life (especially in war), shares some common ground with Anne Spencer's literary gardens, also a haven from injustice and violence. However, Dickey's wilderness—and the mythic pastoral he creates out of it—incorporates redemptive violence, and his poetry insists upon an attention to the rhythms of life, death, and rebirth, the sacrifice of life that nourishes and supports other lives. For Spencer, violence is held firmly outside the garden gates, and it is generally portrayed as damaging to the idealized pastoral vision. Additionally, unlike Spencer, initially Dickey refuses to acknowledge any excessive violence or domination within his beloved and revered southern world; it seems quite likely that his position as a white man (even writing at the same time as the Civil Rights campaign) enabled him to ignore that reality far longer than Spencer. But his later poems do, finally, turn toward the South's social divisions, and these corrupted pastoral poems share similar concerns again with Spencer's damaged pastorals—while both poets also continue to insist upon the possibility of a transcendent, idealized pastoral found once again in the right relationship to the landscape. Indeed, the similarities between Dickey and Spencer, especially in the source of their idealized and perfected pastorals—the restoration of the spirit found within a deep connection to the land—are perhaps surprising, given their differences in terms of race, gender, and time period, but they are unmistakable.

Additionally, in Dickey's early work, he mirrors some of Jean Toomer's connections (and the American pastoral's traditional connection) between women and the landscape. For Dickey and Toomer, both, union with the landscape is enabled through union (physical and emotional) with a woman—and indeed, women often serve as emblems of that landscape. In his early work, however, Dickey does not yet countenance the problematic possibilities of that symbolism—that conflating women with the landscape also creates a darker set of meanings, including rape, exploitation, and violence. Only in his later poems, like “The Sheep Child,” “Slave Quarters,” and “May Day Sermon,” does Dickey pick up on the multiple layers of meaning in that symbolic relationship that were already quite apparent in many of Toomer's sketches, including “Karintha,” “Becky,” “Blood-Burning Moon” (especially in Bob Stone's descriptions of Louisa), and others. Dickey's early poems bear some relationship to Toomer's “pastoral of the averted gaze,” as the speakers in those earlier poems also try to ignore the injustice and violence present in the South; similarly, Dickey's later poems share some connections to Toomer's crystallized images that fully and clearly portray that injustice and violence.

Therefore, all three of the poets discussed in this project so far present significant challenges to traditional southern pastoral mythologies, including that of the Lost Cause and of the Agrarians, as each poet explores not only the bounty and beauty of the southern landscape—its gardens and wild spaces, its rural communities and its natural cycles—but also the social, cultural, and political divisiveness and injustices that threaten that idyllic pastoral world. And each of these three poets creates an individual, complex, and intricately crafted southern pastoral mythology that more closely mirrors their experiences of and hopes for the South. In the following chapter, I will introduce the final poet studied in this project, Eleanor Ross Taylor, who also contributes a unique version of southern pastoral that ironizes and undermines traditional

iterations of southern pastoral mythology, though her emphasis differs somewhat from Spencer's, Toomer's, or Dickey's. Taylor grew up on a farm in rural North Carolina, and she was closely connected throughout her life to various members of the Agrarian movement, but her poetry—sharply fragmented and witty, finely crafted and down to earth, full of southernisms and original language but always insistently modernist—very often works directly against the Agrarians' conceptions of the rural South as an idyllic, tranquil, virtuous, and ever-pleasant place. Indeed, especially in her poems that focus on the women in her family, Taylor provides significant evidence to counter the Agrarian myth. She very often juxtaposes the genteel expectations for her female ancestors with the difficult reality of hard work, the constraints of motherhood, and the brutal forces of nature that disrupt any sense of idyllic tranquility. Thus, akin to Spencer, Taylor persistently illustrates both women's dignity and the difficult lives they face. And akin to Dickey, Taylor also faces and works through the contradictions of the southern landscape and the complexity of southern society, though her approach to those complexities is less hyperbolic and more intricately nuanced than Dickey's. And finally, despite all of the challenges and problems Taylor portrays, her southern pastoral, too, offers hope and consolation, as do the other authors in this study. The source of Taylor's pastoral redemption, though, is closest to Toomer's, as she reveals that hope and consolation in the momentary connections and the long-sustaining relationships between people, and the landscape serves as a reflection of those relationships. Thus, while Dickey's southern pastoral vision is perhaps most akin to Spencer's, Taylor continues to explore the source of pastoral redemption found in Toomer's *Cane*.

CHAPTER V  
THE CONSOLATIONS OF IRONY: ELEANOR ROSS TAYLOR'S  
SOUTHERN PASTORAL

I remember too the stranglehold of that intense presence in Taylor's work: the straitjacket of expectations in which southern white women were destined to live.  
Betty Adcock, "The Piano in the Kitchen"

1. Introduction: Taylor's Challenge to Southern Pastoral Traditions

Eleanor Ross Taylor grew up on her family's farm on the outskirts of Norwood, North Carolina, a small town surrounded by hills, seated near the Pee Dee River and the Uwharrie National Forest. Today, the town still has one main street, one library, one museum, a small elementary school, a single park. From an outsider's perspective, on any given spring day, the town today seems idyllic, quaint, the stuff of 1950s television. And the rich green landscapes and gently rolling farms just beyond the town itself, replete with lowing cows and acres of wheat fields, seem perfectly tranquil, a respite from the honking, bustling, business-minded cities of Charlotte and Raleigh, or even the giant stretches of strip malls and the multiplying Taco Bells and Bojangles just up the road in Albemarle.

Norwood—a place Taylor dearly loved, and about which she wrote much of her poetry—seems, in short, one perfect representation of the southern pastoral world envisioned by the Agrarians. In fact, Taylor's memories of Norwood are fond; in 2000, long after she'd lived there Taylor reflected in her diary on the comfort and freedom she found in her hometown and on her family farm. She wrote that she felt "always held in captivity except...on the farm at Norwood. Caged. In the dormitory at college, in marriage, in the Taylors' bourgeois household [during] our

stay there, in college communities—till—freedom inside my own house, alone.” (qtd. in Gudas 51). In solitude, at home—those are Taylor’s two ideal states, offering safety and freedom. On the surface, then, both her rural upbringing and her sense of delight and freedom in that place seemingly indicate that Taylor’s sensibility and writing should reflect Agrarian philosophy and their idealization of an agricultural way of life. If any of the poets in this study might be expected to adhere to the traditions of the southern rural pastoral, Taylor would be that person.

However, rather than aligning with tradition, Eleanor Ross Taylor’s poetry challenges, ironizes, and subverts multiple myths crafted and created about the South, particularly those myths that engage the tropes of the pastoral. This chapter, in four sections, will examine in detail how Taylor confronts these various myths. First, in her pastoral elegies, Taylor considers the idyllic image of farm life expounded on by the Agrarians—and she subverts that image by portraying the paradox inherent in that life, that it is indeed beautiful but also painful, difficult, suffocating, particularly for the women who must adhere to duty and sacrifice for family. She challenges the images of sturdy, pious yeoman found not only in the Agrarian manifesto but also throughout the history of the pastoral elegy; her own elegies highlight not only the nobility and courage of the people who work the land, but also their foibles, sins, missteps, and the quotidian details of their reality. Not least, she subverts the traditional pastoral elegy by including memorials for women, who are so often left out or ignored by that genre.

Second, in many of her poems—particularly those in *Wilderness of Ladies*—Taylor challenges the myths (most notably found in the plantation romance, but also in other variations of the southern pastoral) of the southern white woman. She examines the lives of her female ancestors, including her mother, her aunts, and her grandmother in detail, finding that their lives not only included beauty and sweetness but also repression, fear, hardship, loss, grief, and anger. Additionally, she presents gentility and femininity as paradoxical, double-edged swords. The

strictures and demands for refinement may be suffocating, but the arts and flourishes that the women are taught (like arranging roses or learning feather-stitching) may provide glimmers of beauty in a life filled otherwise with duty and drudgery.

Third, Taylor examines her inheritance from her ancestors in poems that consider her life and the lives of her female contemporaries. In a poem like “Sister,” Taylor encompasses both her upbringing on the farm and her current life as mother and wife, finding that neither really live up to their mythical promises (either the promises of the pastoral or the promises of domesticity and motherhood), wishing to rid herself of all the strictures and requirements she faces and instead to seek authentic connection and community. In these poems, too, she lays out the tension between the desire for art and the demands of family, following—but also rejecting—the path laid out for her as a proper southern lady.

And finally, Taylor works against the prevailing tropes of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. For example, in several poems in her second book, *Welcome Eumenides*, she undermines the typical discourses swirling around war more generally —those discourses that engage patriotism, chivalry, nobility, righteousness, or freedom as rationalizations for war—focusing intently instead on the gritty reality, the hardships, the suffering, and the losses war creates. More specifically, she dislocates the Lost Cause’s southern-centric view of the Civil War, speaking instead, in one of her most impressive and complex poems, as a Yankee father who has lost his son. In this poem, particularly, the myths of the antebellum South and the Civil War lose their luster quickly, against the cruel image of a mass grave and the agonizing experience of losing a child.

Overall, in her paradoxical poems of the southern pastoral, Taylor employs biting irony to burn away inadequate, misleading, or false ideals so as to grasp a much fuller, more detailed, richer life in her poetry. Additionally, using irony to expose the inadequacy of particular

controlling myths—including myths of the southern pastoral and the Lost Cause—opens up a space in which the more authentic momentary consolations of the physical world, including genuine emotion and empathetic community, are revalued.

In the following section, before delving into a more detailed analysis of individual poems, I will provide an overview of Taylor’s biography, and I will outline some of her specific themes and concerns, set against those of the Agrarian movement. This overview is especially important for two reasons: first, Taylor’s work and life have not yet been the subject of much scholarship, and so, beginning with some significant details from her biography as well as a broader view of her overall body of work provides us with a necessary foothold before considering individual poems in depth. Second, while Taylor’s poetry may not, at first glance, appear to engage with pastoral tropes or themes, she did (as noted above) grow up in the rural South, and she developed close relationships with several members of the Agrarian group; this biographical context provokes us to ask how she responded to various conceptions of and ideologies about the South, including and especially the Agrarian myth of the virtuous, contented farmer. Indeed, viewing her poems in light of (and in contrast with) Agrarianism’s southern ideals reveals new depths in her work, and it allows us to further understand the complexity and irony of her southern pastoral, especially as she addresses and reimagines her own and her ancestors’ experiences in the rural South.



## 2. Critical Overview: Situating Taylor’s Work

One might guess that Taylor’s writing would be closely connected to the Agrarian vision not only because of her fondness for her family’s farm in Norwood, North Carolina, but also because she knew many of the Agrarians themselves so well. For most of her life, she was surrounded by, in Betty Adcock’s phrase, “a gaggle of New Critics” (13). At the Women’s

College of the University of North Carolina (now the University of North Carolina at Greensboro), Taylor studied under Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon; she became fast friends with them, and she travelled to their Sewanee, Tennessee, home to spend weeks at a time with them. There, of course, she met other poets and writers who were either part of the Fugitive-Agrarians or who apprenticed themselves to them—including Robert Penn Warren, Robert Lowell, and her lifelong friend and advocate, Randall Jarrell. Indeed, the Tates also played matchmaker for Eleanor Ross, introducing her to Peter Taylor at their home, and then hosting their wedding six weeks later. In an interview, Eleanor explains that they married in Tennessee at the Tates' home, rather than in North Carolina, because “the Tates had just thrown themselves into the match and wanted the wedding right there....Allen specialized in giving brides away” (Powell 313). Taylor also did her graduate work at Vanderbilt, where she studied with Tate and Donald Davidson, the poet most entrenched in Agrarian philosophy. Later, in the late 1940s, she and her husband bought and shared a duplex with the Jarrells (Randall and his first wife, Mackie) when Peter Taylor and Randall Jarrell taught at the Women's College in Greensboro, and they lived for a time in Gambier, Ohio, where John Crowe Ransom taught at Kenyon College and edited *The Kenyon Review*. The Taylors and the Ransoms played bridge together and “kept score on the closet door” (Powell 314). Though in interviews Taylor explains that she only showed her work (after college and graduate study) to her husband and Jarrell, it seems quite unlikely that she wouldn't have discussed literary currents and ideas with the many Fugitive-Agrarians who surrounded her, and surely she was familiar with their Agrarian theories.

And so, knowing only these bare facts of her biography, readers might assume that Taylor would have embraced the Agrarians' idealized representation of the rural, farming South. And yet, her poetry does not bear that out. Though her tenderness for the family farm in Norwood is plain, her poems, which are complex and chilling, endearing and earth-shattering,

disturbing and sweet, provide a much more complicated set of meanings for the rural South, and they are especially concerned with the rural South as it was for *women*—something that often goes unremarked in the Agrarian writings. (In some ways, this concern with women’s experience aligns Taylor’s southern pastoral with Spencer’s; Spencer’s poems like “Letter to My Sister” and “Innocence” demonstrate concerns over the strictures and constraints on women’s lives, similar to Taylor’s “Sister,” “Woman as Artist,” and others discussed throughout this chapter. However, Taylor’s primary subjects are rural white women rather than black women, a significant and important distinction to keep in mind and to avoid the pitfall of too many southern pastoral myths that generalize across race, gender, and class, or that ignore racial divides altogether.) In addition, Taylor’s portrayal of southern history and her own ancestry differ significantly from the Agrarian conception of the past. In his appraisal of Taylor’s work, Eric Gudas notes,

Although Taylor’s rural, fundamentalist upbringing in the 1920s immersed her in the pre-modern Southern traditions that were so crucial to Tate and Davidson’s view of the past, her poems emphasize discontinuity between generations and dramatize the difficulty of apprehending meaning and value from the past. (xiii)

Taylor’s poems do not promote the Agrarian vision of southern history, and in fact they often directly counter that vision.

We should briefly review some facets of the Agrarians’ idealized representation, so that the differences between their view and Taylor’s will be clearer. The world they imagined, particularly in the 1930 manifesto *I’ll Take My Stand*, is decidedly and deliberately not the world of the legendary plantation. Much as they did in their previous manifesto as Fugitives, the Agrarians continue to reject the “high-caste Brahmins of the Old South” in favor of sturdy, family-oriented, pious yeoman farmers. They mean to establish and propagate an image of the South as a world that is not striving for profit, not part of the capitalist, large-scale-production

machine, but a world that is, rather, smaller, self-sustaining, independent, enriching, and spiritual. John Crowe Ransom's introduction to the collection overtly posits the agriculturally-focused southern community against the "American industrial ideal" so much a part of the vision of the North *and* of the "New South" championed by government and business leaders alike during the 1920s. One of the most important facets of this community, for Ransom, is that labor is "effective" but also "enjoyable" for the workers themselves (Twelve xxii). This labor that "partake[s] of happiness," as opposed to dehumanizing, mechanical, assembly-line labor, cultivates a stronger relationship with the land, and therefore leads to a purer relationship with nature and with God; in short, religion flourishes in an agrarian way of life, and is therefore more virtuous, more moral. In addition, a stronger relationship with the land, and extra time for leisure permitted by an agrarian life, lead to a proper sensibility for the arts as well as a cultivation of "the amenities of life" (xxv). Thus, one thread that connects Ransom's essay to others in the collection—and one thread that is strong in the reinvented myths of the agrarian South—is that the yeoman farmers of their imagination are not simply "plain folk." Rather, they are adorned with select elements of that high-caste plantation set seemingly rejected by the Agrarians; the yeomen they envision pursue in their leisure the life of the mind, including music and culture, literature and history, philosophy and religion.<sup>54</sup>

This myth, of course, has already met with much criticism, even from the time of publication of *I'll Take My Stand*.<sup>55</sup> Not only did this idealistic vision overlook the very real

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<sup>54</sup> As David L. Smiley defines it, the Agrarians drew on the myth of the "country-gentleman ideal as a characteristic of the South," a myth of particular advantage to them since that "country-gentleman" or cavalier trope was familiarly and often used to set the agricultural South apart from the industrialized North. John L. Stewart, in reflecting on the overall sources for the Agrarians' collection of essays, explains that while their version of the South "bore little resemblance to...the great plantations of the legend of the Old South," it was still embroidered with "details from the aristocratic tradition" (150).

<sup>55</sup> One of the more scathing remarks comes from contemporary reviewer W. S. Knickerbocker: "It dwells...only on the felicities of the patriarchal farmer, as if the small farmer regularly secured a dependable living from the rude forces of nature: as if nature were beneficent, and cared for his wants;

challenges and dangers that yeomen farmers (and their families!) faced, it also, on the whole, failed to take into consideration the fact that much of the Deep South had relied on slavery—and later on poor laborers and sharecroppers—for its success. Despite their attempts to disconnect the Upper South from the Deep South, and the yeomen farmers from the plantation owners, the southern economy was not so neatly split, and their vision of what it was to be a farmer did not take into account what it meant to be, in the South, not well-off, not a landowner, not male, or not white.<sup>56</sup>

As a case in point, life in Norwood and the South for Eleanor Ross Taylor, and for her ancestors, certainly did not match up with the idealized visions showcased in *I'll Take My Stand*. And Taylor's poems—from those that speak through and for the women in her family, to those that consider the strictures and demands of domestic life, to those that reevaluate the legacy of the antebellum South and the Civil War—consistently challenge those idyllic imaginings. Additionally, her poems—particularly those focused on women's lives—complicate the mythologizing work in Toomer's and Dickey's poetry, wherein the woman often serves as a cipher for the land or as an avenue to men's spiritual and emotional fulfillment. This is not to say that Taylor wrote her poems for the sole purpose of undermining the Agrarians or other versions of southern pastoral in such writers as Toomer and Dickey. The stakes were much higher for her as a writer—she wrote, she said, especially in her later life to “be alive” (Powell 318). And her poetry extends far beyond the myths of the South, as it encompasses the struggles to balance the demands of duty and the need for art and expression, the pull of conscience and the pull of

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and his children were never ill; and his wife were never overburdened with bearing and rearing children” (qtd. in Stewart 200).

<sup>56</sup> Additionally, as noted in this project's introduction, only a very few of the Agrarians had ever lived off the land as farmers; only a few of them tried to recreate their lives in the agrarian image they had crafted, and they very often found it impossible to sustain both a farming life and a writing life—the leisure they had claimed for cultivating the “life of the mind” was mostly non-existent in the face of the demands of agriculture.

creativity, the strictures of manners and decorum and the striving of the wild, ever-searching heart. She looks back to her ancestors not simply to contrast their lives with a nostalgic view of the South, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to find a kind of model for navigating those desires and demands.

And yet, Eleanor Ross Taylor's work *does* respond to these constantly generated and reworked myths of the South—particularly those myths that created gilded images of her rural southern upbringing, of the landscape she loved, of the history she knew intimately. And it is important that we understand the multiple ways in which she responds, because in her work she provides us with a clear-eyed and complex vision of the South. For example, she challenges the myths that farm life is a life that permits leisure—the women portrayed in her first collection are ever working, ever worried, even to the day of their death. Additionally, she speaks from entirely new perspectives, ones that are certainly not present in collections of myth-making like *I'll Take My Stand*—and those perspectives are those of rural, lower-class farm wives and mothers. Those female perspectives, in themselves, challenge the elitist, patriarchal, and paternalist viewpoints that characterize much of the Agrarians' work.<sup>57</sup>

Her work, finally, speaks back not just to the Agrarians' recreated legends of the South, but to other problematic and nostalgic myths of the South, especially the Lost Cause tradition that rewrote the antebellum South, and even to the pastoral tradition more generally—especially those iterations where women become simplified symbols or metaphors for men's relationship with the land. As with the other authors considered in this project, Svetlana Boym's definitions of two different types of nostalgia are again useful to compare the work of more traditional pastoralists

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<sup>57</sup> Indeed, as Thomas L. McHaney points out, long after *I'll Take My Stand* was published, John Crowe Ransom "finally came to understand that agrarianism could not restore human innocence, nor, in a scientific world, create for most people the leisure time that allowed for poetry, philosophy, or spiritual thought. In particular he realized that agrarianism certainly had no answers for the farmer's wife, whose existence was barren, confining, and burdensome" (46).

like the Agrarians or adherents to the Lost Cause with Taylor's work. The Agrarians and other steadfast southerners propagate a vision of the South without allowing for much doubt (at least this can be said of the Agrarians in their earliest phases; their later writing often reflects significant doubt about the southern past and its traditions), and therefore their work falls under Boym's rubric of "restorative nostalgia." Taylor's work, on the other hand, demonstrates perpetual ambivalence toward "human longing and belonging," and it most assuredly does not shy away from contradictions—of both the past and of modernity; thus, her work is much more in line with Boym's category of "reflective nostalgia" (xviii).

Indeed, one of the keys to Taylor's poetry—one which highlights her use of reflective rather than restorative nostalgia—is her use of contradiction and paradox. The fundamental paradox in her work is that both the beauty and the suffocation, the safety and the threat, of the rural pastoral world are simultaneously present. Whereas Spencer and Dickey create separate categories of pastoral—ideal and perfected versus damaged and corrupted—and bring those categories together in certain poems (for Spencer, "Before the Feast at Shushan" is perhaps the best example of this combination, and for Dickey, it's "May Day Sermon"), in Taylor's pastoral poems that paradoxical, doubled meaning of the southern landscape and society is always at work. As Toomer illustrates in the complex structure of *Cane*, Taylor, too, demonstrates in many individual poems that these two contradictory meanings of the southern landscape are always present, always colliding, always competing. Neither side can be untangled from the other; neither can be "disfestooned," to use one of Taylor's own coinages. The garden relies on both wildness and taming, strength and delicacy, and the garden is always a metaphor for the women of the book. They—the garden and the women, both—endure the suffering of pruning, sculpting, grafting; they send out tendrils or leap over walls, escaping; they support and nurture and nourish those around them. The pastoral in these poems is never purely idyllic; the shadow, a darker

anguish and anger, is always present at the same time as the idyll. And yet Taylor's pastoral is also beautiful—not only because the poems are so carefully crafted, so ingeniously phrased, so musical, but also because Taylor highlights the images of beauty, resilience, and sweetness to be found in the rural South. Taylor locates the beauty of the pastoral in very different places (as in the lives of women) than the Agrarians or other myth-makers thought to look for it, while she simultaneously undermines the myths they created.

Particularly striking examples of her complex pastoral poetry—which both undermine tradition and reclaim the particulars of the lives of women—are found in her pastoral elegies, her poems that carefully explore the lives of her female ancestors, her poems that consider her own life as a wife and mother, and finally her poems that examine war's devastations and losses. In the following sections, I will examine examples from each of these categories, in order to show her distinct blend of southern subjects and modernist techniques, her sincere love for her southern home and her skepticism regarding traditional southern pastoral myths and legends. In the end, Taylor finds pastoral solace only in connections with others, in moments of intimate relationship that bind her to family and to strangers, and those moments, no matter how temporary, illuminate again the bonds between people, the land, and God. But all other falsifying myths about the South are challenged, countered, and burned away.



### 3. Taylor's Pastoral Elegy

To see just how relentlessly Taylor ironizes, undermines, and reinvents classic pastoral, it is useful to compare her pastoral elegy, "In the Churchyard," to Thomas Gray's famous "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." Taylor's poem clearly plays on her predecessor's, as well as on the conventions of pastoral elegy; comparing these poems reveals Taylor's differing emphases, ironic slant, and original approach. Additionally, I will pair Taylor's "In the

Churchyard” and Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” which, like Taylor’s, reflects modernist poetry’s influence. This comparison illuminates how Taylor resists the Agrarian orthodoxy, instead advancing her own complicated vision of the rural, postbellum South, and particularly of the women who inhabit(ed) it.<sup>58</sup>

A traditional pastoral elegy, in David Myers’ succinct definition, is “a form of pastoral that uses a rural setting and simple diction to lament the death of a fellow shepherd” (270). The classical elegy includes “an invocation to the muses,” “pathetic fallacy,” “a diatribe against the injustice of the death and the values of the times,” and “an epiphanic reversal or consolation,” among others (270). While Gray’s poem departs from the original conventions, it maintains enough to exemplify traditional pastoral elegy. In its mellifluous sounds, its somber tenor, its overt focus on those rustic country men now departed, and its eventual turn toward consolation—at least consolation for the speaker, as he imagines himself memorialized—“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” resonates with our generic expectations. For example, though it does not open with a direct call to the muses, it does open with varying kinds of calls overheard by the speaker, calls particular to a rural landscape—the bell marking the end of the day, the cows lowing on their aimless way, each of these a metaphor for being called home, for death itself:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
The lowing herd winds slowly o’er the lea,  
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me. (1-4)

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<sup>58</sup> It is also worth noting that Taylor’s pastoral elegy is also more complex and less traditional than even those of Anne Spencer and James Dickey. Though the latter two poets do challenge the pastoral tradition in many significant ways, their pastoral elegies (i.e., Spencer’s “For Jim, Easter Eve” and Dickey’s “The Other”) rely much more upon conventions—such as railing against the injustice of the loss, ennobling the subject of the elegy, and discovering consolation in the natural world—than do Taylor’s elegies. Her irony sets her apart even from these otherwise innovative southern pastoral poets.

This famous opening sets its melancholy, solitary stage with its slow-marching iambic pentameter akin to the “plod” of the plowman, akin to the march toward night and toward death. Gray maintains this subdued tone throughout the poem, and in creating the landscape of the churchyard, he emphasizes those details that are softest, sweetest, and most mournful. For example, the air “a solemn stillness holds,” and the “moping owl does to the moon complain” (6, 10). The solemnity of the atmosphere—a gesture toward the pathetic fallacy typical of the form—carries over into a sober (even if it now appears clichéd) lament for those “rude forefathers” buried in the churchyard, whose grave markers include only “Their name, their years, spelt by the unlettered Muse” (81). His poem, then, is intended to provide a noble tribute to these long-neglected, worthy men. And he spends the majority of the poem imagining them, bringing to light the details of their lives, “their useful toil, / Their homely joys” (29-30). He envisions their idyllic homes, their devoted families:

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,  
Or busy housewife ply her evening care;  
No children run to lisp their sire’s return,  
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share. (21-4)

From there, he reimagines their moral fiber, their noble hearts, their hard work, their strength of character—all qualities which, had they not been assigned to plow the land, had they been of a different class or time or place, would make them kings and leaders, poets and gentry. This is the pastoral elegy at its core: the memorializing of the impoverished, honorable shepherd (or here, rustic farmer) to soothe the upper classes,<sup>59</sup> to show them that the lowly shepherd lived a noble,

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<sup>59</sup> Henry Weinfield’s monograph, *The Poet without a Name: Gray’s Elegy and the Problem of History*, complicates this reading quite a bit, as he considers the poem’s widespread popular appeal, critics’ flawed attempts to discern whence this popularity arises, and the poem’s recent “tenuous” status in the canon. Weinfield’s reading is far more nuanced than my own can be here. But the overriding popularity of Gray’s poem since it was written still does not discount the fact that the poem also fits well within William Empson’s definition of the “essential trick” of the pastoral, “which was felt to imply a beautiful

righteous life, and though he did not get all the chances he might have, he receives a just remembrance after death. If it is too late, then, alas—it is simply too late.

In part, this reassurance is the elegy's "epiphanic consolation"; the second part of this consolation comes when the speaker reflects on his own mortality and takes the opportunity to write his own memorial, not once but twice. The first memorial is spoken by an imagined future "hoary-headed swain," an old country shepherd much like those buried in the churchyard. That swain reflects the speaker's romantic vision of himself as poet, his mercurial moods, his "wayward fancies." Perhaps the most important sentence the old shepherd utters is "One morn I missed him on the customed hill," because it is the heart of the consolation—the speaker will be missed and remembered once he is gone, just as he has remembered to sigh over the people he memorializes. The second memorial is the epitaph included as the poem's conclusion; it is an epitaph both for the "rude forefathers" and for the poet himself. And it romanticizes, again, the speaker's (and the farmers') humbleness, intelligence, kindness, and piety. Thus, the elegy concludes on a note that reiterates simultaneously the sadness and injustice of death and the honorable hearts of those who have died.

In light of Gray's elegy, Taylor's "In the Churchyard" is remarkably ironic, mysterious, disconcerting and disconsolate. For example, rather than opening with euphonic bells and rustic moos, Taylor's poem begins with a very different, abrupt, jarring sound: "In the churchyard I hear them hammering / On the new roof of my new house / A hundred years old" (1-3). In a twist reminiscent of Emily Dickinson, Taylor employs a voice already in and beyond the grave, hearing those still living hammer out a new grave marker (a sound like a knock on the door, a kind of invocation to the muses, but far more disquieting). The "hammering" is a far cry from traditional

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relationship between rich and poor," and which "was to make simple people express strong feelings...in beautiful language." Gray's "Elegy" performs this trick admirably well.

openings, and it disrupts, already, the pastoral elegy's typically tranquil surface. Taylor highlights, in just these three lines, that our mourning and memorializing disturbs the dead, and indeed, the dead disturb the living.

In the subsequent four lines, Taylor pays ironic homage to the tradition of creating a sympathetic landscape for the elegy:

Cupped acorns glut the walks,  
The greenish nuts crushed in.  
Cupped earths hold up the bright memorial ferns.  
They're gone! (4-7)

In these lines is a semblance of the serene landscape Gray and other pastoral elegists evoke, but in small, deft strokes, Taylor undercuts that serenity and offers, again, something more unsettling. The acorns, with their promise of new life and their sense of security in the word "cupped," make, at first, a sweet detail. But any implication of comfort from those acorns is undermined with the heavy, ugly word "glut"—signifying that there are far too many, and they clutter up the neat graveyard paths—as well as with the assonant phrase, "nuts crushed in," wherein that promise of new life is ground down, cut short. "Greenish," too, is not quite right for either celebration of life or mourning the dead, as it is neither vibrant nor melancholy; even just the small addition of "-ish" ironizes and complicates the emotion of the poem. The following line, with its "bright memorial ferns," takes on a different tone, then, in part because the residue of "greenish" inflects the ferns, and in part because the repetition of "cupped" recalls the crushed acorns. These ferns, we are reminded, will also be short-lived, and in the meanwhile, their brightness is a bit out of place, a bit garish (especially since Gray's elegy—and Tate's "Ode"—deploy images of evening and autumn, rather than bright spring). And, of course, the final line of these four, "They're gone!", underscores the temporality, the here-then-gone-ness, of every living thing—the buried ancestors

are gone, the living seeds of giant oaks are gone, the ferns are gone, and even the various speakers in this poem—some dead, some living, some adults, some children—all eventually pass on. There is, as of yet in this elegy, little consolation. The landscape, to be sure, does not offer much.

The next lines, evoking particularly awful scenes from William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, bring the hammering of the first lines even closer, making it more distressing, more frightening. Taylor writes, "Down over Mamma's face / They nailed, we nailed, I nailed the lid" (8-9). Rarely, if ever, does an elegy return to such a moment—visceral and horrifying but also pragmatic and realistic. Gray's elegy never discusses the actual burial of those in the graveyard; in his poem, the grass has already neatly repaired itself over the hillside. Traditional elegy reveals no gashes in the earth, no coffin lids and nails. But Taylor foregrounds the very moment of burial to unearth the emotions there. And those emotions are genuinely complex. For example, traces of guilt emerge in the shifting pronouns; somehow, Mamma's fate and coffin lid were sealed not by a vague "they" but by a personal "we," even "I." These lines demonstrate real wrestling with the meaning of loss, with the doubt and fears of the living, with the terrible ritual of sealing someone we love up in a box. And the hammering, the repetition of "nailed... nailed...nailed" comes back again to jar the scene. Taylor's elegy does not soothe; rather, it peels back the traditional elegy's gilded layers to see the dark voids, the real graves, the distraught web of concerns, and the fears of the unknown that are all very much a part of our grief and experience with death.

Surprisingly, then—perhaps as if the speaker can no longer bear the weight of those emotions—the poem turns dramatically to wander around, it seems, in the graveyard, noting other family members buried there and attaching a few scribblings of memory to each:

And there was Uncle Risdon.  
Married a Miss Catherine Tye. Aunt Catherine  
Somehow I can't now call her full name.  
She took a galloping consumption  
After she let the baby catch on fire.  
Aunt Oratha despised the coat  
That Uncle bought her. She died of pride.  
Pride knoweth neither hot nor cold  
But hers knew both.  
They die of fleshly pride.  
And Cousin Mazeppa took laudanum.  
"Why did you do it, Zeppie, girl?  
Wa'n't Daddy good to you?"  
"Pray, let me sleep!" (10-23)

The voice of these lines differs markedly from the poem's earlier voices—the first, beyond the grave, and the second, from a child's perspective. This voice is conversational, knowing, matter-of-fact, occasionally grimly funny, scattered. The speaker acts as a curator of family history, or a graveyard tour guide. The poem still aligns formally with Gray's elegy—it now remarks on the histories and families and inner lives of the dead—but it differs strikingly in tone and content. The dead are affectionately remembered; their nicknames and their foibles are endearing, in places, and especially in the wry comment that Aunt Oratha's pride "knew both" hot and cold. But they are not lauded or honored; indeed, their errors and sins are on full display. And these sins are particularly egregious because they fly in the face of traditional pastoral expectations for devoted rural farmwives and mothers. In contrast to Gray's "busy housewife ply[ing] her evening care," these women are neglectful, self-absorbed, irritated, proud, and—perhaps most importantly, based on the final exclamation, "Pray, let me sleep!"—*exhausted*, and exhausted even in death, as Cousin Mazeppa seems to be yelling back at her father, either from the moment of her death or from the grave. Though not all of their errors are equal in importance (hating a coat is far less disastrous than letting a baby catch fire), all of their errors make them human, particular, individual. Taylor's poem, in contrast to Gray's elegy, uses detail to draw back their

faces and personalities from the past, and she uses dark humor to unsettle, rather than soothe, readers.

Therefore, this center section of the poem demonstrates clearly that Taylor does not deploy the traditional epideictic memorial to put the dead on display as models of nobility or righteousness; she does not use the blurry platitudes of memorial to soothe the audience and assure us that the dead lived full, rich, developed, leisurely, ethical, satisfying lives. Perhaps this list of women creates a cautionary tale—but that cautionary tale is not about how to be a good woman. Instead, the cautionary tale seems a direct response to the genre of pastoral elegy, and it tells us how to read the past, and how to understand the supposed pastoral world. And, in wandering through the family graveyard, the lesson seems to be that the past is never so idyllic as we might hope, even in beautiful, sleepy Norwood.

The poem's last two sections confirm this claim. They parody the didactic and consolatory nature of the pastoral elegy, neither offering clear moral instruction nor providing solace. In the first section, the poet creates the voice of someone instructing a child, beginning, "Child, brave it" (24). From this opening, we might expect some wisdom on keeping a stiff upper lip in the face of such loss, or perhaps a pragmatic, stoic, existential Frostian sentence: "since you are not the one dead, turn to your affairs." But what the child gets instead is slightly bewildering—an instruction to look directly up to the sky (not focusing on the graveyard at all) and "blind-out the fur / Of the evergreens in sun above" (24-5). Thus, the instruction seems to be to look, but not to look, to see, but not to see, to stare at both the sun and the evergreens, but to "blind-out" both. The odd advice continues:

They are too far;  
Shade has rinsed out their sun,  
Hushed up their green.  
They'll dizzy one. (26-9)

This advisement becomes clearer, however, once we recognize the double meaning of the pronoun “they.” This word refers to the evergreens, yes—those are too far to see clearly—but the antecedent for “they” might also be all of the women listed in the previous stanza, all of the graves marked by the speaker. Catherine and Oratha and Mazeppa and the others have been claimed by shade, their “sun” or energy “rinsed out,” their “green” vitality “hushed up.” And these women, too, will “dizzy one.” While Gray’s speaker finds virtuous models in the dead, Taylor’s speaker finds that looking towards one’s ancestors, reviewing their complex lives, does not provide clarity, purpose, or instruction in right living, but rather dizziness, bafflement, and confusion. These female ancestors are not the paragons of virtue who, by their lasting example, will provide moral fortitude for the child. Instead, the speaker seems to caution the child not to look up (figuratively and literally) to them at all. Their vitality is lost; the memory of them complicated and confounding. Thus, the child must “brave it,” looking up past the blurred evergreens into the blinding sun, and go it alone.

Of course, the irony of this stanza is that, though her ancestors are “too far” and “hushed up,” and they cannot speak to her, their memories do leave impressions and traces—they are the centerpiece and the heart of the poem. The writing itself indicates that—the poem brings them back to life, and in that Shakespearean way, guarantees them immortality. Indeed, if they are “too far,” they are also too close. They leave indelible marks on those who remain on earth. And the particulars provided for each woman’s life—her mistakes and desires, her angers and weariness—are hardly “rinsed out” or “hushed up.” Like Cousin Mazeppa, they are still, in some ways, speaking. This kind of immortality, though, is not consoling; it’s far more akin to haunting.

The final stanza, in a last ironic blow to the consolatory nature of elegy, switches speakers again, abruptly, and this final voice disturbs readers all the more because it apparently

blends the voice of the child who was instructed and the dead person who spoke in the first few lines. And the sound of the hammers, once again, pulls our gaze back to the earth, away from the bright and blinding sky, and make a jarring, unnerving repetition:

There's the rattat of the hammers—  
The little nails, the little nails,  
The birds eat out one's hands! (30-2)

The simpler language here, with the rhythm and the onomatopoeic “rattat,” adds almost a nursery-rhyme lilt, but the imagery is disquieting. The repetition of “little nails” echoes the previous line, “They nailed, we nailed, I nailed the lid,” reinforcing the speaker’s guilt and the readers’ visceral horror. And the final line, exclaiming, seems both a cry of delight and dread. In one reading, the birds “eat out of one’s hands,” and in that case, this line is a pastoral reconnection with living nature—the birds are tame enough, familiar enough, to trust the person. In a second reading, though, the birds’ feet and beaks become “the little nails,” landing on the body, and pecking at the flesh. They “eat one’s hands” away. And in this second reading, the loss of agency and control is frightening—the hands are the tools to make, to plow, to garden, to write, and in this line, they are destroyed. The child’s voice is, perhaps, fascinated; the dead person’s voice fearful—but it is impossible to separate them by the conclusion, so we are left with a mixture of wonder and terror, tiny comfort and significant dread. We are far from the conclusion of Gray’s poem (or most pastoral elegies), wherein the dead’s “frailties” and “merits” rest in hope in “the bosom of his Father and his God” (125-28). Whereas Gray’s poem begins in the churchyard and ends in heaven, Taylor’s poem begins and ends interred in the churchyard. The “epiphanic reversal” is only that the person visiting the churchyard understands mortality far more clearly, seeing the contradictory nature of death, memory, and mourning—that to remember the dead is also to remember their frailties and mistakes, that death does not “rinse out” all of

their vices to make them wholly virtuous. Memorializing the dead, in writing or in speeches or in epitaphs, either involves omission (“blind-out”) or it involves recognition that the past and our ancestors are not models to be followed into the future. If a pastoral elegy is meant to end on understanding and consolation, Taylor’s poem ends only on ambivalence and ambiguity.

Taylor’s “In the Churchyard” obviously departs from a classic pastoral elegy like Gray’s in a number of significant ways—the moral lessons are not present, nor are the dead memorialized in chivalric amber. There is no consolation, truly, except that the dead are always with you, and the “past isn’t even past”—but, as Faulkner’s phrase suggests, the presence of the past and those ancestors is hardly comforting. Her poem is, in many ways, a far more modernist take on the pastoral elegy. Some of her modernist techniques appear in the use of multiple voices sliding in and out of one another, changing abruptly; the mixture of allusions to other literary works, including Gray’s “Elegy,” Dickinson’s poetry, and Faulkner’s novel; the restrained free verse that incorporates patterns of rhyme; and, of course, the significant presence of irony to undercut the romantic image and undermine stable dichotomies (e.g., dead and living), among others.

And so, one might anticipate that her pastoral elegy would resemble another famous southern pastoral elegy, Allen Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” a poem whose speaker stands outside the cemetery, contemplating the Confederates buried there. The speaker in Tate’s elegy mourns not just the soldiers’ deaths, but specifically the loss of their nobility, chivalry, and bravery, which he cannot find in his own modern world. In its glorification of the past, Tate’s elegy follows a more traditional path, but in his alienation from that past, and his inability to find comfort in his reflections, Tate’s elegy certainly represents a modernist transformation. However, the differences between Taylor’s and Tate’s poem are still instructive, as they reveal important distinctions between their perspectives on the South, their ideas about the role of the past in the

present, and their understanding of the pastoral elegy's promises for reconciliation and peace.

Comparing these poems shows Taylor's resistance to Agrarian conceptions of the rural South to be strong and direct.<sup>60</sup>

Tate's poem attempts to find in the dead soldiers a repository of stability, order, and chivalric values. Of course, his speaker eventually fails, and he is never able to communicate with the dead, to adopt their position, to understand their loyalties and ideals. Neither does he ever does step inside the graveyard—literally or metaphorically. He remains at the gate, barred from the past, finally seeing the leaves, driven by invisible wind, as the only true symbol of life's temporality and the impossibility of understanding another's motives. The speaker lumps all the dead in the graveyard together—there are no individual faces here, but only “row after row” of headstones that “yield their names to the element” (21, 1-2). That he cannot name or know any of the dead individually, that he cannot paint a face or understand the details of their lives is assuredly part of the irony of this “ode” and elegy—this poem that cannot truly memorialize the dead, because it cannot know them, cannot properly be called either an ode (a celebration of their lives) or an elegy (a mourning of their individual lives).

Ironically, though the speaker truly desires to find meaning in the past, the past will not speak to him.<sup>61</sup> Thus, Tate's poem, too, is a modernist take on the traditional pastoral elegy—unlike Gray, Tate does not present a speaker who can learn moral lessons from the dead; instead,

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<sup>60</sup> “Ode to the Confederate Dead” cannot be termed an Agrarian poem, precisely, because Tate began the poem in 1925 and first published it in 1927. He continued to revise it, however, and the final version was published in his collection *Poems: 1922-1947*. I use the version published in 1937 as part of his *Selected Poems*, primarily because Tate called it the “final version” and because it was revised after Tate and his cohorts renamed themselves the Agrarians. Thus, this poem does reflect the significant tensions between Tate's earlier embrace of a more cosmopolitan- and individual-focused modernism and his later turn toward seeking community and value in the rural South and in its past.

<sup>61</sup> Jan Nordby Gretlund notes, “The poem is not so much about the tradition of heroism and self-sacrifice, as it is about the failure of the man at the gate in his effort to re-experience that tradition....The real failure is that he is not even able to understand their conviction. He is unable to imagine an active faith beyond anything he can find in his own self.”

his attempt to understand the past leaves him further alienated from that very past. In the end, the poem devolves into a cluster of dying symbols (many of them echoing T. S. Eliot's symbols in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*). The dead are reduced to "ragged arms, the ragged heads and eyes," and they are "lost in these acres of the insane green" (67-8). The graveyard itself becomes a series of darkening symbols—the "gray lean spiders," the "willows without light," the screech-owl, the "shut gate," and the "decomposing wall"—none of which can communicate their messages. The leaves, scattered throughout the poem as a refrain, finally represent the unintelligible dead. They fly because of an unseen wind, a motivation the speaker can't access; they are all ("only the leaves") that the speaker sees, even though he searches for further understanding; they whisper an indecipherable message carried away "in the improbably mist of nightfall"; and they "plunge and expire" (75). These dead leaves, covering over the graves in autumn, most consistently symbolize the past's withering.

And yet, though the poem makes it repeatedly clear that the past—including its meaning, its system of values—is unavailable, the speaker keeps circling, searching for, and believing in it. Thus, the poem still presents us with a solid belief in the nobility and honor of the Confederate dead, even if we can't now know it or understand it; Tate points to a better, more righteous, more stable and virtuous history. If traditional ideals are inaccessible to modern man, that doesn't mean those ideals never existed. Thus, despite (or perhaps because of) the inaccessibility of the past, Tate's poem reinforces the *belief* in a more idealistic, beautiful bygone world—and that belief is strengthened and made more necessary because of the speaker's despair in the fruitless, isolated, chaotic present. Clearly Tate's poem departs from the traditional pastoral elegy, but it does, in some key places, cling to that form's ideology, particularly to the belief in the superior virtue, stability, and order of Confederate history. Though his descriptions of the dead as rotting bodies are far more disturbing ("unclean bones," "ragged heads and eyes") than Gray's, Tate's

poem still records the dead similarly—highlighting their anonymity and their sterling attributes of chivalry.

Taylor's poem, on the other hand, plainly resists this vision of history—and specifically the myth-making surrounding the southern past. The contrasts with Tate's poem are everywhere. Whereas Tate's speaker cannot enter the graveyard and is barred from understanding, Taylor's speaker does step inside the graveyard—even, at particular imaginative moments, inside the graves themselves. She is, in fact, almost too close to the dead, and this unsettling proximity prevents her speaker(s) from idealizing them. What she does find in the past is not the conjured nobility of the soldiers, but the quotidian dread of daily lives and even the repetitive dullness (and horrors) of being dead. After all, the hammers keep pounding away, making “new roof[s]”, even a hundred years after interment. Where Tate is able to ascribe a set of virtues to the dead *because* of their anonymity—the blurry memory is easier to manipulate than the sharp detail—Taylor's detailed understanding of various individuals will not permit such mythologizing. Additionally, Tate's poem has a single, unified voice that interprets the past (even if it is frustrated), whereas Taylor's poem deploys multiple voices, as if to show that there is no single adequate interpretation of the past and its relationship to the present. The dead speak, the child speaks, the adult speaks, the “curator” speaks, and each of these voices reveals something different about the values of the past and the present understanding of the dead. The memories of Taylor's speaker are too precise for whitewashed legend. Taylor's modernist irony, then, is not found in the gap between the past and present, but in the unexpected *continuity* between the past and present—but not the kind of continuity that Tate's speaker hopes for. Rather, she finds the continuity of daily duty, exhaustion, sorrow, mistakes, sorrows, and sins. She finds the graveyard a less than idyllic or peaceful spot, and she finds that the dead themselves are not stable or quiet or full of moral lessons; rather, they are dizzying, frightening, wearied, unsettled. Thus, in some ways, Taylor's

poem “outmoderns” even the most modernist of the Fugitive Agrarians; she finds the chaos and isolation and alienation of the present was in fact very much a part of the past, as well.

Another significant contrast between Taylor’s poem and the Agrarian vision of the past is their differing relationship to ritual and tradition. “In the Churchyard” (like another of Taylor’s poems, “Family Bible”) may describe a particular southern rural ritual called “Homecoming Day.” This holiday, as Eric Gudas explains, is “also called Cemetery Day and Graveyard Working Day” in the rural South. The purpose of such a holiday is to remember the dead, to eat and visit with the living, and to clean up and maintain the cemetery. Gudas notes, “Homecoming Day is precisely the sort of rural tradition that the Fugitives celebrated and, in the case of Davidson, sought to preserve. In Taylor’s poem, however, the memory of this ritual unsettles the speaker instead of comforting her” (45). “In the Churchyard,” much like “Family Bible,” is far less a celebration of tradition and an honoring of the past than it is a disquieting reflection on the hardships of the past and its haunting of the present. The poem, then, challenges the vision that tradition is always a positive, a reclamation of values and virtue.

One final, and quite obvious, difference between Tate’s vision of the past and Taylor’s, in their respective poems, is that Taylor’s poem memorializes the *women* of the family. This shift in perspective plainly distinguishes Taylor’s poem from the other examples here; Gray’s and Tate’s poems (like most examples of pastoral elegy) focus on only men. Taylor unearths a past, then, neglected in the tradition of the pastoral elegy and primarily ignored by the Agrarians in their writings. For the Agrarians, women serve (if at all) merely as props on the idyllic southern stage. Taylor’s angle of vision, on the other hand, because it looks through the eyes of her female ancestors, and it looks back at them and attempts to understand their lives specifically, necessarily complicates the patriarchal mythology of the South. Though Taylor’s main concern is not necessarily correcting history books, her poetry—with its emphasis on the lives of southern

women—does challenge visions of the South that were primarily concerned with how (white) men lived, and her poetry also challenges the idea of the South as idyllic, leisurely, genteel, and with noble traditions. And perhaps a more subtle challenge of this poem is that it recognizes how quick we have been to highlight the failings of women, even in elegies, in contrast to the epideictic tributes given for men. In short, Taylor’s poetry directly counters the “past that never was,” both the “moonlight and magnolias” (Lost Cause) South and the “rustic contented well-educated spiritual farmer” (Agrarian) South. Therefore, Taylor’s resistance to the Agrarian vision of the southern past is born of her closeness to the rural South, and particularly her sharp understanding of the women in that region—her proximity prohibits finding stability there, and her knowledge is too intimate to allow broad brushstrokes of myth-making that would conceal difficult details.

In sum, Taylor’s elegy presents one version of the paradoxical pastoral, as it reveals her answer to the question: what does it mean to honor the dead and to memorialize the past? Gray’s poem honors the dead by imagining their lives as noble, honest, pious, and hardworking. Tate’s poem functions similarly, honoring the gallant Confederates, but with a modernist awareness of the speaker’s isolation and distance from the past and its presumed stability and virtues. Taylor’s poem, by contrast, reconsiders the pastoral elegy and implicitly challenges the idea that to remember the past is to reduce it, to amend and correct it, to “improve” it (one of the primary tropes of the pastoral, in regard to nature). She refuses to reminisce, to idealize, to whitewash. Taylor’s poem abandons nostalgia that conceals or edits, opting instead for an elegy that *listens* to the dead, that incorporates their voices, that attempts to recall their lives in detail, that merges with them to understand their suffering and humor and fears—even beyond the grave. She pays tribute to difficulty, struggle, fear, guilt, monotony, resilience. She creates a renewed elegiac tradition that does not set the dead up as paragons but recognizes their fallibility, and thereby

learns more important lessons about what it has meant and what it now means to be a woman in the South, what it means to suffer and fail, and what it means to go on with dignity. After all, spending the poem deciphering the history of Aunt Catherine, Aunt Oratha, and Cousin Mazeppa and hearing their voices *is* a memorial. Taylor remembers the dead in vivid detail, and the speaker does not glorify them or make them into emblems of perfection and sainthood, rubbing out any stains on their memory—stains of bad character or grievous mistakes.

Thus, the paradox in Taylor's pastoral elegy is that the dead women *are* honored, and there is comfort, though the poem is entirely at odds with our expectations. The dead are remembered fondly, but they are remembered not as stock characters or symbols of a particular myth, as Gray's often seem to be. And they are remembered not as unavailable models of chivalry and bravery, as Tate's Confederate dead are. Taylor's elegy is very different. The comfort of Taylor's elegy is that she empathizes with those of us who are bewildered mourners; she recognizes—and her poem demonstrates—just how disconcerting and confounding death and mourning and memory truly are. And the paradox of it all is that the poem is as disturbing as it is consoling, as irreverent as it is respectful, as baffling as it is lucid, as *human* as it is transcendent.



#### 4. Taylor's Ladies in the Wilderness

As "In the Churchyard" would indicate, many of Taylor's poems, particularly those in her first collection, excavate family history (though less dramatically than the exhumation in "In the Churchyard"), seeking ancestors and guiding voices. Sometimes, the ghosts and memories do not respond, and the artifacts are difficult to interpret; in this way, Taylor's ghosts are much more akin to Toomer's characters than to the dead with whom Dickey communicates and envisions in his earlier work. For example, Taylor's ghosts are closer to Becky or Fern—whose lives and experiences Toomer conveys as complex and haunting, not at all singularly clear and

redemptive—and her speakers are much more like Toomer’s Kabnis, as he finds multiple and contradictory levels of meaning in the southern landscape and people around him. Taylor’s ghosts never seem to reach the mythic redemptive power of the ghosts of Dickey’s earlier poems, like his older brother, his uncle, or Donald Armstrong, or even the complicated legacy of salvation the mechanic and his red-headed girl leave behind in “May Day Sermon.” For example, in Taylor’s “Wind,” the ghost of Gabriella seems to visit the speaker, and the speaker ends the poem telling her, “Gabriella, howl!” But it is not clear what that howl will mean—if it communicates at all, if it is a sign of unhappiness or wild freedom, of menace or joy. In another poem in the collection, “Night,” the speaker wanders through an ancient house and stares out at the garden that “had turned / A calendar of wastes, / A zodiac of despairs,” and then she sees, suddenly, “There was somebody there” (17-20). But that someone, though the speaker recognizes him or her (“It was you.”), does not respond to her questions, and the poem concludes with a litany of queries increasing in intensity:

What are you doing?  
To whom are you smiling?  
Where are you going?  
Will you not answer me?  
Answer! Answer! (27-31)

The silence that follows this line, the blank page after the end of the poem, resists her questions, will not give an answer; the meaning of this apparition is not made clear to the speaker or the reader. Thus, the disjunction between the past and the present creates a chasm between the speaker and the family’s history, and certainly Taylor points out the difficulty of “apprehending meaning and value” from this and other apparitions from the past, as Eric Gudas notes (xiii). .

However, while this breach between past and present represents one of Taylor’s central themes, the disjunction tells only part of the story. In fact, Taylor does, quite often, find meaning

and value in the past, and often, rather than disconnection, she finds substantial continuity between the present and the past—though the meanings are not what the Agrarians or other southerners nostalgic for the stoic yeomen or the mythical chivalric past might have wished her to find. As in “In the Churchyard,” she frequently unearths telling images and revelatory moments from her family’s history. The portraits she creates, particularly of southern women, are not blurry photographs, steeped in nostalgia and sepia tones. The portraits are, rather, sharp, biting, witty, realistic, attuned to actual speech and alert to conflict and difficulty. As many have pointed out, Taylor’s return to the past offers no blissful escape; rather, most of her speakers embody women contemplating their own entrapment, their own desires (sharply present or keenly remembered) for escape. Thus, Taylor’s historical and familial images are a far cry from, for example, Donald Davidson’s “Tall Men”; the rituals and rites of being a woman in the South, in a rural landscape, in the past—these are often portrayed as painful, mundane, tedious, demanding, self-betraying, suffocating. The voices Taylor includes do often meet the painful experiences, mind-numbing routines, and exhausting duties with humor and resilience, and Taylor’s affection for “Miss Tempe” and “Cousin Ida” and so many more of the women she includes shines through. However, a fundamental point remains—and that is that Taylor will not let the idealization of the past (and particularly of the southern white woman, either as nurturing caretaker of farm and home, or as genteel plantation mistress, or as a combination of the two—the hardworking farmer/mother/seamstress imbued with graceful socialite manners and erudition) stand without a stiff reality check.<sup>62</sup> From that tension—between deep love for her female

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<sup>62</sup> As Elizabeth Jane Harrison notes, in both antebellum and postbellum versions of the southern pastoral, authors depicted the South as Eden, “an unspoiled garden where the aristocratic society could flourish,” and “white southern womanhood represents this virgin land” (3). These white women were often portrayed as a “civil, moralizing influence” as well as possessing a “‘naturalized’ beauty” (3). Thus, throughout much of the history of southern literature, white women were used to symbolize the land itself, as both a garden (civilized) and as wilderness (naturalized). Taylor utilizes this combination of

ancestors and awareness of their struggles and imperfections—stems much of the energy of Taylor's poems, particularly in *Wilderness of Ladies*.

But we must take the observation of this tension one step further to see what the result of it is and how it functions, or to understand what it creates and what residue it leaves, particularly in terms of the wider milieu of Southern Renaissance poetry and its legacy, and in terms of the mythology being built around the New South and reviving versions of the Old South. What Taylor has accomplished in her first collection is not simply a loving portrait of and tribute to her own rural upbringing and family (though it is that), and it is not only a remarkable combination of modernist technique with individual experience and memory (though it is also that); beyond both of these achievements is her subtle but damning challenge to the myths about the South sold, like a bill of goods, to those yearning for a simpler, more wholesome past, to those mired in the mythology of the simple but spiritual and hardworking yet leisurely life on the farm, to those strangely persistent ideals sketched out by the Agrarians in *I'll Take My Stand*. And Taylor challenges, particularly, the idealization of white southern women—as angels in the house, as a Victorian ideal, as a homogenized group of genteel-seamstress-cooking-cleaning-socialite-puritan ladies. Taylor accomplishes this challenge through biting wit and irony, fragmented forms and brilliant wordplay, while still managing to humanize and attend carefully to the women she writes about. Indeed, it is her humanizing that challenges the nostalgic portrait. As in the elegy discussed above, it is the particulars, the moments, the details that both valorize these women's achievements and point out, through irony, the falsities written about them (and the stupidity, the

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symbols in her poem "The Bine Yadkin Rose," and yet she also demonstrates the sheer difficulty of representing both the tame and the wild, and simultaneously undercuts these ideals with strong irony.

banality, the sheer impossibility of the expectations and gender roles set out for women in the first place).<sup>63</sup>

Additionally, Taylor uses the tension between a truly wild landscape and the carved, sculpted, tamed garden to underscore the tension between women's desire to escape and the pressure to conform to gendered expectations. The metaphor of cultivation plays throughout the book, dovetailing to describe both cultivated, wild-hearted women and pruned but ever-untamable gardens. In fact, Taylor often pairs wildness and cultivation—but not to establish one as better or more useful or more beautiful than the other. Rather, she pairs them to establish that both are double-edged; both wildness and pruning are necessary, a way of sustaining and maintaining life, but both can be threatening, a wildness that can overtake everything else, and a pruning that can cut too deep. Whereas Spencer's poems invoking gardens are generally celebratory and restorative, Taylor's garden symbolism is multi-faceted and more tumultuous; her use of irony can undercut either or both ideas about wildness and cultivation, in order to point up the terror of wildness or the futility of genteel pruning. In other places, her irony can restore either or both ideas as consolations, or as necessary for survival. In many ways, Taylor's poems themselves are a kind of gardening—a way of cutting through the wilderness of memory and history to make something crafted, recognizable, “improved,” or meaningful. Gardening is a kind of negotiation with wildness, and poetry is a similar negotiation to make sense of a bewildering world. But the wildness is necessary in order for a garden to thrive, as well. And so, Taylor's use of sharp implements throughout the book is no mistake, either; the scissors and shears and knives

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<sup>63</sup> In a parallel way, Spencer challenges the portrayals of black women in traditional southern pastorals; as Harrison points out bluntly that black women were written to represent “debased sexual desire” or “the beloved ‘mammy’ figure, the archetypal earth mother” (4). Like Taylor's poems, Spencer's poems that illustrate the dignity and hard-won survival of black women, as in “Lady, Lady,” or their resistance to oversexualization, as in “Letter to My Sister,” work to undercut misconceptions about women perpetuated in traditional southern pastorals. Though their strategies and their subjects differ, Taylor and Spencer together present a significant corrective to the stereotyping and frequently-deployed symbolism of southern women, white and black.

are both tool and threat, as they create a particular restrained beauty (out of a wild history, a jungle of a life) but also the danger of cutting too deep, a suicidal suggestion. As Alfredo Franco so clearly puts it,

If many of these poems take place in the realm of Southern gentility, it is from there precisely that they cry out and mount their campaign against it—with housewifely scissors, table knives, garden shears and a devastatingly strong iambic line. Against it? Yes, but also for it, recognizing that it is the source of much beauty, too—the source of the poetry and its tensions, the source of great delicacies of phrase and of idiomatic richness, and most importantly, the spur to memory. (45)



Even the first line of the first poem in *Wilderness of Ladies* manages this feat of particularizing fondness and keen understanding of suffering, this delicate ironizing, this difficult paradox at the heart of her pastoral. In “The Bine Yadkin Rose,” Taylor begins, “Bemiracled rose, I see my cutting took” (15, 1). In the overall poem, Miss Bine, an old, well-brought-up spinster, has both literally created a new hybrid rose—a European beauty in the formidable wilderness of briers—and metaphorically attempted to graft European gentility onto Miss Tempe, her independent, lower-class seamstress, whose life Taylor’s speaker describes as “a raggy scrapbag pantomime” (8).<sup>64</sup> And so, in this first line, we have the astonishing emergence of ladylikeness, “Bemiracled rose,” a sign of unlikely beauty—but also unlikely survival. The bemiracled Bine rose, after all, does not truly belong in its “mother bed,” the “sad horn” of the “foster brier” that is far hardier, less delicate. But that foster brier has the stoutness that such a life in the southern backwoods (in the Yadkin valley, just outside Norwood, North Carolina,

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<sup>64</sup> Taylor connects her mother’s life with her bag of scraps elsewhere, as well. In her unpublished biography, she explains that one of her brothers threw out ‘Mamma’s Ragbag,’ with its bits of dresses and cloths and cuffs, and she laments: “So the past disappears” (qtd. In Gudas 39). The ragbag, then, is not just a collection of scraps, but a symbol of memory and family history, a connection to her mother, and a sign of a particular way of life—piecing bits together to make something beautiful. In this instance, Taylor shows admiration and love for her rural upbringing, though she also underscores its difficulty.

where Taylor grew up) requires. And in that first line, too, is both victory and pain—the “cutting” creates the new blend, makes a new thing out of two, makes survival and beauty both possible, but the connotation of pain and sacrifice is made clear and palpable, too. The first stanza of this poem, and of the book, stands, then, as a representation of much of the tension in Taylor’s work—wildness and survival against artifice and showmanship, sustenance and support against transplant and isolation, but also beauty and refinement against drudgery and chaos—and she digs to the heart of that tension to show the difficulty of maintaining it, of overcoming it.

The image of this Bine Yadkin rose, this miracle and agony of grafting, lingers and serves as a symbol for the meeting of Miss Tempe and Miss Bine, the two women introduced in the second stanza. Taylor writes, lightly, sweetly, in near perfect iambs, “Miss Tempe went to sew for Miss Bine / Before she ever thought of being Mamma” (5-6). Taylor immediately engages our empathy for Miss Tempe, revealing that she will become the speaker’s mother, using the familiar and warm “Mamma,” and also revealing an affection for and an attempt to understand this woman who hadn’t a care in the world, no children, no marriage yet. And Miss Tempe has a particular precision and vivacity in her work: “The smoothing, the whistling, the scissorly-wise drama” (7). The description of her hands smoothing the fabric, her whistling making a light-hearted music, and all of it creating something beyond mundane routine, a “scissorly-wise drama”—all these small phrases bring Miss Tempe life and animation. (And it seems to me that these phrases might also easily apply to Taylor’s own craft; her smoothness, her music, her stitching together of disparate elements—like grafted roses and mother and her employer—and finally, her tense, scissored fragments create a similar, vigorous art.)<sup>65</sup> In the

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<sup>65</sup> Further supporting the idea that Miss Tempe and Taylor share a delight in creativity and art, and further connecting the art of sewing to the art of poetry, is Taylor’s detailed list of the textiles and techniques her mother (Miss Tempe) loved. She writes that her mother “loved the makings of finery—art—a good heavy fabric, a tissue wool, pongee, voile, lace, smocking, embroidery, darts and pleats” (qtd. In Gudas 68).

third stanza, readers come to love Miss Tempe more for her humor; mocking a suitor and playing on her own name, she says:

“I accuse you, Mr. Stapleton,  
Of excess temperance—ha-ha!”  
“Miss Tempe...I beg....Allow me to insist—!” (12-14)

In a single brilliant turn of phrase, Miss Tempe points out directly, obviously (and perhaps to Miss Bine’s chagrin), her suitor’s overdone attentiveness, his overt devotion, alongside his suffocating adherence to etiquette: “excess [T]emperance.” And the suitor’s stammering—which simply proves Miss Tempe’s point, that his manners are in such excess he cannot formulate a full sentence—serves to underscore Miss Tempe’s fierce nature, her sharpness, her wit. She is a natural beauty, more like the foster brier’s sharp thorns than the susceptible, delicate rose petal Miss Bine may want her to be.

If Miss Tempe is the natural sprite, the one whose wildness has not been entirely tamed (and whose humor serves to undermine pastoral mythologizing), then Miss Bine is her counterpart, the “artful rose of stiff, dispiteous stem,” the exemplar of gentility. Taylor’s disparate levels of diction highlight the contrast between Miss Tempe and Miss Bine. Where Miss Tempe appears, the language relaxes, incorporates homely and familiar phrasing (“raggy scrapbag” and “scissorly-wise”), becomes lighter and affectionate. Surrounding Miss Bine, though, the language stiffens, becomes formal and distant. But Miss Bine is not despised or rejected in this poem; she, too, is depicted with affection, a loving nod to her quirky Victorianisms, her own way of surviving a difficult world. Taylor explains in the third stanza, “Miss Bine taught one to violet the wrists” (11). In the formal phrasing (“taught one”) and the

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Taylor’s list of fabrics and techniques demonstrate a similar relish for these items, as well as for the words themselves and the rhythms they create.

odd shift of “violet” from noun to verb, Taylor makes Miss Bine’s adherence to propriety plain—after all, she is so insistent on decorating one’s wrists with a circlet of violets that it becomes habitual action, “violet the wrists.” But she is not simply a representative of etiquette; in the fourth stanza, we see her sincere, human fear, even if it seems a bit akin to Victorian swooning, an overreaction:

In autumn near dusk a bad cloud came up.  
The heavens turned drear, Miss Bine turned white.  
“I fear God is near,” she croaked. “Let’s light a light.”  
They set a fiery candle in a teacup. (15-18)

Miss Bine’s fear, her croaking voice, her small effort against an entire sky, a powerful God—these details humanize her, reminding readers that all the cultivation in the world cannot overcome mortality, that they are, in the end, useless. And Miss Bine is fully aware of it, too. But her formalities, her manners, are one way of bringing order to (and against) a chaotic, threatening wilderness; they, too, are a route to survival. Thus, while Taylor may ironize Miss Bine’s gentility and piety, pitting them against both Miss Tempe’s naturalness and nature’s furies, she also understands Miss Bine’s ideals, recognizing them as one admirable way to resist chaos, and so readers are invited to empathize with her, too.

The first four stanzas of “The Bine Yadkin Rose” establish clear contrasts between Miss Tempe and Miss Bine—one, a working seamstress with a strong vibrance and a laughing streak, and the other, the emblem of gentility quivering with religious piety. These contrasts are made particularly clear in the parenthetical couplets that appear at the end of the second and fourth stanzas. In the second stanza, after readers have been introduced to Miss Tempe and her “raggy scrapbag pantomime” of a life, Taylor returns to the rose to symbolize the difference between the two women, and, almost as an aside, she writes: “(The artful rose of stiff, dispiteous stem /

Blenched lest a natural beauty should offend)” (9-10). Miss Bine, “the artful rose,” winces at Miss Tempe’s “natural beauty,” which is clearly less contained, more vivid, wilder. The “stiff, dispiteous stem” seems akin to Miss Bine’s formality, a stiff-necked approach to the world, a haughtiness that Miss Tempe, with her whistling and raggy scrapbag pantomime, could not adopt.

In the second parenthetical, at the conclusion of stanza four, the tables turn a bit, and the emphasis shifts: “(The spicy daughters of rank greenhouse whims / Blench lest a natural vanity offend)” (19-20). Miss Tempe is clearly more aligned with “spicy daughters” and “rank greenhouse whims”—“greenhouse,” of course, does imply a level of cultivation, as well as shelter from the wilderness, but even in the greenhouse, the plants grow rank and don’t always obey, following their own whims. In this couplet, Miss Tempe winces at, but also bends to tolerate the vanities of Miss Bine, her showy piety and her decorative artifices. These parentheticals create a symbolic parallel for each of the women, and how they accommodate one another, how they learn to maneuver around the other, not offending. Taylor’s use of grafted roses and wild offshoots, “artful roses” and “spicy daughters,” return readers to that pastoral vision—the created and crafted garden within the wilderness, made from and out of the wilderness, just barely resisting the threatening and vibrant wilderness, and dependent on that wilderness for survival and life force. Miss Tempe and Miss Bine stand on either side of the garden wall, but neither are far from the other—Miss Tempe, threatening always to go wild, but tamed to the domestic life, and Miss Bine, deliberately self-contained within the walls but always aware of the wildness just outside the doors.

And yet, even in the second stanza, despite the tensions and differences between Miss Bine and Miss Tempe, there is also a kind of grafting between the two women. The metaphor of sewing reinforces this idea—sewing is, after all, another way of binding two pieces together, and out of her “raggy scrapbag” Miss Tempe creates a pantomime of civility and social graces to

please Miss Bine. These two women, one with a natural vitality and the other with an excess of manners, come together in a kind of supportive sisterhood, though each suffers from the expectations she faces, and each does seem to accommodate, even as she resists, the other. The parenthetical couplets make this paradoxical grafting clearer, and they bring the symbolic rose and wild brier near to one another, pairing them in tension.

After stanza four, the contrasts between Miss Tempe and Miss Bine nearly disappear. In the final stanzas of the poem, it is no longer clear to whom each pronoun (“she,” “you,” “me,” “our”) refers. Here, Taylor unleashes the full power of her complex ironies, underscoring the necessity for both hardiness and delicacy, for basic survival and for the luxury of beauty. It could be that Miss Bine, in these last stanzas, is cautioning Miss Tempe against marriage and its mundane traps of quotidian routine. It could be that the outside speaker (perhaps the “I” whose cutting initially took in the first stanza) is describing the stories of both women, or reflecting on the limited choices that face Miss Tempe, Miss Bine, and so many other women of their place and time. It could be that the speaker no longer clearly distinguishes between Miss Tempe and Miss Bine—they are part of the “sisterhood in multiple rosettes,” and along with the speaker they are part of “a ring-a-rosy of our distant hands,” a nostalgic remembrance of their closeness even in their differences, even across time and space (32, 35). None of the final stanzas single either woman out again by name; rather, the final stanzas seem to bring them together, to unite them in a description of women’s limited choices, their mundane sufferings, and their nostalgic regrets. The grafting, it seems, of the “bemiracled rose” and the “foster brier” indeed *did* take, for better or worse. And Miss Tempe and Miss Bine are now of the same stock, in the same garden.

But that garden is not the idyllic garden of peace and tranquility, for either woman. The fifth stanza describes a different kind of garden—no longer Miss Bine’s house, her artful roses, but a new house “not yet built”—and a different kind of grafting—a marriage. The stanza reads:

Unringed, but wed, she took a ring and wed unwed,  
A bouquet of pink hyacinths at her waist.

Her thumping heart denied her chilling taste  
But well believed the deadly words she said. (21-4).

Though the antecedent for “she” in this fifth stanza is not clear (is “she” Miss Tempe, marrying and leaving Miss Bine for a different life? Is “she” Miss Bine, remembering a marriage now ended?), and though the syntax of the first line is confounding, the sharp tensions of marriage are made abundantly clear in this stanza. Even that first line demonstrates a shift from “unringed,” free and uncaptured, to “wed”—and though “she took a ring” certainly provides a sense of agency, the odd phrase “wed unwed” and the following lines cast a shadow of doubt on this marriage proposal and its aftermath. As always in this poem, the flowers symbolize the ironic, paradoxical pastoral: they are both the center of beauty and the harbinger of difficulty and pain. The “bouquet of pink hyacinths,” in particular, carries connotations of love and springtime renewal, but also of jealousy, suffering, and death from their origin story in Greek mythology. In that story, hyacinths first spring from the blood of slain Hyacinth, Apollo’s love, killed by the jealousy of the wind god, Zephyrus. This wedding scene in Taylor’s poem also carries those darker connotations, fraught with uncertainty (“thumping heart,” “chilling taste”) and foreboding (“deadly words she said”). This grafting, it seems, does not “take” so well.

The next stanza bears out the difficulty, the pain, of this graft—and it highlights another paradoxical situation in this pastoral world, the pastoral of white southern women of the past. The paradox is this: as much as Miss Tempe (and the speaker) may have looked with winking condescension at Miss Bine’s gentility and her insistence on establishing little bits of beauty with roses and violets, now the poem turns toward the reality of a difficult marriage, perhaps begun without much money or many resources, and suddenly the absence of those niceties is both

noticeable and reason for sorrow. No matter if it's Miss Bine remembering a past marriage, or Miss Tempe entering into one, in this fifth stanza, Taylor points out that in this situation there isn't time for gardening, for cultivating, for beauty for its own sake. The emphasis now is on practicality—turning over flower gardens to grow potatoes, turning a wedding dress into a blanket. This stanza, then, in language far more direct, presents a kind of cautionary tale of the difficulties and inanities and sorrows that marriage presents. One of Taylor's most quoted stanzas, it shows that the "cutting" of marriage has taken away some vibrancy, variety, sweetness, and in its place has left weariness, monotony, and cold distance:

Move into a house that's not yet built,  
And there's scant time to prune a rose and spray.  
You dish potatoes up three times a day,  
And put your wedding dress into a quilt.  
(The chary husband stiff dispite wins  
Quails lest uxorial charity set in.) (25-30)

Here are no roses, no emblems of beauty, no whistling, no laughing. There's no time to tend to those excesses. However much that "artful rose" was initially despised in the poem, a thing of silly luxury or impracticality or sheer artifice—here, in this stanza, its absence is awful. And it is made more awful by the reiteration of beauty reduced in the following lines—the "potatoes three times a day" and the "wedding dress into a quilt" are reflections of struggle, of practicality in the face of poverty, perhaps, and likely also of the demands on women's time, creativity, and energy. No matter how practical it may be to turn a wedding dress into a quilt, it is also a sad moment, a recognition of some pretty dream gone. And the parenthetical couplet that follows the stanza presents a further obstacle to this grafting between husband and wife, in difficult, formal, almost arcane language—the difficulty of sorting out the syntax and diction perhaps an indication of how difficult it is to come to grips with such a marriage. The marriage-graft does not seem to take

well at all; the husband remains wary, winning “stiff dispity”—an echo of Miss Bine’s severe manners—and the wife, so stiffened, wins a colder, more distant husband who fears “uxorial charity.” Thus, this stanza, and the one before it, speaks far more explicitly about women’s attempts to survive within their limited choices—marriage, work, spinsterhood—and the useless beauty that’s so quickly discarded in the face of necessity, but also how much that beauty—even if it was just a façade—is missed, once it’s gone.

The final couplets reinforce this absence, as the speaker again contemplates these two women, Miss Tempe and Miss Bine, and again using floral metaphors, illustrates their sorrows and difficulties, their need for some loveliness in an otherwise dissatisfying, difficult marriage. The speaker hopes for herself not to fully understand “this ring-a-rosy of our distant hands,” perhaps saving herself from some pain of separation. And yet, she ends this way:

An austere blossom for each Sunday plate,  
For a sisterhood in multiple rosettes,  
Adoring our Victorian regrets. (34-6)

That useless *and* necessary beauty is very much an emblem of Taylor’s paradoxical pastoral. The single “austere” bloom is not enough, but it stands as a symbol of the richer, sweeter “sisterhood in multiple rosettes,” and it hearkens back to the excess gentility of Miss Bine’s world, something worthy, now, of nostalgic reminiscing, now that it’s gone. The rosettes, the violets, the “Bine Yadkin Rose”—all of these are extravagances, useless and superfluous. But in the end, they are no longer superfluous—they are necessary for surviving this otherwise-deadly-dull existence. That is the paradox at the heart of this pastoral poem.

But perhaps the image that best captures Taylor’s presentation of these two women, of the paradox that together they encompass, is the image that (literally and figuratively) illuminates

stanza four. That powerful image—the “fiery candle in a teacup”—is one of Taylor’s most deft metaphors—a quick turn of phrase that brilliantly captures the complexity of the scene, the women, even their era. This fire-in-a-cup represents *both* women, a striking metaphor for their strong, vital spirits contained (or restrained) in a porcelain shell of refinement. That shell should not be able to contain such fire, but the fire, it seems, is careful not to exceed its boundary—and of course, the way to set any pottery is through that very fire. The two—indomitable spirit, mannerly custom—seem incompatible, but in this image, they are intimately twined. Perhaps one needs fierce laughter to withstand bracelets of violets and stammering suitors; perhaps one also needs finery and delicate comportment to withstand the tedious tasks of marriage, “dish[ing] up potatoes three times a day.” Thus, the poem does not end by rejecting either Miss Bine or Miss Tempe; rather, it unites them (and the speaker) in “a ring-a-rosy of our distant hands,” “a sisterhood in multiple rosettes, / Adoring our Victorian regrets” (32, 35-6). And that union, that relationship—though it’s past, though it was momentary—is the single consoling note of the poem. That these women lit a candle against the darkness, together, is the most spiritual, truest, and most strikingly beautiful moment of the poem. There is struggle and powerlessness in that image, but there is also, assuredly, comfort and resilience in that image, and a powerful symbol of their relationship, their efforts to combat oncoming storms, deep sorrows, monotony and regrets. The “fiery candle in a teacup” is one perfect symbol of the flickering heart of the paradoxical pastoral.

And, as with many of Taylor’s poems (especially in regard to her poems about war and the Lost Cause mythology, discussed later in this chapter), the momentary relationship, the physical world, the meeting of two people face to face—those are the significant consolations that matter, that keep the world’s sorrows and sufferings and agonies at bay, just for a bit. Those are the material signifiers of spiritual fulfillment; other discourses and duties and ideals ring hollow

and prove false in Taylor's poems. In this poem, the ideals of gentility and of natural beauty—those ideals assigned primarily to white women in the South—fall short on their own, which we see clearly through Taylor's constant undercutting irony. However, the women themselves, in their genuine relationship, provide a safe haven, a small flame of hope amid the world's dangers, sad marriages, poverty, and brutal storms. Together, they create a hardy and elegant rose that can both survive and adorn.



The rose grafted onto brier, the hyacinth signifying innocence and loss, the hardy spirited woman cultivated into gentility, the beauty surviving against and in spite of bitter odds—these are all part of Taylor's ironic, paradoxical pastoral. Begun in the opening poem of *Wilderness of Ladies*, the paradoxes continue throughout the book, but they are particularly noticeable in other poems that take up Taylor's family history, especially narratives about her mother, Miss Tempe, about Cousin Ida, and about her grandmother. One of Taylor's most celebrated poems, "Buck Duke and Mamma," from this first collection—the poem that Randall Jarrell singled out in his introduction as "perhaps the most beautiful and touching of all these poems"—exemplifies the ironies at the pastoral's heart (9). In this poem, too, a streak of wildness is set against taming forces, and the act of pruning and trimming the garden becomes more a destructive response to grief, as well as a more sincere reflection of that grief, than a proper way of maintaining a garden. Indeed, the pruning itself *becomes wild*, serves as a memorial to a wild spirit. Taylor inverts the meaning of trimming and cutting in this poem; pruning is now a way to *honor* wildness and to *enact* wildness instead of taming it, to counter the forces (propriety, gentility) that would hem in a wild spirit, and to take a stand against limitations on an expression of grief, against anyone who would call such an expression unseemly.

The poem opens with Buck Duke, an orphaned neighbor boy who lives with his grandfather, bringing Mamma a “milkpail full / Of speckled, wild, goose plums— / All fat unsmelt-out perfumedom” (26, 1-3). Even in these first three lines are hints of Taylor’s ironic twists—the wild has gifts to offer, sometimes better than those that are domesticated. These plums are rich, sensuous, “sour” but “sweet, too,” an unlikely combination (as unlikely and fantastic as Taylor’s jubilant innovative diction, “fat unsmelt-out perfumedom”)—much as Mamma and Buck Duke are an unlikely combination who find, as the poem reveals, a surprising connection between their untamed spirits.

Mamma, in this poem, is the same Miss Tempe who appears in “The Bine Yadkin Rose,” but who has now, clearly, already “thought of being Mamma.” And Miss Tempe has maintained her spirit and her mocking stance toward women’s duty and gentility, even as she outwardly carries out her duties and displays a mannered etiquette. For example, Mamma’s snatches of dialogue throughout the poem are performative, always and ever in rhymed, playful couplets, with a hint of mischief behind each. In the second stanza, Miss Tempe cautions (but with a sparkle of impertinence): “I say, dear boys! Be good. Take care. / But learn a little evil! If you dare...” (31-2). In the first stanza, we see more of her playfulness, as the speaker describes Miss Tempe going “about her cast-off household chores” (the word “cast-off” clearly signaling her lack of interest and precision in those chores). As she does those chores, she mimics and mocks one of her earlier teachers in pretty manners and ladylike artifice. Giving a funny, smart disparagement of the roles and duties assigned to women, Mamma “overlooked [her chores] with a lavish bow / Inspired by that heroine of poems, / Her elocution teacher, Miss Hattie Yow” (18-20). “Overlooking” (no accident, this choice of words, in its double meaning of imperiously overseeing and simultaneously ignoring) and bowing lavishly to her chores (a bit of parody to point out the absurdity of the expectation to perform even her chores with genteel manners), Miss

Tempe then quotes Miss Hattie Yow. Readers can almost hear the sweetly condescending, school-marm-ish voice Miss Tempe imitates: ““Nothing to do? In this world of ours? / Where weeds spring daily amidst sweet flowers?”” (21-2). Those “women’s-work-is-never-done” lines (as Jarrell terms them) are again in perfect rhyme, and that lilting rhyme serves to undermine any seriousness about the chores, to mock those questions that are so often given to reprimand a child’s complaint of boredom. In just a few images, a few lines of dialogue, Taylor illustrates Miss Tempe’s gift of humor, her ironic slant on manners and duties; the practical demands of marriage and keeping a house and garden have not dimmed her droll approach, her sharp wit.

And this witty undermining of propriety leads Miss Tempe to appreciate Buck Duke, perhaps more fully than anyone else around him. While others reprimand him, are shocked by him, try to rein him in, Miss Tempe admires him, approves of his “devilish eye” and his life-saving, feisty wildness. And Buck Duke, based on his lovely gift of wild plums, clearly admires Miss Tempe. The speaker explains that his mischief “saved an orphan from dire fortune, / And saved his grandpa’s house from sanctity” (13-14). That a house would need to find salvation from sanctity is yet another instance of Taylor’s ironic approach to the piety and gentility insisted upon by recreations of the southern pastoral. And our empathy is again guided away from that myth of the South and toward the two rebels, Miss Tempe and Buck Duke.

In the second stanza, we see Buck Duke’s strong-willed impishness illustrated. Though he’s told not to “drink that Mackling Spring’s brack water” because “the cows stand in there and let go” (a nice bit of countrified advice), Buck Duke plunges in, giggling frogs, until he’s “thrashed Mackling Springs into a suds” (24-30). Miss Tempe’s words ring in the background (“Be good. Take care. / But learn a little evil! If you dare...”), seemingly adhering to propriety but on Buck Duke’s side nevertheless, as he flouts the rules (31-32). Buck Duke, though, finds more than a little evil—and whether he drank the Mackling Spring water and became ill, or

whether Taylor uses “drunk” to imply that he carried his rebelliousness too far, to debauchery and rages, Buck Duke eventually loses out to his illness. The middle of the second stanza traces his fall: he raged and tossed, in fever or drunkenness (or both), made wild proclamations and cursed and “called names that paled the sallow-boned herbwives” (36), but eventually, “the hands cooled, then the face,” and he dies (40).

Mamma stands at his bedside, and the language the speaker uses seems strangely out of place for a deathbed scene—indeed, it hearkens back to Miss Tempe’s playfulness about her chores:

She overlooked him with a sprightly brow  
Inspired by that gay mistress of mad poesy  
Her elocution teacher, Miss Hattie Yow.  
‘Stop, stop, pretty waters’ cried Mary one day  
‘My vessel, my flowers you carry away.’ (42-6)

The similarities between the speaker’s description of Miss Tempe doing chores and Miss Tempe attending Buck’s death are, at first glance, odd. Why, here of all places, would Miss Tempe retain a “sprightly brow”? Why does the speaker again use the word “overlooked”? Perhaps these descriptions indicate a repression of feeling, an adherence to duty, even in the face of loss (one thinks of Emily Dickinson’s poem that describes “The Bustle in a House / The Morning after Death”). Perhaps her “sprightly brow” is a kind of tribute to Buck’s rebellious nature, to her own kindred spirit. In any case, she is there, staying with him, sending him off with a small poem.<sup>66</sup>

One significant difference, of course, is that Miss Hattie Yow is not referred to here as a “heroine of poems,” but rather as a “gay mistress of mad poesy.” The lightness of “gay mistress” and the strangeness of “mad poesy” both seem an uneasy, unlikely fit for this kind of loss and

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<sup>66</sup> The couplet Miss Tempe quotes is borrowed from “Runaway Brook,” a poem by Eliza Lee Follen, published in children’s readers. One version of the poem appears in from *Verse and Prose for Beginners in Reading*, a reader published in 1893 and edited by Horace Elisha Scudder.

sorrow. And yet, perhaps mad poetry is the only possible response to such an unexpected loss, such a deep grief. Or perhaps quoting poetry in the face of such grief is itself madness. Certainly the couplet itself seems far too inadequate, far too light-hearted and silly, to be an elegy. However, the couplet (and the poem from which it is taken) do carry a somber note, and they are more relevant to grief and loss than they first appear; after all, the image of a girl trying to follow the river down to see where it takes her books and flowers is a striking metaphor for the living trying to follow the rivers (Styx, Jordan) that lead to the afterlife, to see where that river has taken their loved ones. And so the girl's cry to the water to "stop, stop!" is also a cry against death. Thus, once again, Taylor manages to display the paradox of the pastoral—while its surfaces may seem lighthearted and sweet, its depths are full of sorrow, anger, resistance, and loss.

The final stanza extends this paradox further, and it shows even more plainly the inadequacy of learned discourse in the face of true grief, as well as the sweetness and darkness intertwined in the pastoral. Significantly, Miss Tempe offers no further rhymed wisdom in this stanza; she grieves silently—but her actions speak volumes about grief and authentic consolation in the physical world. Additionally, all the rhyming couplets that were scattered throughout the previous stanzas disappear in this final stanza; a few end rhymes are still present, but they are dispersed, separated further from one another, and therefore muted—the tone shifts away from a performative display of oratory and toward a genuine expression of heartache. In order to mourn Buck, Miss Tempe returns to her garden—perhaps in small part to find solace in its beauty, but in large part to slash it down, to take out her anger at his loss, and then to create something out of that destruction:

Mamma made a wreath of all her flowers:  
The histrionic garden did not bear  
One saucy pose when she put down the scissors;  
The battered bees hung stupid in mid-air.

She worked on knees and elbows on the back porch,  
That savage zinnia ornament compiled (47-52)

This action—and Taylor’s portrayal of it—is fascinating and complex, beautiful and frightening. Indeed, set against Miss Tempe’s actions in this final stanza, those little pretty rhymes from earlier in the poem, those borrowed couplets, are far from consoling; they barely even ripple the deep waters of grief. Proper elocution and genteel expressions of sorrow are rendered absurd, inept, incapable, in comparison to this “savage” grieving. In this stanza, Miss Tempe instead takes unexpected but far more authentic action—she undercuts the pious, educated discourse that teaches us (badly) how to deal with death and grief, and instead demonstrates the complex of emotion through destruction and creation, undoing and making. And in so doing—in enacting the wildness of emotion, in making the devastation she feels inwardly external—she creates a truer tribute to Buck, honoring his own wild streak, his tendency toward excess, his fearlessness.

Miss Tempe reaches for some kind of authenticity in mourning and emotion here—she is working to cut through and cut out expectations, façades, proper displays of grief, artificial and useless comforts. And so, symbolically, she does cut through all of the ladylike decorum, taking down all signs of gentility (a proper garden, a delicate plucking of one or two flowers, a reserved show of emotion), in harvesting every last one of her flowers. Women in grief—especially women of Miss Tempe’s generation—would have been described as “histrionic” if they displayed such grief in sobs and screams, and so, instead of “carrying on,” Taylor displaces that hysteria onto the garden and then, with fierce and honest emotion, shows Miss Tempe slicing through it. And the world around her, represented in part by those “battered bees,” have no idea how to handle such an explosion of emotion—the world, like the bees, hangs “stupid in mid-air.” (The use of the word “battered” here is also, of course, a reflection of Miss Tempe and Buck Duke, a tiny pathetic fallacy, a brief gesture toward the pastoral elegy.) She also cuts through the “saucy

poses,” those indiscreet and showy displays, also not permitted for decorous ladies and certainly inappropriate in the context of Miss Tempe’s private mourning. That she left not one zinnia standing in the garden is a further testament to her campaign against artifice in this final stanza. Alfredo Franco explains, “Miss Tempe will have none of the histrionics of ladyship and is always spiritedly on the side of naturalness, against cultivation. Taking up her scissors (by now a familiar implement in the book), she prunes her garden of excess and artificiality” (49). Further authentic consolation is found in work, real work, getting down “on knees and elbows” to create something worthy of Buck’s indomitable spirit. The “savage zinnia ornament” is the perfect metaphor for the paradox of his life, and hers, and of the pastoral itself—the artifice of “ornament” meets the wildness of “savage” and the natural world, the “zinnia.” The ruined garden is one reflection of her grief, and the beautiful ornament made out of it is another. But while societal demands (and the pastoral myth) would require that only the beautiful ornament show, Taylor illustrates plainly that ruin and beauty, devastation and ornament, cannot exist without the other, and together they are almost enough to express the complexity of grief.

The poem’s final twist reemphasizes the paradox of pastoral, especially regarding genteel expectations for rural southern women. Miss Tempe, exhausted after the sorrowful and redemptive work, “cooped up her face / With hands like bird’s wings— / A gesture, she knew, would have made Miss Hattie smile” (53-5). Having finally found a way to authentically express her sorrow, she collapses into a despairing gesture—turning her face away from the world, from the devastation of her garden that mirrors her own, and from the beauty she has created in wild tribute—and ironically, it is the very gesture that Miss Hattie, that performer, that mad teacher of oration, approves. But Miss Hattie’s smile is entirely inappropriate, and “smile” is a strange and unsettling word to find at the end of this poem that depicts such tragedy and mourning. This final gesture, then, demonstrates just how mismatched, how inept, the genteel expectations for women

of the South are, in the face of their real lives, real losses, real mourning. And yet, they have a strong hold—so much that these expectations are what Miss Tempe reflects on sardonically at the conclusion of the poem. It is, then, a constant effort to work toward sincerity; and the myths of the pastoral, genteel South, then, are always fraught with paradox.

In fact, looking back over the poem, we find that the paradox emerges plainly even in the first few lines, in Buck Duke's own words: "Sour! Your eyes'll water, Miss Tempe! / But sweet, too" (5-6). And that description—seemingly simply a description of those plums—turns out to be a prophetic statement for the poem and for the context of the larger pastoral myth. Miss Tempe's eyes will water from the sourness of a wildness cut short, the bitterness of loss—but Buck Duke, their kinship, and their savoring of the natural world and its wild gifts are sweet, too. But the sweetness, Taylor insists, is never without the sour—and we must have the sour not just to fully appreciate the sweet, but also to discover the difference between artificial sweetness and hollow gesture, between genuine love, kinship, consolation, and truth.



In another poem portraying a woman in Taylor's family tree, "Cousin Ida," mortality again provokes Taylor (and the women in her family) to reflect on the differences between moments of genuine connection and displays of artifice, and to consider the paradox of and tensions between restraint and freedom, domesticity and wildness, stiff expectations and energy spilling out. In Taylor's taut, loaded language, the stories of Cousin Ida brilliantly reveal the knife-edge of those tensions, the ferocious tenderness of family and the women's sweet remorseful dreams of escape. The poem's disparate scenes show both the template of expectations for a white southern woman in the late 1800s—surrounded by images of the idealized South—as well as the ways in which those expectations fail Ida, the ways in which her reality, her life—as well as the South itself—do not mirror those expectations. The major

argument of the poem, I believe, is to point up just how false and fallible those idealized images of the South and southern women are, and to underscore that point by revealing snatches and images of a much more painful, even miserable reality. Ida's memories are torn between those idyllic moments and those haunting, darker scenes.

"Cousin Ida" begins near the end of the eponymous protagonist's life: "She waked to snow, / And let the morning go, / For she was old." This first stanza, direct as it is, also strikes a mournful note in the long "o" sounds drawn out at the end of each line (as well as in the pun Taylor creates with "morning"). And it also indicates a change in Ida's character—other snowy mornings, earlier in her life, she would not have let go, or would not have been permitted to do so. But this lapsed morning offers a window for Ida's reflection on her life, a chance to sift through memories and the ironies they reveal. The second stanza—where the speaker's voice merges with Ida's consciousness—begins this reflection:

That hushed onset  
Comes but to blank  
My distant, might-be-yet world, too,  
All worlds, all peep shows in all eggs. (4-7)

The snow's erasure of the world around her becomes a metaphor for her impending death, the "blinking" of her life and all other possible lives she might have lived, the choices she might have yet made. The final image of the second stanza, "all peep shows in all eggs," blanketed by snow, demonstrates Ida's sense of the fragility and smallness of her life, of all lives—tiny dioramas (or tiny newborn chicks) inside delicate shells—and they can be easily lost. This image is reminiscent of the "fiery candle in a teacup" lit against a darkening stormy sky; it, too, signifies another whole life in a small, delicate enclosure, and it, too, is set against overwhelming forces.

After all, how does one find an egg in a snowstorm? How do you differentiate one shade of white from another?

The little world Ida grew up in—that long-ago rural-Victorian South,<sup>67</sup> and her life within it—is nearly blanked out. One of the refrains, “You ought t’ve been gone from here long ago,” echoes this idea—and it is a line that accumulates meaning throughout, as the word “gone,” like a prism, fractures into multiple possible meanings. The poem itself does not immediately allow Ida’s world to be “gone from here long ago,” but instead rescues and recaptures it in fragments and images, anecdotes and bits of dialogue. Taylor gives us small glimpses into the “peepshow” of her life. But the poem, and Ida as the poem’s speaker, are ambivalent about the rescue. Indeed, Taylor deploys irony to undercut the expectations for women in that world, to show their futility and just how those expectations and ideals fail women. Throughout the poem is the paradox, again, of possibilities recognized but foreclosed, the paradox of rural, genteel white southern women living between pre-modern traditions and a modernizing, ever-widening world. Additionally, Taylor indicts other remnants of that world, including racial injustice, by incorporating several moments that reflect both the feigned benevolence of white people toward black slaves and the harder, sadder reality that that benevolence masks. Ida’s recollections, then, in Taylor’s deft structuring and sharp language, highlight the gaps between genteel expectations and a much tougher reality, between her upbringing and her later, clearer understanding.

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<sup>67</sup> This world is perhaps most memorably and dramatically captured in Mark Twain’s 1883 *Life on the Mississippi*, wherein he describes the late nineteenth-century South as clinging to an imaginary past, a result of the “Sir Walter Scott disease”: “Then comes Sir Walter Scott with his enchantments, and by his single might checks this wave of progress, and even turns it back; sets the world in love with dreams and phantoms; with decayed and swinish forms of religion; with decayed and degraded systems of government; with the sillinesses and emptinesses, sham grandeurs, sham gauds, and sham chivalries of a brainless and worthless long-vanished society.” The world Ida describes throughout the poem includes these sorts of phantoms and shams, false chivalries and grandeurs—but Taylor also ensures that we see through these shams by including Ida’s own regrets and reflections.

The first recollection, the first scene in Ida's show, sets a proper stage for a youthful Ida and her cousins, as they learn those skills required for refined young ladies. Rocking in their chairs, they learn "hemstitching and featherstitching" and sigh over the heat (11). These images seem straight out of *Gone with the Wind*, or earlier iterations of the plantation romance—replete with piazzas and voiles, charming sighs, discussions of love and marriage. Ida uses the phrase, "our passage learnt," to describe this scene—the word "passage" signaling not just a particular piece of work memorized, but also a rite of passage already gained. And so, the stanza concludes, the girls "prepared for marriage, or—rather—love" (13).

But Taylor's irony, already thick, is about to thicken. First, it's clear that "hemstitching and featherstitching" are not solid preparations for marriage. This scene bears traces of the gentility-training we find in "The Bine Yadkin Rose," and we are reminded that those niceties will give way to cutting up a wedding dress and dishing potatoes. Indeed, in the following stanza, Ida returns home to discover that her engagement has been canceled for her, and her family "cut my wedding dress to jabots" (19). And second, within the line itself, Taylor's speaker creates a deliberate gap, an extended pause, between marriage and love, using those long dashes to signify the distance that may separate them. Though the girls in the first stanza bemoan the fact "that heat and light went hand in glove," the same is clearly not true for marriage and love, despite the neat rhyme between "glove" and "love" that pairs them. While Ida may have loved her beau, their marriage was deemed unsuitable after he "had a drop too much" one night and "snored by the parlor fire and scorched his toe" (14, 16). And so, both of these subtle ironies serve to undermine the perfected pastoral image of the happy, refined, well-mannered, bustling, arts-and-craftsy white southern woman. These ironies plainly demonstrate that the genteel expectations for white southern women do not match up with the realities many of them faced, including our Ida, now destined, it seems, for spinsterhood or for escape.

Indeed, one of the prevalent tensions in this poem is the tension between domesticity and wildness, remaining home or escaping elsewhere. In the middle of the poem, Ida captures this tension succinctly, in the phrase, “I, captive, cage-fond” (52). She is a captive of the rural pastoral myth, the genteel and puritan expectations for women, and yet, also “cage-fond,” as that milieu and its customs are familiar and even cherished. In one small phrase, Taylor precisely identifies one of the most predominant paradoxes of her work and of the southern pastoral myth—that legend is a beloved trap, a familiar lie, a treasured and well-worn falsehood. But, though the cage is comforting in its familiarity, Ida (and Taylor) is also acutely aware of its oppressive limitations.<sup>68</sup> After all, in the lines following, she describes a bird (a well-known symbol of transcendence and freedom) that “they said had no long of her own” but who “cries from the black gum to my ears alone” (53-4). In many ways, Ida is exactly like that bird, a woman who wasn’t heard, who “had no song of her own” (married or single makes no difference for Ida or for other women), but she is able to listen to and fully understand the song of those silent birds. And Taylor, too, can hear and fully understand those birds and the women they represent—the women sing to her (made especially clear in the fact that birds traditionally symbolize women poets). And so, the women who were not permitted their own songs are now given voice in her poems. This book is full of their songs. In this poem, in particular, Ida is given a voice—and Taylor is sure to incorporate much of the paradox and complexity of her story and song, including the very difficult tensions between confinement and freedom, “cage-fondness” and fear.

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<sup>68</sup> Taylor represents this concept again in “The Chain Gang Guard.” Henry Taylor notes that the guard’s situation “parallels that of most of the women, in that he is somehow in charge, yet unable himself to escape,” and throughout Taylor’s first collection, “this situation is more typically that of women than of men” (121). Thus, “The Chain Gang Guard” functions not only as a poem in itself, but also as an extended conceit that reflects back on the women in Taylor’s poems, from both the past and the present.

The final stanza provides another sharp image of this tension, as Ida remembers, in loaded language:

They bound me up in ribbons, moiré bows,  
My hair so tight it left no play for face,  
My waist so tight it left no space for plea.  
'Child, you'll be miserable,' they warned, 'Don't go.'  
(Stay here where suffering's homemade, sure to fit.) (74-8)

The tight, exact rhythms of the first three lines reflect the tight confinement of Ida's girlhood, the exacting expectations of becoming a perfect southern woman. These ribbons and bows, the corset and hairstyle are, of course, symbols of the confinement of the gender role she is expected to fill. The costume becomes the woman, the exterior reflecting the expectations for the interior. The dress, binding her, becomes an emblem of the "homemade" suffering. No individual expression or "face," no individual breath or "plea" are permitted when she is younger—her means of expression, through countenance and voice, are cut off. Though she was encouraged (forced?) to stay home in the rural pastoral world, where "they" believed she would be happier, that pastoral world was far from idyllic, and the "suffering [was] sure to fit." In the following lines, the rhythms begin to loosen, symbolic of the fact that, now older, now nearing her death, Ida finally has a chance to breathe and speak and reflect on those restrictive expectations. She writes that her garment, symbolizing both expectations and suffering,

...never has worn out, though it's grown thin  
Now, like a veil. I see through it  
When the shadows are right. (79-81).

And so, we find that she still wears those expectations—that homemade dress has become threadbare from so much wear, but all that wear has also provided her with the chance to see through the suffering, to understand its limitations and suffocations more clearly. The phrase,

“see through it,” may reflect not just Ida’s clarified understanding of the patriarchal oppression she endured, but also the fact that she can now see past it, see her way clear of it. Taylor writes a few lines later that Ida’s “own ember” still, even now, in late life, has “half a notion to spill out”—her light still shines, and her voice is still strong enough to be heard.

And Ida is willing, throughout the poem, to cast her light on other darkneses, other painful ironies of the idyllic southern pastoral. Throughout this poem, Taylor weaves Ida’s stories of tight binds and repressive routines with memories that evince darker and more horrible truths about the South’s past. She may have tried, during her life, to close her eyes to slavery, and yet, in the center of the poem, Ida reflects both on the rapidity of the years passing as well as on her own willed blindness to the injustices of the South:

One year I clapped my hand over my eyes  
When spring came, and when I took it down  
My knuckles were speckled brown.  
In the middles, in the red cotton bloom,  
Each warm clod with its darker side,  
Its sprouting seeds of the staved-off jungle,  
Slaves still sang (62-8)

This stanza covers so many years of Ida’s life—and during all of those years, the slaves are singing in the cotton fields. Just the length—“the middles”—is one acknowledgement of the ongoing injustices in the South. The language is elusive here, not direct, and the focus is still too much on Ida’s life itself to truly countenance the suffering of slaves. But the implication of the “darker side” of the South is there, as is the connection that Taylor is drawing (gradually, cautiously) between the multiple oppressions of that darker side. Ida’s oppression is entirely different from the oppression of slavery, but she does “tie a bow” between them, recognizing that her straitjacket of ribbons and moiré bows is connected to the constant suffering of the slaves

who, like one particular slave mentioned earlier in the poem, “kept his shoulder to the wheel of death” (30).

And the metaphor of the “clod,” on one side sun-warmed, and on the other, darker side, always threatening to go wild, “sprouting seeds of the staved-off jungle”—that metaphor is yet another of Taylor’s crystalline images of the paradox of the pastoral. This image, in short order, implies that domesticity in the South may appear sunlit and warm in its mythology (the “happy darky” stock character of plantation romance certainly is evoked here), but the darker side is just beneath. And that darker side represents two things: first, the darkness of injustice, and second, the life there seeking release. Its tendrils and sprouts are always seeking an escape—whether those sprouts are white women or black men and women. In this case, the cultivation of the land indicates the history of slavery, a way of cutting off freedom, and those sprouting seeds, even in the darkness of history, are the ever-present desires for freedom, growing underground, never entirely “staved-off.”

This stanza ties back to various other moments in the poem that also try to “blank out” the existence of slavery—through patronizing benevolence or quick corrections in language. In these efforts to cover over or ignore slavery, Ida mirrors traditional southern pastoralists like the Agrarians or adherents of the Lost Cause. Those attempts, though, are unsuccessful, as they seep back into Ida’s consciousness, and Taylor ensures that we are able to see the “darker side” of “each warm clod.” In the fifth stanza of the poem, we meet “black Uncle Wylie” on the day of his death, and instead of an elegy, Tempe makes a cavalier joke (and Ida makes her own, rhyming “wryly” with “Wylie”): ““Good-bye-sir, Wylie! / ‘You ought t’ve been gone from here long ago!’” (24-5). This refrain, of course, haunts Ida throughout the poem—its repetition signifies her own impending death, and the passing of an entire way of life. But here, it is still a line that evokes a casual disregard (if also some affection, perhaps) for Uncle Wylie, and it is, it seems,

distasteful now to Ida (as it is to readers) because she quickly moves on without breaking the stanza to another, sweeter, more innocent memory. And yet, by the end, she returns to Wylie, understanding her connection to him, and recognizing that she has lived only a “half-lighted” life—a life that only half understood the repressions of the South—though that light now threatens, at the end of her life, to spill out. And it does spill out, in that she finally tells all of these stories, and Taylor’s structuring of her various memories draws the connections between the suffocation of white women and the oppression of black people in the South. In another, more dreamlike stanza, Ida overhears a conversation between a slave and master. She opens with a strange image:

When the stars fell it was unearthly bright:  
We read unwritten texts by that sharp light.  
“More rain, more rest—“  
    “What’s that you say?”  
“More rain, more grass!” (39-41)

This conversation is an “unwritten text” that she can now read clearly, under a “sharp light” of “fallen stars.” She can read, far more plainly, the stifling and silencing of the slaves, the way they are forced to change their words, to cover up the truth of their suffering. Again, the emblem of light—like her “ember” in the final stanza that spills out, illuminating her own suffering—serves to elucidate the contrasts between the pastoral myth of the South and the shadows over its history. Ida (and Taylor, and her readers) are not blind to the darker sides of the pastoral myth. Just as in Dickey’s use of symbols of light and darkness in “Slave Quarters,” or as in Toomer’s use of dusk and dawn as complex symbols in sketches like “Karintha” or throughout “Kabnis,” Taylor, too, uses this complex symbolism—as well as paradoxical images, sharply-drawn contrasts between cultivation and wildness, and careful structuring that moves from stereotypical scenes of the southern pastoral—in order to illumine deeper and darker truths of the South and its history.



Perhaps the poem in which Taylor most deftly counters several pieces of the pastoral myth at once is “Her Day.” If the southern pastoral, typically, evokes a renewed heavenly Eden in the rural South, where aristocracy could flourish and where sturdy yeomen and their families found contentment, where communities (across genders, classes, and races) could find harmony and where connections with the land restored the spirit, and where the work was good, not unendurable, and still left time for education and reflection, then this poem shines, in each line, like the teeth of a saw, ready to cut through those mythical constructions of the pastoral in the South. In her natural imagery and snippets of dialogue, in her overlay of past onto present, Taylor consistently undermines our expectations for the pastoral world. And yet, after all of those trappings have been stripped away, we are left with, again, a fierce tribute to a woman not conquered by nature or danger, by humiliations or by pain. As in many other poems of this first collection, she cuts through falsehoods and platitudes to get to the harder reality, but also to get to the only consolation to be had in the face of loss and grief and death—a moment of clarity, of authentic understanding and connection.

In “Her Day,” Taylor describes the day that Granny, the family matriarch, dies. The poem weaves between speakers—a lucid speaker attending her at her deathbed, and Granny’s own jumbled memories of childhood mixed in with her concerns for her present life and her farm. This polyvocal approach that blurs time and space and pronouns already challenges the stability of the pastoral world. The disarray that the poem evokes refutes the order and peace that animate many southern pastoral visions, and the multiple, blended narrators counter any single dominant narrative of the South. And from the very outset, the poem unsettles—even the weather is deceiving. The poem opens, “All day it had kept turning dark, like rain / Coming, or like the day of the eclipse” (1-2). The darkness, then, is like the threat of rain, but also like the strange total

darkness of an eclipse—but the rain does not come, and the eclipse is not happening. And so the reason for that darkness is never given. It remains a mystery why the world suddenly turned dark. This darkening landscape may gesture toward the pathetic fallacy of the pastoral tradition, especially the tradition of the pastoral elegy; it does seem to be an omen of Granny's impending death, and it also implies the kind of power that she holds—the whole world responds to her suffering and death. In any case, it is an ominous beginning, and we are far removed from the sunlit innocence of the forests and fields. And, just like the day of the eclipse, on this day, too, the cows are thrown off by the sudden darkness, too, and they “come up to the barn” far too early, “bellow[ing] to be milked” (3-4).

From the outset, then, the rural pastoral world of this poem has gone awry. And the second stanza, with its mix of Granny's delirium, pain, and constant worry, offers no relief. Farm life is, here, enormously demanding—it does not ease with Granny's illness. She worries over large and small things, the herd of cows and “a thread she'd torn” (14). The whole first half of the stanza is full of disconsolate, unsettling language—night and pain, fretting and crying, gloom and loss. And even Granny's delirium offers no escape. She returns to a handful of childhood memories, which initially hold the possibility of an idyllic escape, a sweet nostalgia, but those memories, too, are spoiled or threatening. If they are funny and nostalgic (and they are), they are certainly not sacred or safe. As an example, as a girl, Granny “walked out for bluets, pinks,” with the other girls, but they walked in “pneumonia weather,” and they also found “what Ma called poison lilies, sprouting / From Back Bunn's meadow resurrectionwise / But with a sinful pink stain at the throat...” (22-24). The lilies, sign of grace and beauty and even salvation here, are tainted with that sinful, sexual stain, and so poisoned. The natural world here does not provide a safe haven or a landscape of spiritual connection and purity; instead, it embodies a world fraught with sin and error, danger and disgrace—though it is also beautiful and thrilling, and maybe all

the more for those contrasts. This memory, too, then, is part of Taylor's paradoxical pastoral, and here again she refuses to let the landscape rest in mythic vision.

Granny slips into another memory next, of playing "down at Cluster Rocks" on the river, and she remarks, "Scary, it was— / We played clubfist— / Grab hold, Liza!" (25-28). Though we might anticipate that a return to childhood is a return to innocence, a kind of pastoral haven in the midst of all this threatening weather and fraught landscape, Taylor plays a paradoxical game with this idea, too. The girls, in Granny's memory, begin their game of clubfist on the slippery rocks, and Taylor includes the playful, innocent, nursery rhyme song they sang, her keen ear for language and dialect on full display:

William Trembletoe  
HE's a good fisherman  
KETCHez his fish  
putsum in a the dish  
KETCHez his hens  
putsum in the pens.  
Some lay eggs  
Some  
don't  
O,U,T, out, goes—if pain— (29-38).

This verse is light-hearted, catchy, endearing in its rhythms and rhymes, but the conclusion of it draws us back to a more ambiguous place; the hens that don't lay eggs are a signal of the pastoral world failing again, and of course, "O,U,T, out, goes—if pain—" is an entirely unsettling conclusion, indicating lapsing consciousness, the return of the grandmother's present suffering, the approach of death. And the game then turns ugly, frightening:

She gasped, You're choking, Wincie!  
Made me cry, a grown woman  
You play so mean, making grown women cry  
Old women....No, death choked (39-42)

Even the name “Wincie” implies pain, and it becomes clear that the game of the past is now jumbled up with the present. But the game was always, in some ways, designed to make girls and women cry.

This point—that the game has its cruel streak, and that the game is a metaphor for growing up and finding the hard fate of being a woman—emerges more plainly in “Playing.” Here the children also play clubfist down at another stream, “Ugly Creek.” But their chant in “Playing,” even more than in “Her Day” starts to hint at more disturbing realities in the South. Even innocent rhymes about cats and woods and water assume darker hues, until suddenly the rhyme turns far more alarming:

Where’s ox? Rope lynched.  
Where’s rope? “Dead and buried  
Behind the new church door  
And the first that laughs or grins or shows  
His teeth  
Gets a slap, and a kick, and a knock, and a—  
Wreath.” (25-31)

The imagery is frightening, recognizing the horrors of lynching and death in the South. The wreath seems a strange turn, a turn away from violence, until we find the “savage zinnia wreath” Mamma made in memory of Buck Duke.

Additionally, in “Playing,” Taylor illuminates other threats and worries and terrors in store for the girls. Earlier in the poem, Taylor answers the question, “What was it, little girls became?” with the line, “Pretense had always been their aim” (16-17). They play at being women, and in connecting this game with growing up, Taylor draws out the sexual overtones of the game of clubfist, which is played by making a chain of hands, one girl’s thumb inside another’s fist, and that second girl’s thumb inside another fist, until the chant ends. After the girls’ disturbing chant, the adult speaker returns to provide a rhyming chant of her own, mirroring

theirs, and it is no more reassuring. Each of the phrases depicts the various possible fates of the girls: “(The waiting womb! The waiting tomb— / The empty antique sitting room!) / Before the final griefs succumb” (34-6). The girls may grow up to be mothers (the womb is waiting), they may die in childbirth or otherwise literally, or they may die metaphorically in a life of constraint and hardship (the tomb is waiting). And they may end up solitary in a dusty, ornate, deafeningly silent “empty antique sitting room.” These are the “final griefs”—the adult speaker’s version is just as frightening as the children’s version, in its own way, if “final griefs” are what little girls playing at being women finally encounter. At the conclusion of “Playing,” the little girls respond again, first fiercely and angrily, and then more resigned, to the fact that they weren’t warned about these fates in time:

ROBERT, YOU LEFT OUT SOME!  
You left out some!  
You left out some!  
Watt...left out some...(37-40)

Even as cruel and frightening as their version of the chant was, it didn’t cover other difficult possibilities, the womb and tomb and empty room. In these final lines, the child’s voice and the adult’s voice conflate; Betty Adcock notes that these lines “present the child discovering ahead, as the adult has looked back to see, that the harshest possibilities were ‘left out’” (12). In the chants in “Her Day” (much sweeter by comparison, despite its distressed ending) and in “Playing,” then, Taylor resists the idea that memories of childhood in the rural South inevitably bring a twinge of pleasant nostalgia, or paint a portrait of innocence and freedom. These chants and games that we expect to be innocuous and silly, that should represent a kind of pastoral idyllic freedom, are instead, in her hands, fraught with complex dangers and risks, violence and bad fates. One can imagine the poet laughing at the desire to return to the past, as if it were a

time of more order, stability, virtue, and steady values. Returning to memories of her own childhood and to the stories of her ancestors' childhoods is far more complex than those idealized visions will permit—and so her poems, again, create an ironic gap between expectation and reality. Taylor undermines those expectations to provide a much clearer picture of what a rural southern childhood might in fact entail. And it isn't always beautiful, desirable, or reassuring.

Neither is the river symbolism, in both "Her Day" and "Playing," singularly beautiful or calming. Rather, that symbolism is just as complex as Taylor's depictions of childhood. The river never simply indicates the peaceful stream of idyllic settings (though it is occasionally a place of solace).<sup>69</sup> Jarrell, in his introduction for the collection, noted that water serves as "the ruling, final image of the poems," and Taylor's variations on water as a metaphor include "water of experience or sexuality," "life's dark star-bearing flood trapped in the mill of daily duties," or even "frozen into the fixity of glass." And "you destroy yourself, escape from yourself, in water," too (10). Both "Her Day" and "Playing" incorporate several of these meanings and metaphorical possibilities. For example, both the names "Cluster Rocks" and "Ugly Creek" imply some kind of menace. The rivers of childhood represent risk and danger, playfulness on the edge of fear. Later in "Her Day" the river becomes a fishing hole where the "water's clare" in March, but stirred up and unclear in other months. That muddied river symbolizes Taylor's version of the southern pastoral—it is never so easy to see through, never entirely peaceful or clear. The river does, in Granny's vision at the end of her life, become "golden," "the river that bright angel feet have trod," the River Jordan that she will soon cross. At this moment of the poem, it seems as though the pastoral (and Granny's life) will resolve itself of contradiction—there will be a happy, heavenly ending for her, and the river will finally run beautiful and clear.

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<sup>69</sup> In various other poems, the river is dangerous and wild—and that danger is sometimes welcomed, as in "Goodbye Family," when the speaker, swimming, meets the curve of the river and it "blanks / Out all but ear" (41-2).

But again, Taylor undercuts this religious symbolism with a moment both endearing and heartbreaking. Granny seems to cross the river to her next life safely, rowed over by her uncles, and taken ashore. But on the other side she finds, again, Cluster Rocks—now “alight,” but still not entirely safe, still “scary,” as it was when she was young. And as she attempts to step from the boat into the afterlife, “the boat beneath her slipped the bank” (51). Much like her life of duty and care, the close of her life and the opening of the next is also fraught with difficulty. She cannot catch a break, even in the next life. Thus, the metaphoric meanings of the river multiply and accumulate. Taylor resists easy interpretation of our relationship to the natural world—the river is gentle and wild, nourishing and threatening, dammed and uncontrollable. And because of the river’s otherworldly symbolism, Taylor illuminates the fact that while we may find spiritual connection and redemption in the natural world, that connection will not be easy.

However, Granny’s humor and resilience, precisely evoked in the final lines of the poem, do provide a fierce and funny kind of solace, in no small part because they undercut our usual platitudes about the journey to the afterlife with brilliant, unexpected irony. Taylor concludes:

“Stretched me arightsmart,” she chirped.  
O to think of that dying!  
O unworthy “stretchedmearightsmart”!

She glared at hell through tears. (53-6)

In these lines, as in “In the Churchyard,” we are given the particulars of Granny’s personality, her sharp country wit and distinctive voice (her “chirp”). With one foot on the shore of the afterlife, and one foot stuck in the boat drifting backward, Granny barely keeps her balance, but her humor and quickness remain fully intact. And so, she remains alive to the speaker, to the reader, and that kind of detailed memory is some comfort, some sweetness, even if nothing else—even alighting onto the shores of the afterlife—is easy. Though her “stretchedmearightsmart” is

not a worthy, reverent, somber enough phrase for her final hour, it is *her*. Taylor's precision in language is the truer, better memorial, far better than any pious commonplace.

And finally, Taylor gives one more parting shot to the pastoral myth in that last line—"She glared at hell through tears"—because it is not clear in which direction Granny is looking. Is she looking toward the afterlife, the hell that awaits her? Or is she looking back toward her earthly life, her rural homestead full of duty and worry and cruelty and pain, that life given in snatches of memory and fragments of images throughout the poem? In either case, Taylor's final line cuts "scissorly-wise" through religious discourse and southern pastoral, through the banalities about "better places" after death and through the myth-making of an edenic southern world. And it is only Granny's "glare" that offers any comfort at the end of the poem, because it is a sign of her anger and her strength, her unwillingness to give up, even in the face of some hell. This is "Her Day," after all—the title indicating not only that "her time has come," but also that she retains ownership over her own life, and that this is the day to celebrate and remember her, as she was, precisely.

Taylor's portrayals of Miss Tempe, Cousin Ida, and Granny, then, continually point to the difficulty of traditional rural life. She refuses to idealize their lives, instead giving us the gritty and difficult details of work, loss, mourning, and worry. Miss Tempe, for example, faces the unendurable mundanity of marriage, dishing potatoes up three times a day, and the awful grief of watching a young, spirited kid die too soon. In both instances, she recognizes the inanity and inadequacy of the manners and decorum drilled into her all her life. Miss Bine, too, finds all of her genteel training of no use, in the end, against fearful storms and quotidian routine. Cousin Ida recalls the awful constrictions of gentility for southern women, as well as the ever-present, if often ignored, awful oppression of slavery. Granny, too, faces the burdens of duty, unable to rest even as she is dying, unable to find comfort in memory or in her journey to the next life. In each

of these poems, among many others, Taylor challenges the myths of the pastoral South through vivid, sharp, undeniable detail and unexpected ironies. And yet, simultaneously, Taylor illustrates the resilience and beauty, the strength and ferocity that keep these women alive in the face of all these gritty, difficult, painful situations. Akin to Toomer's emphasis on the centrality of the pastoral values of connection and community, Taylor emphasizes the redeeming kinship between Miss Tempe and Miss Bine, "a sisterhood in multiple rosettes," a fragile beauty amid austerity and dull housework. And like Spencer's complicated garden symbolism that contains both beauty and grief, Taylor underscores that Miss Tempe, too, finds some solace in razing an entire garden, killing off that beauty, in order to make a fitting tribute, a "savage zinnia wreath," for Buck Duke. Likewise, Ida and Granny, at the end of their lives, find comfort in finally telling the truth, detailing their memories of childhood cruelties and the suffocations they faced, and their honesty undermines the myth of a harmonious, placid South while also creating something of beauty in the telling. Though their stories are never so outrageous as Dickey's corrupted southern pastorals, the histories of the women in Taylor's family serve the same disruptive purpose. However, the consolation of Taylor's work, in these poems particularly, is *in the irony* that can cut through false platitudes and hollow discourse, and in the details that create true and fierce memorials.



##### 5. Taylor's Artists in the Garden

Another of the key underlying points—and ironies—of Taylor's first collection is that, to reiterate Faulkner's phrase, "the past isn't even past." Taylor not only details the conflicts and struggles that her rural, pre-modern ancestors faced—especially those that work against the grain of the southern pastoral mythology—but she also demonstrates how those conflicts and struggles continue to resonate for her in her present, modern life. Of course, Taylor does not write strictly

autobiographical poetry (and, as evidenced in her review of Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, she abhors confessional poetry, arguing that it uses the poet "shabbily"). And yet, many poems in *Wilderness of Ladies* do touch on conflicts and concerns that Taylor inherited from her rural upbringing and from her female ancestors, and many of the struggles she describes and defines in the poems that reflect her contemporary situation mirror those faced by Tempe, Ida, Granny, and others. For example, in a poem like "Sister," Taylor presents the conflict between the desire to escape to the past and the knowledge that such an escape is impossible—not least of all because the memories of the past that arise are far from idyllic. "Sister," then, is remarkably similar to Granny's troubled memories of her own childhood, or Ida's constant returns to more uneasy, disturbed memories rather than the innocent ones she tries to retain.

In other poems like "Goodbye Family," Taylor's speaker measures the weight of duty, finding it nearly unbearable, and in this she echoes the practical drudgery faced by Miss Tempe and Miss Bine. In still other poems, Taylor reflects on the conflict between the demands of domestic life and the demands of creativity and art, a conflict encapsulated in the image of the Bine Yadkin rose, which emblemizes both hardy survival and delicate beauty. Miss Tempe's "savage zinnia wreath"—a symbol of creative response to grief and suffering beyond the bounds of propriety—is also mirrored in Taylor's "Woman as Artist," in the extravagant flowers. Those flowers—so mighty they "Multiply / Till the round earth's ringed with Babel trumpets"—reflect the speaker's expected adherence to her duty to nurture, like a mother, as well as her defiant adherence to beauty, creativity, and art. In many ways, then, Taylor's poems demonstrate, again, that the disjunction with the past is an illusion—that, for southern women, there is far more continuity with the past, especially in terms of the expectations, pressures, and conflicts they faced in defining themselves.

Another way to view the similarities between Taylor's past and present speakers is that Taylor possibly identifies with these particular moments in her family's lives because she herself feels these conflicts, and looking back toward them is one way to find a model, a way through, a means of survival. Eric Gudas notes that one of the primary conflicts of identity evinced in Taylor's poetry is that between "gentle lady" and "hard-boiled artist" (93). However, whereas he argues that Taylor inherited these "competing loyalties" from her mentor, Caroline Gordon, it seems clear to me that she understood this conflict long before she met Gordon, that she saw this tension played out in her ancestors' lives in multiple ways, and that she inherited this tension from her female family members and from her southern rural upbringing, wherein expectations for women were strict and plain. In writing about the women in her family's history—in reconsidering their lives, their particular moments of struggle, their redemptive acts—Taylor creates for herself a network of understanding, a sympathetic community. As if to clarify exactly this point, in the final lines of the collection, at the end of a multi-part complex reflection on various members of her family, Taylor writes, "Was closeness more than painful separateness? / We were a constellation of detached, like, ghosts" (62). The poems considered in the previous section certainly demonstrate that Tempe, Ida, Miss Bine, and Granny all worked through the knots of gentility and survival, art and practicality, desire to escape and the demands to stay home, the need for beauty and the requirements of duty—and so, they become, for Taylor, a "constellation" or community of understanding, even if they are no longer present, and even if they were not close to begin with.

The poems I feature here—"Woman as Artist," "Romantic Abstract," and "Sister"—deal with these same knots, the poet's hands working through them in the lives of her contemporary speakers as much as they did in her portrayals of her female ancestors' lives. And though Taylor demonstrates that the modern world is far from idyllic for women, in these poems again she seeks

out that community, that solace of understanding. And again, Taylor also demonstrates that if the pastoral offers any solace, it is not found in nostalgia or landscape or mythology, but in artistic creation and in genuine relationships and community.

The title of “Woman as Artist” certainly seems to promise a declaration of purpose, an assertion of what it means to be both a woman and an artist, and to unveil the relationship between them. How does a woman recreate the world? How does she portray it? However, the poem as a whole remains elusive, disjointed, multiplying rather than simplifying in image and implication, centrifugal rather than centripetal, as Taylor’s poems often are. And in fact, from its very first stanza, the poem evades direct commentary on the position of a woman as an artist. The poem opens with a fragmentary image, underpinned by staccato rhythms and short lines, that immediately challenges our notions about the fulfillment and beauty of being an artist, a woman, a mother:

I’m mother.  
I hunt alone.  
There is no bone  
Too dry for me, mother,  
Or too extra. (1-5)

The path between the title, “Woman as Artist,” and these lines is nothing if not complicated. What does a woman artist look like? What does she do, and how? The first line might offer us a positive picture of motherhood and artistry—producer, protector, creator—made more powerful by the lack of an article (not “I’m a mother,” for example, but phrased more assertively, fiercely). But it is undercut by the next lines—“I hunt alone.” The mother is not part of the family, here, nor is she the nurturing, placid farmwife of the pastoral; instead, she is a hunter, prowling, scavenging, killing alone. Woman as artist, woman as mother, may have to scrape for what she can get—dry bones, leftover bones. In the second stanza, the mother instructs her son to “have a

care,” because that which she feeds him (the “chowder”) contains pearls that “nibble...gently, with joy,” but actually “contain powder” (6-10). If the pearls are the artistic creations, it’s clear that they cannot feed her son—and they are not only inedible (and indeed the things doing the eating!) but also dangerous (filled with gunpowder, a beautiful—even feminine—bullet). The role of motherhood and all the typical discourse that swirls around it, its grace, generosity, and selflessness—all of this is undercut throughout the poem; it seems to imply that the role of mother and the role of artist (no matter our pat clichés about mothers as creators) are totally incompatible.

The stanzas that address the artist’s role are similarly biting, undermining; in the third stanza, Taylor makes it apparent that what the artist creates provides nothing useful, according to cultural and material demands:

The light feathers of a year,  
Too fine to make a pillow,  
Not fine enough to wear  
Out anywhere, drop but like milk  
Into the snow  
Of what I say and bear. (19-24)

The artist has created something beautiful, but, like “milk into the snow” or “feathers...not fine enough to wear,” the time spent nurturing her art has produced nothing of quantifiable value. Her art does not feed her family, nor does it warm them. But the dry bones of motherhood (and the ironic isolation it imposes) do not offer her anything to build her art upon; they do not sustain *her*. The woman and the artist—as well as her family and her art—are all starving.

And yet, a moment arrives of victorious ferocity, or ferocious victory, for the woman, the artist, and the mother. And not surprisingly, Taylor returns to the garden to convey this victory, to reveal her artistic achievement, to describe her tender, fierce, ever-attentive nurturing. In this

stanza, the roles of woman, artist, and mother are brought together in the garden. In the context of the poem—which is, before and after this verse, harsh and painful, angry and hungry—this stanza offers the reprieve of Eden.

Kneel, fathers.  
If my babies are right,  
It is not because of you!  
Or me.  
But I lick them tenderly,  
Scrutinize their toilette,  
Every tendril pleasing  
On account of me...  
Next year I'll dig them up  
And separate them.  
They'll multiply  
    Multiply  
        Multiply  
Till the round earth's ringed with Babel trumpets,  
Some dark, some light,  
Some streakèdy. (25-40)

This Eden does not arise without tremendous work. This garden is not alive and multiplying because of the visions of the “fathers,” but because of the work of mothers. The speaker’s tenderness and scrutiny, her dedication and perseverance, are what bring this brilliant, multi-colored garden to life—and what keeps the wilderness, the meaninglessness, the emptiness at bay. This stanza is very different from the first, which was made of abrupt sentences and fragments of imagery; it offers one whole energetic, ongoing, tumbling sentence—the artist, the mother, the woman has found her milieu and her strength in bringing these flowers to life. The repetition of “multiply,” falling rapidly down the page, underscores that vibrancy and strength. It is important, I think, to note the variety of color, the repetition of “multiply,” and the reference to “Babel,” as all of these details signify the coming together of various communities. The speaker deploys the metaphor of gardening bulbs—which need to be dug up and separated, first, before they can

proliferate and grow—in order to suggest an eventual unity and communion, even among different colors, different languages, different worlds. And so, finally, the earth “ringed with Babel trumpets” will, eventually, herald the efforts of women, artists, and mothers in the face of starvation and drudgery, suffering and fear, and that ring of flowers will signify the divisions and difficulties they have overcome. Indeed, the “trumpets” brilliantly evoke not just the shape of the flower but the announcement of this achievement. In the center of this poem, Taylor remakes the pastoral world, and indicates that the most essential part of the pastoral is community and connection. Additionally, she ensures, in this stanza, that we recognize the extraordinary work that it takes to create beauty, and that we recognize the efforts of women, in particular, so often left on the periphery of the pastoral narrative.

By the end of “Woman as Artist,” the speaker is alone again, threatened by storms of “cyclonic gusts and chilling rain” (54). But the dramatic, vivid image of a ring of trumpet flowers that encircles the earth—an extraordinary metaphor for a created and struggled-for community of women—remains. And that image serves to draw together the women who appear throughout the book. Alfredo Franco observes that *Wilderness of Ladies* is a kind of “gallery of women,” and the gallery is brought together under the direction of the artist: “Some are ladies, some are ghosts, and some are tigers....Of course, overseeing the book, is the ‘Woman as Artist,’ the toughest ‘lady’ of all, heir of Miss Tempe and, like her, a mother” (46-7). And indeed, the “Woman as Artist”—who survives isolation, who creates out of scraps and bones, who nurtures and starves, and who builds connection and community out of bulbs and dirt—is a kind of archetype for this first collection, the woman who unites and connects the others. She builds, from memory and through art, the authentic community that she seeks.



The poem that follows “Woman as Artist,” underscores this desire, this yearning, for community and understanding. But it complicates the position of woman as artist by including other voices, the voices of neighbors or gossips, alongside the speaker’s. The poem opens: “Believe in me, / Who always meant to be. / I never can” (51). This plea to a second person, in the context of the previous poem, can be read as a call for support, for community, for encouragement. But this support doesn’t come, as the next lines introduce a parenthetical voice—the conflated and critical voices of others watching the woman artist—that haunts the speaker: “(I’m told / She slaps the baby’s dirty hands, / The dishes mold.)” (51). The mother who hunts alone, aggressive and creative, is an artist surviving, tough in the face of starvation. The gardener who builds a world of blooms out of a few bulbs is an artist achieving, making beauty out of very little. But the artist of “Romantic Abstract” is made vulnerable, asking someone to believe in her, and what she receives instead is whispers of condemnation. This mother/artist, who slaps the baby’s dirty hands (a “good mother” cleans them, tenderly), who drinks during lonely days (“tippling in the bright lonely rooms”) with the phone off the hook, is faltering and failing, according to these intrusive voices. Domesticity or a community of women is not a safe place, here. Despite the glimmers of hope found in “Woman as Artist,” here Taylor undercuts that hope and demonstrates that community can certainly be double-edged, that a community of women is not inherently salvific or redeeming. And it isn’t only the neighbors who don’t support her; her “romantic vision” of the natural world also deserts her. Though she addresses questions “in vexation” to that natural world, it doesn’t speak through or to her. Instead she finds a “mute, placed moon” and “light-tongued stars that spat the flower bed” (51). The pastoral myth, in which the beauty of the natural world is a balm, a pathway to connection and wholeness, isn’t available or satisfying in this poem, either.

“Sister” is perhaps the most forthright example of a search for community and understanding, despite (or because of) the fact that the world fails to match idyllic mythologies. The poem’s opening, however, seemingly indicates that that community resides in the southern rural world, in memories of innocent childhood—indeed, the poem starts by painting that world as the kind of idealized, harmonious, peaceful world of the pastoral vision. Taylor describes two sisters recalling their walks “in this peace pan,” “ever strolling uphill to the old-house-place; / The path washed out, grown up, but not erased” (1-3). The sonic qualities of these lines are soothing in their quiet; the repetition of the “p” sound in “peace pan, “uphill,” “old-house-place,” “path,” and “grown up” serves to unify the lines, to create a sense of harmony and order. And the stability of the image is comforting, as well—returning to the old house after growing up, the sisters find that the path is still present, the house still standing, the atmosphere still tranquil.

But, as always, Taylor quickly undercuts this idealized vision: “The wars of marriage and the family burst around us” (4). This line concludes the opening stanza, and it dramatically interrupts the tranquil scene constructed in the previous three lines. Those explosions reiterate what Taylor has highlighted in “Woman as Artist” and “Romantic Abstract,” among many others—that marriage and family are not the place of refuge they are often imagined to be. And Taylor’s line points both toward the present and the past—the verb “burst,” brilliantly, evokes both possibilities—and so that line also demonstrates that those “wars” disrupt and destroy old familiar memories as well as present, temporarily harmonious relationships.

The stanza that follows presents both that harmony and that disruption—the sisters, the “we two” of the first stanza, return to memories of growing up and they fall back into quibbling, quarreling, the early wars of childhood, the struggles between self-confidence and learned humility:

When I was young, folks thought me pretty,  
I took my charms up to the city....  
I didn't like it there.  
    Oh, the poems Mamma burned in those days!  
You made Mamma cry. Her tears fell in the dough...  
I'm not well, that's why. I told you so.  
Why did you go and have me? I hate you all.  
    Lord, help me to be more humble in this world. (5-12)

Interestingly, though the voices battle with one another, they also blend into one another, as Taylor doesn't make it clear who says what, and she does not demarcate the beginnings and ends of quotations. The sisters are still "we two," the "almost one I" that ends the poem. The relationship holds, despite the wars and ruins, the shortcomings and disruptions, of family history and present difficulties. The final line of this stanza, borrowing from the hymnal, points toward hope for the future: "In that Great, Getting-up Morning, there will be another song!" But of course, this moment of religion is also ironized—the new song will replace the refrain of "Lord, help me to be more humble in this world," and so too the kind of feminine humility the sisters learned, the humility that kept them from writing poems, from arguing their convictions, from going their own way. Though the sisters may not have liked the city, it's clear from the stanza's conclusion that they are also not satisfied with the rural home they grew up in. The farmlands of the first stanza, the "old-home-place," are not the answer either, and Taylor uses the ironized hymns to point it out.

The following two stanzas also echo the first, as, together, they mirror the division between a perfect, innocent pastoral setting and ruinous reality. The speaker in the third stanza hearkens back to childhood, as if to find stable, common ground again with her sister. She reminisces about the abundance and beauty and peace of that world, in the "cotton / Piled shoulder high to climb on" and in the frogs that "creak in the pasture" (18, 20). In the sweet, marvelous imagination of childhood, the speaker heard those frogs but believes instead that "the

stars made that noise when they came out” (23). But even here, there are signs of an undermining, less idyllic reality—the speaker remembers, too, that the cotton was “seedy” and that “the floor smelled seasonround of guano” (19, 20). Perhaps even more telling is that the speaker hears the frogs’ (or stars’) song as “No! no! no! no! my dear!”, a sure warning against growing up, against giving up her imagined magical world.

The fourth stanza, though, shows just how quickly and how thoroughly the girls had to give up their peaceful, magical worlds at the homestead, learning early their “exotic properties,” their “pretty price” (26). It is no accident that Taylor uses the same word, “exotic,” to describe both the cash crop of cotton and the girls themselves—the repetition of the word subtly underscores that the girls, like the harvest, have become commodities to be bought for a pretty price. In the rest of the stanza, they learn all those delicate skills of genteel ladies (echoes of Tempe and Ida, as well as Miss Bine and Miss Hattie Yow, are everywhere here). They learn, for example, that “the garden radish lies on ice, the radish rose” (27). Here, the bitter bulb of radish becomes a dainty, crafted centerpiece—but it is also frozen, useless, and on display. Here again the rose—in this case, the transformed radish—is a metaphor for the girls growing up, and here again, as in “The Bine Yadkin Rose,” is the paradox of hardy survival and delicate beauty together. The radish is a homely, lowly little vegetable, but in this line it is transformed, with the knife, into the centerpiece, the rose. It is a symbol of what the girls will face in growing up. This radish, then, is both a sign of crafted loveliness which stands against the dullness of routine, and also a sign of bitterness, futility, learned artifice. The speaker ends the stanza by turning outward, looking toward the sky, and she finds “the sun that baked our mud-bread / Hides slyly in the trees.../ And howls at what we eat” (31-4). The sun, the symbol here of clarity and knowledge,

laughs at what the girls have played at<sup>70</sup>—becoming the nurturers who make bread—and what they must become—the entertainers skilled in feminine arts, making roses out of radishes.

Additionally, the sun is a symbol of sustaining life, and its laughter highlights the futility of what the women have made—that radish is futile here for actual nourishment, just like the mud-bread, but it is also futile for sustaining the women’s creative drive, their spirits and hearts and minds.

The radish comes to symbolize, too, all the duties and daily burdens the women will face (those duties which are also a drain on their energy and creativity, their fulfillment), which the next stanza describes much more explicitly:

And riding the trolley homeward this afternoon  
With the errands in my lap  
I would have disfestooned my world—  
A husband, more or less!  
A family, more or less!— (35-9)

The speaker’s almost flippant tone in this final stanza betrays her frustration, her suffocation. The exclamation marks work doubly to convey her sarcasm and her aggravation at having always a husband, always a family, to attend to. The “errands” on her lap, made here into tangible objects rather than a list of tasks, seem heavy, a burden. And Taylor’s playful invention of “disfestooned” also creates layers of meaning: the husband, the family, are festooned around her, like adornments, garlands or wreaths, and in this sense, they are as unnecessary as the radish rose, as unnecessary as decorations. But of course they are not so easy to throw off, like a tinsel wreath. The echo of the earlier depiction of “the wars and marriage and the family” makes that impossibility all the more plain. And yet, the speaker’s yearned-for recklessness, her increasing

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<sup>70</sup> The image of the girls making mud-bread recalls the speaker’s claim in “Playing,” that what it was “little girls became” was determined by the fact that “pretense had always been their aim” (16-17). The inedible mud-loaves are a forerunner of the radish rose, in that they are equally useless in nourishment, and in that the mud-loaves are a way of “playing at” women’s work.

yearning to throw it all off, is also made plain in her deliberate, ironic comparison of a family and a frilly decoration.

Interestingly, the poem does not end with this turn toward wildness, this desire for isolation in the wilderness over companionship in domesticity. Rather, it ends with a turn toward a different kind of wildness, a different kind of relationship:

I would have disfestooned my world—  
...  
To have alighted to a cup of kettle-tea  
And someone  
To whom I could lie merrily,  
Use malapropisms, be out-of-taste,  
Without regretting that old warfare waste,  
Without acknowledging the sib discard—  
Black king, black jack, black heart;  
We'd play it solitary while the dusks rushed by,  
More than one-flesh-and-blood,  
Almost one I. (37-49)

And here, then, is the strongest assertion of redemption in Taylor's first collection—the desire for true, unmasked, genuine relationship. This stanza imagines an escape from domestic duties, from artifice, the from tamed decorum—but also an escape from isolation. Of course, the speaker still wishes to “lie merrily,” so perhaps the relationship isn't all true and honest, but the tone of the poem indicates that the speaker's sister would understand the lies, would laugh along and gladly accept the speaker as she is—“out-of-taste” or speaking badly or quietly solitary playing cards nearby. The relationship allows room for and *values* the speaker's genuine self—not the artificial rose, not her “exotic properties” or “pretty price,” not her good marriage or family, not her adherence to duty or respect for religion. Though so much of the language in Taylor's work is shifting, slippery, ever doubled in meaning and slanted toward irony, this final stanza is one that moves in the other direction—toward truth, toward heartfelt assertion.

Thus, in “Woman as Artist,” “Romantic Abstract,” and “Sister,” Taylor uses irony and doubled (multiplying) meaning to undercut the discourses of the southern pastoral myth, of spiritual redemption, of idealized marriage and motherhood. In so doing, she illustrates the absolute struggle to make art and to make meaning, and the difficulty of finding and creating genuine connection with the natural world and with other people. Her ironic, distanced, tough, and fragmented voice offers her the best strategy, the best form, perhaps, to express the concerns and frustrations of life as a poet, woman, wife, and mother. And yet, the poems continue to search for answers to those concerns and frustrations, and they continue to seek out those genuine connections. Art—like gardening—is a way to make meaning out of, to make something clear and legible from, the wilderness of loneliness, difficulty, and lack of clarity. And poetry—like pruning the dead branches—is a way of weeding out the useless discourses, the false platitudes, the myths of the South and of womanhood. The pastoral’s comfort for Taylor, then, isn’t in the “old-home-place,” in the cotton barns or the fields, in genteel manners or reliance on religion. It is, rather, found in moments of genuine relationship.<sup>71</sup>



## 6. Taylor’s Reconsideration of War and the Myth of the Lost Cause

In her second book, *Welcome Eumenides* (1972), Taylor still includes multiple poems that explore the relationships between women, the moments of genuine connection that provide our only solace. Poems like “Epitaph” and “Mother’s Blessing” return again to Taylor’s “wilderness of ladies” with her signature sharp, ironic eye, and they build on Taylor’s community

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<sup>71</sup> The connection between this poem and the pastoral is highlighted by Alfredo Franco, who recognizes the “Edenic feeling to the world that the sisters shared, Eden the original wilderness and the Paradise Lost.” The final stanza, of course, makes no direct reference to that physical landscape of the “old-home-place,” but that is because that early Eden is now (as it was then) located in the relationship itself. Franco continues, “In the last stanza of the poem, the ‘I,’ now an adult, yearns for a similar comrade, for a moment of respite from the demands of cultivation and family life” (51).

of women from her first book. But this second volume also steps outside the wild gardens of her southern upbringing.<sup>72</sup> Her poems travel in time and space, taking on different personae; her view expands to take on a wider history, a wider world, in part to challenge other myths about the South beyond the Agrarian vision, especially the myth of the Lost Cause of the Civil War.

Dickey also counters this myth, though he does it quite differently; comparing the two serves to demonstrate just how politically charged and fiercely direct Taylor's refutation of Lost Cause nostalgia truly is. Dickey, of course, exposes the visceral and emotional horrors of war in various poems that reimagine his experiences as a pilot in World War II and the Korean War. But his southern pastoral vision excludes war from the South almost entirely, at least in his early work, in order to establish the South as a restorative haven from war. In his poem, "Hunting Civil War Relics at Nimblewill Creek," Dickey maintains significant distance from the horrors the Civil War itself; in the poem's search for a meaningful historical and familial legacy, it echoes Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" more than his other war poems. Thus, Dickey indirectly counters Lost Cause nostalgia, revealing the terror and revulsion war creates, but he does not go as far as Taylor in addressing the ghastly images and terrible losses of the Civil War itself.

Indeed, Taylor's work in her second collection is especially conscious of the devastations and horrors of war, composed as it was during the first decade of the Vietnam War. Her familiarity with the pain and separation and loss that war causes is not only rooted in the ever-present coverage of the Vietnam War (and raising two children while the war endured); she was also married to Peter Taylor when he deployed in World War II, and of course, she grew up in the South, where the Civil War remained alive in myth and memory. No doubt Taylor noted the

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<sup>72</sup> In her review of *Welcome Eumenides*, Adrienne Rich notes this relationship between Taylor's first and second books, as well. She writes that *Wilderness of Ladies* "speak[s] of the underground life of women, the southern white Protestant woman in particular, the woman writer, the woman in the family, coping, hoarding, preserving, observing, keeping up appearances, seeing through the myths and hypocrisies, nursing the sick, conspiring with sister-women, possessed of a will to survive and to see others survive.... *Welcome Eumenides* reaches out from this scene yet has its roots there" (104).

contrast between the nostalgic mythology of the Lost Cause and the actual horrors men and women experienced in World War II and the Vietnam War. In *Welcome Eumenides*, then, Taylor tackles this stark contrast, confronting the dominant discourses that are often deployed in war—repetitive, stagnant discourses of patriotism, service, religious consolation, freedom, nobility, etc.—with her devastating use of irony and her keen eye for complex emotions contained in the smallest details. Additionally, she adopts different personae—from Florence Nightingale, to a mother who lost her son in World War II, to a Yankee father who lost his son in the Civil War—in order to approach war from multiple angles. The commonality between these different voices is that each of them is forced to experience, intimately, the agonizing losses and suffering war creates. These voices, then, make nostalgia or sentimentality or platitudes in the face of war sheer impossibilities.

The reason it is particularly important to extend this study of Taylor's work to her consideration of war is to more fully understand just how sharply and intensely she rejects the Lost Cause, which is irrevocably entangled with the myth of the southern pastoral. These two myths work hand-in-hand as they look to the past for models of nobility and righteousness and even harmony among communities—but, of course, Taylor is having none of it. Therefore, in this section, I will first consider one of Taylor's statements that reveals her overall view of war; then I will take up two poems that most sharply demonstrate Taylor's rejection of the mythologies of war, "After Twenty Years" and "A Few Days in the South in February." In "After Twenty Years," Taylor speaks from the perspective of a mother who has lost a son in World War II, and this poem is particularly important to study because, as Adrienne Rich points out, Taylor empathizes with this bereaved, surviving woman whose "grief is anger," and who believes that "better her son should *live* in the mean material postwar world than be dead in one of those wars which men have rationalized to her, to themselves" (3). Through startling image

and razor-sharp irony, Taylor dismantles any rationalization for war in the poem, in the visceral depiction of the mother's grief.

The second poem, "A Few Days in the South in February," is even more important to this study because it faces the myths of the Lost Cause and the pastoral South head-on, directly countering any romanticization of the Civil War. Taylor's methods to demolish these myths are multiple; she speaks from the perspective of a Yankee, thereby underscoring the fact that it wasn't only the South who suffered painful loss in the war. She speaks from a father's perspective, thereby establishing it isn't only women who mourn at the graves—men, too, even those on the side of victory, must face up to war losses, "devoid of machismo" (Rich 3). Additionally, Taylor deploys her ironic "shears" in this poem, too, as she utilizes the father's original written account of his journey to recover his son's body from the mass graves at Fort Fisher, but she edits and restructures the account in order to undercut false or hollow expressions of sympathy and comfort drawn from the discourses of politics and religion, to point up the horrors of war in contrast to the nostalgic mythology of the Civil War, and to emphasize those singular moments of genuine consolation in the material world, in authentic and meaningful connections between people.



One of the clearest examples of how Taylor rejects the false discourses pertaining to combat is in her response to Daryl Hine, the editor of *Poetry*, who, in 1972, sent out a request for poems that would address the escalation of the war in Vietnam for a protest issue. Many poets responded, and their answers, which he published in the September issue, may have surprised him; some applauded his courage in planning such an issue, some stated that they wished they could contribute but couldn't begin to imagine where to start a poem on such a difficult topic, and still others absolutely rejected the idea of poetry (and *Poetry*) taking an explicitly political stance.

In her reply, Taylor navigates between these positions carefully: she rejects his request, redefining her own work in the process, and threading a path through aesthetics and politics: “It is my notion that all poetry is against war and for man, and that any ‘poem’ on the subject of de-escalation in Vietnam or elsewhere descends to journalism from the lofty tone I would wish for *Poetry* magazine. I am sorry indeed to think you have planned such an issue” (364).

This note serves as a ringing condemnation of Hine’s idea for a specific Vietnam-protest issue, with her sarcastic use of quotation marks around “poem” and her express disappointment—like a mother’s or a teacher’s—conveyed in the final sentence. Taylor underscores her belief in poetry as “high art,” above daily newsprint and television broadcasts. However, she does not claim, as other poets do in their replies, that poetry shouldn’t dirty itself with politics. Instead, she makes the claim that *all* poetry is political; even if she finds one kind of language inappropriate for poetry, she still holds to a belief that poetry can reveal structures of power, speak against power misused (as in war), and speak up for the ideals of living as a human being. *That* kind of “lofty tone” can most assuredly assert a politics “against war and for man”—and indeed, the tone might protect the poem (and the poet) from dismissal as “merely political,” and so convey its message more effectively. In two sentences, Taylor manages to not only hold fast to art and politics, but also to partly reconcile them.

Under this light of a political artistry, a poem like “After Twenty Years” begins to shine even more clearly. This poem is assuredly “against war and for man,” maintaining a political approach which revalues the life of genuine emotion and empathetic community. Simultaneously, this poem adheres to Taylor’s high standards for craft, incorporating modernist techniques including narrative and historical distance, fragmentation, persona, and above all, irony. Narrated by a mother who has lost her son at Normandy in World War II and lost her husband to suicide (because “It is hard / To be a father without / A son”), the poem’s speaker is

clearly not to be equated with Taylor herself (14-16). And yet, taking up the voice of this woman enables Taylor to voice her own fears and opinions on war from a distance. That distance is increased, indeed, because the central events of the poem—the deaths of the family men—are submerged, only discussed “after twenty years.” The first stanza begins by asking, “After twenty years in France / Do you dream in French, my son?” (1-2). And then, abruptly, the poem shifts back to a small town—Norwood, in fact, Taylor’s birthplace. Here, Taylor describes, the downtown storefronts have new glass windows, but the sheds out back are falling apart—and beyond those “dilapidated sheds” is the road “lined with maypops / Where you talked to the white horse” (6-8). These three layered images suggest, delicately, the mother’s own state of mind—she holds up a façade (“gloved, hatted,” akin to the store’s “new glass front”) but behind that, she is torn apart by grief and memories of a long-gone idyllic moment. The image that opens the poem, then, implies a world of complex emotion and memory, an intersection of past and present, and, not least, a revelation of the crumbling behind the façades, the reality of war behind the false fronts.

The poem then turns toward narration and political statement, though that political statement remains more oblique than overt, buried in curses rather than exposed in full-fledged didacticism. In the final stanza, the speaker’s voice (like the “dilapidated sheds” of the first stanza) begins to crumble; the use of ellipses and long dashes become frequent, nearly every other line, as though the grief is overwhelming and the sentences can’t hold up to it. The speaker, in a climactic moment, cries (perhaps silently, to herself, or in prayer, to a God she wants to believe in but nearly cannot): “My glove’s rouge, with lipstick / Or with teeth... Curse *men*, curse *free*— / God vault your freedom!” (25-7). The speaker bites her fist to stifle a cry or scream that might open a flood of questions—what kind of freedom is it that war achieves, if it leads only to unending sorrow, to debilitating grief? What kind of freedom have men given *her*, with their

wars and their deaths? They have left her without even a proper grave at which to mourn her son: “Oh the acres of undistinguished / Crosses make me sick....Your nothing grave... / Shame!” (28-9, 33-4). This poem *is* a political statement, made through emotional exclamation and sharpened imagery, against the deadly politics of governments and wars. More importantly, the mother’s grief is underscored, revalorized, by the way in which discourses of consolation based in religion, patriotism, freedom, or democracy are ironized and undercut in the poem. The language of these abstract ideals absolutely do not satisfy or console in this poem; the usual pat responses to grief (i.e., “he died to protect our freedom,” or “God took him home”) are insistently broken down. “God vault your freedom!”—freedom means nothing. The language of religion also comes up short; “home” is not heaven but the physical place where the mother still lives, “A Norwood ugliness, a bourgeois rot, / Dust and concrete, Falcons and Mustangs” (37-8). Even that “ugliness” would be preferable to permanent loss; the only consolation would be to see him alive again on earth. Taylor’s ironies cut into inadequate discourses of consolation. If there is any consolation in the poem at all, it is found in the mother’s most tender memories of her son, evoked in imagistic language which stands in contrast to the faceless memorials and generic platitudes.



The political statement against war is almost on the surface of “After Twenty Years,” but in others, it is more submerged, more fragmented, even more distanced. This is the case in Taylor’s long poem, “A Few Days in the South in February (A Hospitality for S. K. Wightman, 1865).” This poem moves back further in time to recreate a first-person Civil War narrative, which was first published in *American Heritage* in February, 1963.<sup>73</sup> The narrative begins when a

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<sup>73</sup> The other articles published in this issue are a far cry from this kind of personal reflection of loss, grief, and faith; instead, they focus primarily on the tactical and heroic sides of war, with articles like “Conquest

New York family receives a letter from the United States Army, in January of 1865, explaining that their son Edward has been killed at Fort Fisher, North Carolina. His father, S. K. Wightman, determines that he must travel there to find his son's body and bring it home to his family. Though the original narrative is straightforward, unembellished with personal reflection except for the barest emotions and several prayers, the story of his journey is epic and miraculous. First, Wightman finds an old friend in Washington, D.C., who is able to introduce him to the Secretary of War, so he can obtain a pass to travel through the war zone. A few days later, he finds the only vessel traveling to Fort Fisher for days, maybe weeks. Upon his arrival, though there were hundreds who died in the January battle, he discovers that Edward's grave is the only one marked, his name written on a pine board with lamp-black. He has a pine coffin in which to bring his son home, but the soldiers advise him that his son's remains are likely beyond the point where that box alone would suffice. They recommend wrapping the body in tent-cloth, filling the pine coffin with salt and rosin, and sealing it with pitch—but though there is plenty of salt at Fort Fisher, none of the other materials are readily available. The next day, as Wightman walks around the fort, he finds, unexpectedly, miraculously, a whole barrel of rosin buried in the sand. Similarly, he finds enough pitch from barrel staves the subsequent day, and the soldiers deliver him a tent-cloth, help him dig up Edward's body, prepare and seal the coffin, and transport him back home.

Throughout the journey, Wightman's fears—that he would not be able to travel, that he would not be issued a pass to go to Fort Fisher at all, that he would not be able to find his son's body, that it would be unidentifiable, that he would not be able to transport him home—are

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and the Cross" about Bartolome de Las Casas, "Was the Secretary of War a Traitor?" about the possibility that John B. Floyd sent weapons to the South in the Civil War, or "Six Minutes that Changed the World" about the Battle of Midway, a U.S. Naval victory against Japan in World War II. That Taylor was drawn to this narrative over the others in the magazine further demonstrates her mistrust in the (typically masculine) war discourse of conquest and freedom.

ameliorated one by one, answered in miraculous ways. The narrative concludes with Wightman's prayerful reflection of gratitude to "Almighty God, for all the way in which He led me through all the scenes which I have so imperfectly described" (78). The final paragraph of the narrative places Edward and his life cut short in God's hands, portraying Wightman's devout belief in God's plan and his goodness as consolation for his loss:

I believe that the bounds of our lives are fixed by our Creator, and we cannot pass them. Edward's time to depart from us had come; and while I mourn his loss (for I loved him tenderly) I feel it my duty to yield submissively to the will of the Most High, and to acknowledge that He hath done all things well. Blessed be his holy name. I feel that I am reconciled to this dispensation of his providence, and can say 'The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away, and blessed be the name of the Lord' (78).

It is this language of predestination, of God's will for our lives, of a divine plan that passes human understanding but that demands faith—it is this language that Taylor weaves throughout her poem.

However, in Taylor's poem, the language of consolation, the belief in providence, and the religious faith in God's control of our lives makes the narrative in many ways *more* devastating, because that language does not quite adequately meet the level of shock, the visceral horror, and emotional depths of grief throughout the narrative, emphasized by the poem's sharp, focused image fragments. The language of consolation hardly can cover, for example, the moment when the soldiers dig up Edward's body, and Wightman sees his decomposing face in detail; it hardly can cover the moment when the soldiers place Edward in the coffin and Wightman rides away because, he notes parenthetically, "I could not bear to hear the driving of a nail" (75).<sup>74</sup> Taylor highlights these moments of agony throughout her poem, and though she incorporates

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<sup>74</sup> This sonic image, of course, is reminiscent of Taylor's ironized pastoral elegy, "In the Churchyard," wherein the consoling notes of the elegy are replaced by the disturbing visceral experience of burial.

Wightman's language of gratitude and faith, she cuts across it with stark, terrible images—indeed, she describes Edward's exhumation as "the end of miracles" (V:12).<sup>75</sup>

The fact that Taylor does not find Wightman's story one of consolation or uplift is underscored in her letter to the publisher of *American Heritage*, in which she asks for the address of Wightman's descendants so that she can request permission to use the narrative in her poem. In a draft of this letter, Taylor carefully words her request, first noting that her poem has "exaggerated the fairy-tale quality of the events themselves." But she follows that depiction to explain that the poem addresses not only the miraculous but also "the paradoxical grimness of every blessing." Perhaps the most telling moment, which stresses her doubts about the capacity of consoling language, is the final sentence, which she strikes out entirely: "It was, as you said in your preface, 'not merely timeless but ennobling and inspiring'" (Taylor Draft). This whole sentence is replaced with the word "unforgettable," wholly different in connotation from "ennobling" or "inspiring"—the story lingers for Taylor, but not in an uncomplicated or uplifting way. It lingers like a scar.

It is important to note that Taylor does not ironize Wightman's belief, experience, or emotion. Rather, the language of consolation, like the descriptors "ennobling" or "inspiring," — which is also the language of the Lost Cause and nostalgia for the antebellum South—is what Taylor calls into question because that language seems so hopelessly inadequate. But in the midst of irony and inadequacy, Taylor allows true consolations, tiny moments of relief and sweetness amid the horrors of war, to come to light. The ironies do not dismiss or devalue emotion, but rather underscore its weight and gravity; it highlights, in addition, the fact that the only consolations are found in the physical world and in community. From its earliest draft, Taylor

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<sup>75</sup> The speaker of "After Twenty Years" comes to mind here, and the language of that poem resonates directly with this one, as her efforts toward faith are overshadowed by her desire to see her son alive again: "God I am of little understanding.../ But with God all things are possible.../ Give my son another life—" (3).

subtitles the poem “A Hospitality for S. K. Wightman, 1865,” the word “hospitality” perhaps illuminating the poet’s desire to shelter and comfort Wightman, to provide in poetry what he could not find in his own language of consolation.<sup>76</sup> But of course, Taylor also underscores the poem’s inability to console, as it comes one hundred years too late.

And yet the poem does try to provide comfort, though Taylor recognizes that those moments of consolation, paradoxically, are often also moments of searing grief. The poem, divided into sections to reflect the days Wightman spent at Fort Fisher, chronicles these moments amid an unforgiving landscape—the landscape, significantly, of the South, that landscape so mythologized in the pastoral. In the first section, for example, Taylor sets up the narrative briefly with one statement and a series of central questions:

An old man seeking a battlefield,  
I march on the land of the enemy  
For my son.  
Who will know where he fell?  
How take him, taken by the enemy?  
How wrest him, young and strong  
From war, from peace? (I:4-10)

The paradox of that final question—that Edward must be taken out of war, but also out of what is supposedly the peace of his final rest—begins to unsettle the language of religious consolation. If Edward is finally at peace, there would be no reason to plunge into the middle of a war in order to dig up his body and bring it home. If his soul is in heaven, what need would his family have of his body? And yet, it is the physical reunion with his son’s body, even if he is not alive, that promises some glimmer of consolation. This need for Edward’s physical presence is emphasized

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<sup>76</sup> The poem’s original title, kept through several drafts, was “Edward, Edward,” changed in the final typescript draft to “A Few Days in the South in February.”

in the stanza that follows, which includes a passage taken directly from Edward's final letter home (published in *American Heritage* as a sidebar to Wightman's narrative):

*Your Christmas letter descended  
Like a Parrot shell and near  
Annihilated this home-starved soldier....  
Six days before!  
Climbing the parapet, a minie ball. (I:11-15)*

Edward's letter, written six days before he was killed, is both a comfort and a devastation—he appears to the family in words though he can no longer appear to them in life, and so his absence is felt even more sharply. His language, too, is hardly comforting—that the family's letter to him nearly “annihilated” him is an irony of the worst and saddest kind; his casual reference to a near emotional ruin caused by his family is directly paired, in Taylor's poem, with the minie ball that actually kills him.

Indeed, Taylor's inclusion of the son's voice along with the father's voice underscores the lack of comfort that traditional religious discourse offers—if the son is at peace, why does his voice keep haunting the poem and its speaker? The son's voice also undermines political discourse about war (as well as the characterization *American Heritage* provides of an “inspiring and ennobling” story)—if he is noble and inspiring as a soldier, Edward's language betrays envy, misery, isolation. So it comes clear that the family's attempt to comfort and console their son in life, by telling him about all of their Christmas festivities and dinners, is also inadequate to the experience of war. Edward's pairing of “home-starved” illustrates exactly this inadequacy: though their words may bring images of home, family, food, and delight, they cannot ever bring that reality to him, and so he continues to starve. His starvation is made literal in a later section of the poem, where Taylor quotes Wightman's narrative on the appearance of his son's face: “*The teeth appeared very prominent*” (V:18). She follows with another section of Edward's letter:

*“What has your plum-pudding to do with me?”* (V:19). The juxtaposition of Edward’s hollowed, starved face and the description of the family’s Christmas pudding once again prove just how inadequate (and even cruel) the language of comfort can be. Much of the language Wightman uses for his journey and his sorrow functions in similar ways—it cannot ameliorate his pain and suffering, and neither can it bring Edward back to him. The only real moments of consolation are those small mercies which exist, tangibly, in the world.

Taylor highlights this more clearly later in the first section, where Wightman inquires of a soldier—the only one around for miles, “a grim tale’s magic” that Wightman found him at all—where the graves from the January 15 battle are, and the soldier points him almost directly to Edward’s marked grave. In the stanzas that follow, Taylor emphasizes that tangible, legible, partial consolation—his name that can be read, the family that shares his name, and the memories his name evokes:

The darling of his sisters, mother  
His steady eye, good sense  
His quiet dreams  
It seems I may spend out my years  
Beside the spot. (I:47-51)

The speaker’s reluctance to leave his son—indeed, he tries to leave three times and returns—reiterate the importance of the physical world, and the good moment of finding a soldier who could talk to him. When the discourse of prayer and religion appear at the end of this section, it is jumbled, mixed up among lines, standing in contrast to the clarity of the previous stanzas, where Edward’s grave seemed, for a moment, to bring him back, where the father wanted to stay. With a sighing “So,” the speaker tries to direct his attention back to God:

So, thanking God for His  
Mercy and goodness to me—

Only one grave marked.  
Surely the bounds of our lives (I:59-62)

Taylor leaves the last line of the section unpunctuated, as if Wightman (the Wightman she has recreated) cannot conclude the thought in the pat way it had been concluded earlier in the section (and in his original narrative): “Surely the bounds of our lives / Are fixed by our Creator” (I:39-40). The truth of the moment is the father’s sorrow, and the consolation of the moment is seeing his written name and staying close to the ground where he is buried. The importance of this truth, this small (and paradoxical) consolation is underscored by the irony of the inclusion of words like “thanking,” “mercy,” and “goodness,” and by the way the discourse of religious belief begins to fall apart, rings hollow, cannot quite cover the moment.

This irony shines through even more brightly as the poem continues. In the third section, when a barrel of the much-needed rosin appears buried in the sand (“grim tale’s magic,” again), the father questions who led him to it: “the devil despair? / Godmother in disguise? / The hand of God?” (III:6-8) The doubt ascribed to his voice here is underpinned by a reference, shortly thereafter, to Abraham—in digging up the barrel of rosin, he remembers the call of Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. That son was saved, but Wightman is only given a barrel of rosin washed up from the sea, to help him take his dead son home—in contrast, small comfort. Whereas Wightman’s original narrative marked this moment as a miracle, Taylor transforms it into one in which a small mercy cuts through a huge grief, and where the language of God’s goodness seems particularly insufficient, since that God had permitted other sons to live. Perhaps it is for this reason that Taylor, instead of using Wightman’s oft-repeated full refrain of gratitude for mercy, only includes the abbreviated line, “Tears, thanking, etc.” (III:15).

The subsequent fourth section of the poem, in earlier drafts, only brought to light the next small “miracles” of the story: Wightman and the soldiers discover enough wood to create a

coffin, and they discover enough pitch on the inside of leftover barrel-staves to seal it. Taylor terms these discoveries “this coffin-gift,” starkly revealing the paradoxes of consolation—the gift of a coffin is a bitter one indeed (IV:8). In later revisions, Taylor added a few short lines which underscore this bitterness, making the fourth section the absolute nadir of the poem. It begins, in later drafts, with the startling, austere line: “Needing what you don’t want is hell” (IV:1). Employing the word “hell” here, even metaphorically, implies the failure of religious discourse to connect Wightman to some kind of comforting deity. And, after each “miracle” or “gift”—the discovery of the pitch, the building of the coffin—Taylor adds the phrase, “Thanking God, etc.” The “etc.” is so dismissive, so heartbreaking, because it seems to imply that all the energy and effort has gone out of the father’s gratitude—the language has become rote, meaningless, and the tangible objects, the only sources of comfort which are also symbols of despair, overwhelm these prayers of gratitude.

The next sections work to ameliorate some of this despair, and this happens in part because the father is surrounded by a sudden community of those who understand and mourn with him: “Unbidden blue coats straggle round / To meet my son” (V:7-8). That these unknown, unasked-for soldiers help him in this grotesque reverse-funeral, exhuming Edward and preparing his coffin, offers a brief moment of consolation. In the following stanzas, Edward lives again for a moment—though his face is “speeding from face to skull,” his memory is brought to life, honored, by this small group of men. One soldier notes that Wightman need not be a doubting Thomas—Edward is still his son, and his hands “are very like” his fathers: “Ah, can ye doubt?... / For sure now, he greatly resembles ye” (V:30-1). Other men remember how he talked about his father, how much he loved him; another recalls his sense of humor in “his Virgil parody” (V:36). This moment is the truest instance of consolation in the poem; it is temporary, as the father cannot bear to hear the men nailing Edward into the coffin, but their talk of Edward, their memories

alongside Wightman's, are also the surest, the most honest moments of consolation. The stanza ends, interestingly, without the "thanking God, etc." or any prayer at all, but rather with a tangible, earth-bound and physical peace, the water like a lullaby, the sleep a kind of reunion:

Some days are pages ragtorn from hell.  
Yet on this cruellest day night came.  
Aboard the *Montauk*, water-rocked,  
I slept, slept peacefully,  
As if we two  
Slept in our beds at home. (V:45-50)

The lines here are far less fragmented than in much of the poem; almost all are end-stopped or coincide with natural breaks. Their rhythm and conclusiveness soothes far more than the earlier disjunctive snippets. Ending the final two lines of the section on "we two" and "home" is a powerfully consoling moment, the night a brief respite from that day "ragtorn from hell." The consolations are not in prayers, but in the physical world and in the relief of sleep.

Taylor's first drafts of the poem addressed Wightman in the second person; only in later drafts, including the published one, does she change to first person narration, speaking in Wightman's own voice. This change is central to understanding how the irony finally works itself out—were the speaker to be outside of Wightman, looking at his belief and pointing out the failures of his language, it would serve more as a judgment than a "hospitality," more as an overt critique of war than a deep understanding of loss, no matter the depths of sympathy that the speaker may try to convey. But in first person, the poet steps into the father's shoes, tries to understand the experience from the inside, and so moves herself and her readers closer to that experience—and, significantly, she addresses the issues of grief and consolation not from a female voice but from a male one. This persona transition makes the poem a vivid, personal recollection, a psychological and spiritual portrait with immediacy rather than distance; it serves

to bridge the gap between a New York man recovering his son from the Civil War in 1865 and a North Carolina woman writing poetry in 1970; and it breaks down the gendered dichotomy that assigns the task of grieving and carrying emotion only to mothers. Adrienne Rich notes: “The war is lost, for this father and for the others like him. . . . the father Eleanor Taylor has recreated ‘from family papers’ is Whitmanesque in his compassion, determination, and grief-stricken dignity” (3). Speaking as a father from the “victor’s” side, Taylor underscores the political point—no matter the discourses of religion, democracy, or any other ideal for which war is fought, all sides and all people lose.

Speaking from a northern father’s viewpoint, Taylor doubly undercuts the Lost Cause mythology, as well. In employing Wightman’s voice, Taylor humanizes the North, illustrating its very real suffering and mourning. And so, she stands, in this poem, opposed to the dehumanized, mechanized, cold image of the North propagated by the Lost Cause, and she underscores the fact that the South does not have the greater claim to nobility, honor, Christian decency, and courage, as both Wightman and his son display those qualities in abundance. Additionally, Taylor’s poem undercuts the Lost Cause by demonstrating that there is no basis for nostalgia about war—her emphasis on the physical, emotional, and spiritual misery all of the soldiers (and their parents) experience discredits that nostalgia from the very outset. The language Edward and his father use contains the double-edged effects of comfort and desolation, but the nostalgic discourse about war in the South, which Taylor no doubt encountered throughout her life, does not match up to the tragedy and the reality of the Civil War at all.

The poem’s final section moves away from the hellish landscape and recovery of Edward’s body; in it, the father reflects from his home in New York on his son’s proper burial, on the cemetery, on his “sent-out child” who “lies harvested.” The scene seems, finally, peaceful—there is snow, and a softly-ticking watch, and stone doves pecking the ground. And Taylor

remains true to the original narrative, here, ending with a brief glimpse of the final paragraph

Wightman wrote, an echo of all the previous prayers:

*I believe that the bounds of our lives  
Are fixed by our Creator  
And we cannot pass them.  
The Lord gives and the Lord takes away  
Blessed be the name of the Lord. (VI:15-19)*

The final prayer of the poem is, finally, partially comforting. And yet, it echoes against Edward calling each member of the family by name earlier in the section, in the letter which arrived home after his death:

*(“To all—Dear Father Mother Fred  
Abbie and Jim Chas  
Mary Ell and  
Babies”)* (VI:4-7).

The spacing effectively creates silences between names, echoes, the sense of a voice that lingers in their home, which is both comfort and torment. Edward’s presence is incomplete; his absence not entire. And so, even at the conclusion, anguish and solace compete, neither voice resolving nor erasing the other. The voicing of the final prayer revives the voice of Edward’s letter; the statement that the Lord fixes the boundaries of our lives is a reminder that Edward’s life is over. Like the snow that falls outside the father’s window—the image that Taylor carefully places just before the final prayer—the language of religion only blankets the grief. However, the irony Taylor employs to critique and undermine our usual discourse of consolation *is* consoling, in the final equation—not in itself, but because it reveals what our used-up language and our mythologies cannot do. And thus, the irony opens a space for us to lean on something else—the emotion of the moment, the community that surrounds us, a renewed art and crafted language

which tries to get closer to the heart of each moment. This is Taylor's answer to the several myths of the Civil War and the South encountered in the poem—she uses irony in the service of revaluing emotion, community, and consolation. And *this* space is the “hospitality” Taylor creates in her work, not only for Wightman but also for her readers.



## 7. Conclusion: The Southern Pastoral through Four Poets' Lenses

Throughout her first two collections of poetry, Eleanor Ross Taylor consistently challenges pastoral myths of the South. Her first collection, *Wilderness of Ladies*, takes on the Agrarians' vision of an idealized rural world and its virtuous, simple, hard-working farmers. Taylor shows that ideal world to be a myth from top to bottom—through her recreations of the lives of her female ancestors, in particular, Taylor demonstrates that the women who worked on her family farm never had the luxury of leisure, that they suffered very real losses and fears and griefs, and that while they loved and were loved, and while they kept their senses of humor, they were not necessarily always noble, generous, or perfectly virtuous. In addition, Taylor challenges the southern mythology, tangled up with the pastoral and the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, of southern rural women's Victorian gentility; she highlights what an enormously difficult balancing act it is to plow the land and master elocution, to survive in a rural wilderness and act as a lady. Taylor illustrates these women's lives with a combination of admiration and awareness of absurdities, with significant respect and a keen sense of irony. And she tracks their legacy in her own life, as she wrestles with the demands of domestic life, the strictures of etiquette, and the pull of creativity. And finally, and perhaps most searingly, Taylor undercuts the southern mythology of the Lost Cause, leaving no room for the glorification of the Civil War or the antebellum South, illustrating in various places—but particularly in “A Few Days in the South in February”—just

how brutal and devastating war is for everyone on every side of the conflict, for those who are directly involved in combat and for those who are forced to wait, to agonize, and to grieve.

And yet, like all of the other poets in this study, Taylor, too, rescues something from these pastoral myths. Like Spencer, Taylor returns to the garden to find representations of beauty and survival, connection and solace. Like Toomer, she rediscovers the essential values of pastoral in connections with others. And like Dickey, she revisits the South and the myths swirling around it, revealing it to be both a site of corrupted values and a redeeming haven. But what is perhaps most compelling in Taylor's work is how she uses irony to undercut and strip away the false nostalgia and misconceptions of pastoral mythology, finally leaving us with what she values as essential, true, and sustaining—and that is those momentary consolations of genuine connection with others. She finds them in honest and darkly humorous memorials for those buried in the churchyard; in the endearing relationship, the “grafting,” between Miss Tempe and Miss Bine; in the speaker's need for a frank, funny, and meaningful connection with her sister; and in those miraculous moments of understanding between a Yankee father and the soldiers who fought alongside his son—and, perhaps more importantly, in the way Taylor connects to all of these speakers and characters, and the in the way she connects readers to them, as well. Those connections are what Taylor rescues and rejuvenates in her southern pastoral vision.

Overall, the poets in this study demonstrate that the southern pastoral continued to thrive in the twentieth century. It offered a way to explore and challenge the stories that had been told about the South for centuries, to highlight the racial, gendered, and class divisions inherent in those stories, to reconsider how the South exploits or carefully tends to the natural world, and to countenance and reimagine the history of the South before and after the Civil War. Thus, they demonstrate that the pastoral tradition is vitally necessary in understanding the history and legacy of the South, and in providing a way to articulate our beliefs about what the South was, is, and

could or should become. However, and perhaps more importantly, these poets also demonstrate the necessity of constant, vigilant *revision* of the pastoral—to ensure that it continues to face up to the South’s failures and problems, to ensure that its idealism isn’t a simplistic nostalgia or a way of concealing social divisions or exploitation of nature, and, most essentially, to continue to imagine the best possible future for the South, one that lives up to and lives out our highest aspirations and ideals, one that finds spiritual redemption and ecological restoration, one that establishes equality and justice for all its people, a South that is made whole and beautiful and perfected in both our literature and our lives.

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