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Paul Douglass

San Jose State University, paul.douglass@sjsu.edu

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PAUL DOUGLASS

Cradle of the Copperheads Education and the Career of Jesse Stuart

Although Jesse Stuart burst upon the American literary scene with his earthy sonnet sequence *Man with a Bull-Tongue Plow*, a portion of which won the Jeanette Sewal Davis Poetry Prize in 1934 (runners-up that year included Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams),¹ he would succeed as a writer of prose fiction. And from the beginning he wrote about the classroom. An imposing figure of huge energy and enthusiasms, Stuart was a lifelong student and teacher. As principal and superintendent, he championed an Emersonian tradition of individual growth through public education. "Split Cherry Tree," one of his most popular stories (which was filmed and received an Academy Award nomination), tells how a young teacher earns the respect of an Appalachian boy and his father. *The Thread That Runs So True*, *Trees of Heaven*, *Mr. Gallion's School*, and large parts of *Beyond Dark Hills* all testify to his preoccupation with teaching and learning. Throughout his literary career, as Mary Washington Clarke has noted, Stuart sustained an overriding metaphor in which the teacher is the loving conservationist caring for the unconsciously growing students, the trees and plants committed to his care.²

And yet Stuart's whole artistic output was marked by a strong dislike of the "book learning" he had achieved at great cost and on which he staked his career, both as a writer and a teacher. If education had provided him with the opportunity to write and be read, if it had furnished him a mission—to prove the value of schooling for his rural homeland—yet it was also the focus of deep ire and frustration. A politically astute man, Stuart fought against a public school bureaucracy and pitted himself against snobs and pedants. He despaired at times of ever effecting positive change for the people among whom he had chosen to stay. Clearly, education was the main hope he saw for an improvement in the hard life of the Kentucky hills. But just as clearly he took fierce pride in the unimproved W-Hollow world which was his life's-blood. To alter it, as he was surely doing in his role as school man, would be to destroy what he eulogized in many

Paul Douglass teaches in the English department at Mercer University, Atlanta. His edited version of Jesse Stuart's *Cradle of the Copperheads* was published in January 1988 by McGraw-Hill.

of his popular fictions.

Stuart's love for the classroom was thus matched by his hostility to masters of taste and purveyors of "classics." In fact, his writing had its very genesis in his contradictory attitude toward education.³ That inner conflict stemmed from his fundamental refusal to accept modern cultural values and their expression in art, as J. R. LeMaster has observed.⁴ It seems that in Jesse Stuart's great "Yes!"—his affirmation of life generally and teaching in particular—there was also a great "No!"—a denial of modernity, urbanity, skepticism, all embodied (for him) in their bastion the academy.

Stuart was at odds with educational institutions long before he left Vanderbilt without a master's degree in 1932 and declared his independence from the Agrarian gurus there. When asked later in what school he had enrolled for his B.A. program back in 1926, Stuart often said, "I went to the college that would take me. I did. I had a time finding a school that'd take me...No one wanted me" (*Jesse*, 67). He had dreamed of going to Vanderbilt, the University of Virginia, or Harvard. That dream had perhaps been born in the summer of 1926 when he was at Camp Knox where he had read Edwin Mims' edition of Carlyle's essay on Robert Burns and had conceived Vanderbilt as a place where "teachers wrote books and farmed" (*Jesse*, 117). He was turned down at Berea College in Kentucky and ended up hitch-hiking across the Tennessee state line to Lincoln Memorial University where he was accepted on a probationary status. There he performed well enough to graduate.

But while there, as Richardson tells us, he found no ivory tower, no bastion of reverence for poetry and literature. Stuart felt the teaching at LMU was not even as good as what he had received in Greenup High School, and the college suffered from poor food, bedbugs, and faculty corruption (*Jesse*, 87-8). Moreover, among those working-class and rural students Stuart felt defensive about writing poetry. Later he felt defensive about his college degree. But with characteristic fierceness he balanced his disappointment at not being accepted at a better school with gratitude to LMU: "I wanted to make LMU proud of me—this small school, without money or prestige, that had taken me in off the road where I was a hitch-hiker. . ." (*Jesse*, 89).

This educational experience, followed by employment as a Depression-era teacher and school principal in Greenup, presaged Stuart's later rough ride in the graduate program at Vanderbilt where he would confirm his opposition to academia (and hence to some of the most powerful figures in American literature between the wars). Robert Penn Warren, then a young assistant professor at Vanderbilt, has said Stuart was *truly* an Agrarian writer while many others simply *pretended* to be.⁵ It was at Vanderbilt that Stuart discovered just what that difference would mean

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for him. He was trying in the summer of 1931 to make the shift from graduate work at George Peabody College for Teachers (now formally part of Vanderbilt) to full standing in the graduate program in English at Vanderbilt. As at LMU, he felt on the defensive about his status at Peabody. He was a social inferior with practically no possessions who had to work as a janitor at the college in order to meet his expenses. (Stuart later said that he had the distinction of being "the only white janitor at the university.") He later described how the Vanderbilt students looked down on attenders of the Grand Ole Opry where Stuart loved to spend Saturday nights.

The pattern of privation and social distance did not change after he registered for fall classes at Vanderbilt, having received Edwin Mims' counseling: "It looks as if you've got something big before you, Stuart. I don't see how in the world you can do it and do yourself justice" (Jesse, 128). The fall term brought home the fact that his poor preparation at LMU combined with his heavy work schedule would make graduate study very hard indeed. He received three C grades—including one from Mims and another from Donald Davidson—and only one B (from Warren). He would need a B average to get an M.A. Through all this he was living on eleven meals a week, licking salt and drinking water to control his hunger. Stuart admitted that when he saw his first quarter grades, "my legs weakened" (Jesse, 143). Yet his resolve to write a thesis and complete his degree did not collapse even when, in the middle of the next term, Feb. 1932, a dorm fire destroyed the draft of his thesis, a term paper, his clothes, his typewriter, and his job—the cafeteria where he was working (and eating) had to close temporarily in the aftermath.

But Stuart's determination to succeed in graduate school was apparently offset by an equally fierce determination to hold onto his roots. The gap between him and his scholarly mentors remained despite the fact that he found them stimulating and rewarding as teachers, despite the fact that he was an adaptable, clever, and eclectic learner. He wrote papers for Edwin Mims' British literature survey class that were not gradeable because, as Stuart later admitted, he had failed even to address the question (Jesse, 155). And when Mims assigned an 18-page autobiographical essay, Stuart responded with a 300-page manuscript of the sort that would re-echo in his subsequent career—a sprawling, crude, repetitive, powerful explosion of language. Mims, who recognized its power and beauty, still found it ungradeable. Stuart finished that spring at Vanderbilt with several blanks in his transcript. Even so he was offered scholarship money. But he left anyway, having found the Vanderbilt of Warren, Tate, Mims, and John Crowe Ransom "a bunch of paradoxes," not least of which was that none of these "agrarians" really knew farm life (Jesse, 166-8).

Thus as Stuart left Vanderbilt and headed home in 1932, his fictive world was inchoate. He thought of himself as primarily a poet and continued to work almost maniacally on his sonnets. And he spent the 1932-1933 school year as county superintendent of schools in Greenup. He resigned that job in the summer of 1933 and checked into the Nashville YMCA where he undertook his first true novel on a rented typewriter. The result, *Cradle of the Copperheads*, was thought to have been lost. In *The Thread That Runs So True* Stuart claimed that he had burned it because it was

too "nonfictional" in its "denunciation of certain educators who fought against school reforms for their own personal gains."⁶ Stuart said at the time that his one consolation for that hellish year would be that he would "get a book out of the experience" (Jesse, 197). It was an outpouring, 450 pages long (according to Stuart's own account in *The Thread That Runs So True*), and that particular version of the manuscript does appear to have been lost.

But Stuart apparently retyped that manuscript, adding as he went (belying the impression that *Copperheads* was merely a catharsis, something to be written and discarded). He ended the summer with a typescript of 638 pages, not counting a 62-page handwritten interpolation following page 464. The typescript now resides in the special collections room of Murray State University in Kentucky. On the ragged cover sheet is a scotch-taped note reading "CRADLE OF THE COPPERHEADS OLD MS WRITTEN IN 1933 REVISED AND RETYPED AUGUST 1933." So far as can be determined, Stuart did nothing with the manuscript until 1970, when he retyped it yet again. This time it grew even longer because of altered margins and numerous minor additions, to 940 pages (although it numbers 950, there's a 10-page error in the pagination). This second typescript is in the special collections room at the University of Louisville.

At the request of the Stuart Foundation, I recently edited *Cradle of the Copperheads* from the 1970 typescript, collating it carefully with the 1933 typescript. It was a long and painstaking process but a rewarding one, as gradually the chapters grew leaner and the plot clearer. My task as editor was essentially to excavate the time-line so that events of September were not tangled with those of March and to find the places where Stuart said it best, and to keep them.

No doubt Mims would have found this manuscript just as ungradeable as the term paper he had received from Stuart. The difference in tone, however, would have shocked him, for this time Stuart expressed his anger and frustration at his school problems both in Greenup and at Vanderbilt without reservation. The fact that he inserted the chapter called "A Trip to Tennessee" when he retyped the book in 1970 shows that he believed the topics were related. *Copperheads* shows vividly today how ambivalences in his roles as artist and educator in 1933 were endemic to his whole career.

The novel's hero Shan Stringer determines on a career as a "people's" writer and rejects the academy. His story, which incorporates poetry as did *Beyond Dark Hills*, captures the paradox of Stuart's denying his obvious and inescapable future; it also creates a picture of Depression-era Kentucky that rivals at times *The Grapes of Wrath* in starkness and power. The source for many characters and stories to follow, this novel documents Stuart's early distress over the problem of education and the "canonization" of writers and their texts.

In *Copperheads*, Stuart expresses his anti-intellectualist bent, yet he implicitly seeks an intellectual readership.⁷ He lauds the simple hill people and yet criticizes them harshly, one good reason he left the novel under wraps after its completion. He preaches against elitism, complaining of the "overbearingness of some of my college professors...[who] told me

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not to write about the hill country."⁸ Yet he plants both feet firmly in the elitist tradition of art. He is unkind to many rural teachers and mocks academics mercilessly. And yet, as we know, Stuart loved the schools and longed for scholarly success, absorbing the lessons of those at Vanderbilt like Donald Davidson who told him to quit writing "pretty boy poems," the precious sort of stuff he had created for his *Harvest of Youth* volume in 1930 (Jesse, 145). Stuart had indeed taken Davidson's advice. The result of that academic counseling was the Plowman Poet persona Stuart had first conceived on reading Carlyle's *Life of Burns*, which took more solid form in his own mind as he scribbled sonnets during 1932 and 1933.

With *Copperheads* he had made his first attempt to transform this newfound identity as Plowman Poet into fiction. He envisioned himself as a transcriber of elemental experiences: the clouds, wind, trees, creatures, and people of his Kentucky hills. His hero Stringer (who later became Shan Powderjay) reenacts Stuart's frustrating year as a rural county school superintendent after having left Vanderbilt without a master's degree. Stringer attempts to explain and justify his position as the administrator of a system he abhors and as an artificer of fiction in a homespun world. Stringer finally goes off (significantly, to the city) to "compose" himself. The result is a literary experience fraught with tensions that seem quintessentially American.

One such tension affected Stuart's style. His attempt to mirror his rural ethos charms but also bores, as true friends of Stuart's fiction will readily admit. Not surprisingly, he is unable to foreground country speech without a background of more effete and citified language. Such contrasts become a source of tremendous energy but also a source of trouble. Stuart's first novel is deeply marked by his realization that he is entirely at home in neither the urban nor the rural worlds, that his pose of outsider depends upon his also being on the inside as an artist. For example, the characters divide into the rural-innocent and the urban-shrewd, yet it is the rural characters who finally act most shrewdly. Shan's situation like his style refers us continually to the aesthetic and social values he claims to overcome or destroy.

It is 1932, the depth of the Depression, and 25-year-old Shan Stringer has returned from a disappointing year at college to help out on his family's farm. Though he is not well qualified, he is offered the job of superintendent of county schools. His mother suspects the out-going superintendent Ace Ruggles and his henchmen on the school board of dirty tricks, and she warns Shan not to take the job. But after all, \$100 a month is better than nothing, so he accepts. Shan immediately realizes that the rural county schools are being neglected in favor of the richer city school system which has hired Ruggles.

Like other Depression-era novels, this one spotlights the have-nots. Stringer's office is in the county courthouse (just as Stuart's was) on the second floor by the Red Cross headquarters and the grand jury room. At the end of the corridor is a hallway in which

were kept coffins for the paupers. All you had to do when you came to get in the bread line or go to the R.F.C. was to go back and look through the glass door to see the coffin in which perhaps someday you

might be laid. I saw the ragged downtrodden small-town men, the floaters, the hill men who would remain self-sustaining to the end—I saw them come and stand outside that glass door and look at the coffins and walk away....I watched women come up the stairs from the streets and sit on the benches opposite the doors of the toilets, women heavily rouged on the lips and face. Their hair would be stringing down across their faces and windblown over their eyes. I saw them sit there drunk and half-drunk with men in the same condition; I saw them lean in each other's arms and kiss each other painfully hard. (COC, 164, 165)

Stringer reports the graffiti penciled, inked, and etched on the privy walls: "Many times all about the county officials would be marked out! A pencil would go over the words and blot them out! The next day they would be placed back in plain letters" (COC, 166). These plain truths are the testimony of the down-and-outers eulogized in Stuart's beautifully-wrought chapter, "Dark December I Remember." They fight for bread but also for their *words*.

Like Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Stuart indicts American materialism and its peculiar false language, that misnaming jargon that robs the common man of his humanity. (Recall Tom Joad's puzzlement over the use of the word "Reds" to describe Federal Agricultural Camp members.) *Cradle of the Copperheads* tells of a fight for political rights. It simultaneously praises native gifts of intuition, railing against a "dryasdust" schooling that stunts human growth. As superintendent, Shan visits all 80-odd schools in the county and hears story after story of corruption and injustice. Each story connects natural language with good living. Each is finally a story of conflict between books and earth, between the adult social self and the innocent child's heart. Shan shows us that differences between people are always also differences in language.

Shan's "dirt-farmers here in the hills, these one-horse farmers," speak a language "rough and rich, like their soil" (COC, 53). Main topics of conversation include the ex-superintendent Ace Ruggles:

"Well, boys, he come nigh as a pea a-goin' out of there and never gettin' his starn-end up there on that soft leather chair again." (COC, 2)

Ace Ruggles' brother the D.A.:

"I was talkin' to Widow Fipps this morning and she said just think old Tommy Ruggles tryin' to send Daredevil Strongoak to the pen for killing a chicken thief!" (COC, 2)

the school board:

"Odie Lang offered five bucks the old board would win and Dennie Fisher called him quick as he took the money out of his pocket. He riz right up off the fence where he was whittling and said, 'I'll take that bet!' " (COC, 255)

and of course farm conditions:

"We don't earn the salt that goes in our bread when we fool with tobacco now. We just raise tobacco to give to the Pinhookers." (COC, 88-9)

But beneath the proud, colorful, tobacco-spitting jargon, spoken in the face of depression and drought, there is a darkness and silence that Stuart also celebrates. He identifies the dark Kentucky hills strongly as "mother earth":

My mother is a product of the hills. When I see the hills, these long gray

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stretches of silent hills, I think of this hill woman who gave me birth. She is a strong woman and silent. I understand my mother. I do not even have to speak to her when I go home unless I want to. If I speak it is all right. If I don't speak it is all right. We have gone out and sat together and watched the clouds roll over us on windy nights...and go beyond the dark hills. They would go beyond and we would sit out on a winter hill together watching the stars and the winter nights. We would listen to the winds blow in the pines and through the barren sassafras tops. I never told my mother in her life I loved her. She never told me that she loved me. (COC, 174)

This silent understanding grounds all being for Stuart. It is a realm in which language is not needed and should not go.

Many anecdotes told in the novel illustrate this view. One such story concerns a young couple's elopement. They do not want their marriage license, Shan is told: "They said they didn't want no old scrap of paper. They said they had always been married to one another from the time they first saw each other" (COC, 77). And Shan comments, "Sometimes the passions surge in the human body. They surge like the water surges upward from beneath the earth. . . . Let [them] go back like the wild fox—like the wolf—like the hound bitch! Let them go close to the earth again" (COC, 77-8). In his role as artist, Shan claims to reveal this primal fluid world: "There is not the pattern of books where [they] live," says Shan. "I have been there and I know" (COC, 79). Yet Shan communicates through the book-world, for the primal flux is itself powerless to speak.

To this point Stuart's novel follows the general run of the modernist poetic of Hulme, Eliot, and Pound, trying to restore vitality to language, opposing a dried-up social order to a primeval experience where "order" derives from inner being and where poetic language "floods" the artist's consciousness, welling up from a stream beneath the surface of personality. Stuart's vocabulary of "pattern" vs. the surging of the underground water comes directly from the Bergsonian heritage communicated to him by the Agrarians at Vanderbilt whose aesthetic stance came in turn from Kant, Bergson, and Eliot. Like Thomas Wolfe, Stuart poeticized his fiction to represent this surge, even inserting numerous sonnets directly into the text. It is no accident that these lyrical moments are both Stuart's forte as well as his downfall (as with Wolfe). He reaches and then over-reaches, trying to tongue the language of a non-verbal experience. Although the *word* kills, poetic words are considered exceptions. The justification for this view lies in T.E. Hulme's interpretation of Bergson in *Speculations*: The artist dives beneath the surface and comes back with newly-forged language which for a time still glows with vitality. He is the psychic spelunker.⁹

But Stringer (reflecting Stuart's naivete in aesthetic matters and his discomfort with literary modernism) wants to stay in those depths. He is opposed to education because it alienates him from primal life: "Once I was asleep back in those hills and life passed like a dream. I plowed the soil. I helped my father raise what we ate. I was very happy. I saw gods in the skies. I saw a life after death." Then, he says, "after three years of struggle and an inactive life, I got a degree from a small college and I came back to teach school. In the meantime, I had become wide awake. I had

lost my gods in the wind" (COC, 132-3). Stringer describes his miserable fallen state and thus justifies his having left Vanderbilt: "I'm not happy. After I found out what college was I never took a diploma! I didn't want it on the wall. I went back home and burned the one I took in high school....I live close to the soil with my parents who have not been spoiled by an education. That is why I say leave the child alone. Do not wake the child, but let the child sleep" (COC, 133-4).

For Stringer as artist-hero, education is the deathblow to creativity. Since creativity is his highest value, this renders his position as superintendent of public schools untenable. The result is tortured and torturing thought:

I was into the school work. I would earn what little bread and meat there was in it. But I still cried out against the way it dries us up. If that is what you want to do, go ahead and go to school all your life. Become a dried up prune no one can cut with a hatchet! A century of desiccation and dust will lie on you. Your bones will bleach and become brittle. You will become dry as powder. Go on to school and forget the world. Get the facts and stoke them deep in your mind like so many sticks of wood in the grate. Place them in there well, for they look better when they are neatly stacked. Be a great handler of bone-dry facts. The world needs people to handle her bone-dry facts. (COC, 157)

This is a typical Stuart diatribe: it drives its point home with the rough-and-ready poetry of a dirt-farmer's simple syntax. Such writing earned him the reputation as a man who perhaps was the untutored Plowman Poet he appeared to be, who perhaps was incapable of the allusive and compact style fostered by his Agrarian masters.

But there is another way of seeing Stuart's style, already in 1933 well developed. It may be seen as a conscious effort to oppose the rhetoric of his Vanderbilt teachers, to wrest from them the language that minimized his own gifts and potentialities and to change the center of power from the urbane and urban to the rural and ruminative—in the agrarian sense of cud-chewing. Recall that after their initial dismissal of Eliot, the Agrarians made a defense of *The Waste Land* one of their top priorities. If the "modern" taste in literature taught at Vanderbilt promoted compactness and classical allusion, Stuart would answer with sentences that multiplied and reduplicated like leaves in a forest. His very style would deny an elitist background of reading.

This stylistic choice mirrors Stuart-Stringer's rebellious educational philosophy. A large portion of the novel's middle section concerns Stringer's ambivalent response to Mr. Baylor, a school inspector, who is described as a "clean-cut stranger." Stringer likes Baylor but hates the system he represents. To Baylor he addresses his emotional outcry about "gods in the skies" and letting the children "sleep." Stuart himself repeated this philosophy as a career educator. Asked to describe how he as an author of short stories taught the short story, he responded: "One thing I do is not to teach the short story as it was taught to me....I had to find the climax, the anti-climax, and about a half dozen other things in the teacher's formula—a formula creaking with age." He asserts that the main thing is for his students to love the short story, and the polarity of the organic vs. inorganic is apparent in his use of the negative: "We do not have a

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skeleton to analyze the story by; we do not take it apart and piece it together again." Stuart writes, "I shudder at the thought of the English teachers who have ruined their students' love of the short story by age-old tomfoolery practices." Yet in a telling sentence toward the end of this account, Stuart says his students gain "a pretty good knowledge of grammar too for I lay it on hot and heavy."¹⁰ Stuart may have achieved later in life an equanimity toward grammar, but in 1933 he was smoldering with the mountain boy's resentment for old-fashioned school masters, and the evidence suggests he never entirely discarded that attitude.

Stringer acts out Stuart's anger toward the deadening effects of doctrine, jargon, and pedagogy. Everywhere he finds the encrusted, the brittle, the skeletal—in short, the inorganic—where there ought to be vitality, flexibility, life. In frustration he uses his schooling to debunk education and employs dirty tricks himself to avenge corrupt acts of politicians and teachers. This he calls "fighting fire with fire" in the novel's last chapters. Though this strategy wins a school election fight, it becomes self-deconstructing as rhetoric and fiction: Shan's rhetoric as artist-hero duplicates the elitist and normative system he attacks. Since he can see no way to return from the primal depths without essentially "dying," he is ultimately unable to rationalize his own power of speech. Shan has accepted the Bergsonian principle that "the word turns against the idea,"¹¹ but he has no explanation for the ways in which language may be made to partake in the life of primal "ideation."

Here is a quintessential example: Shan meets a teacher in a rural school. The teacher has a wife who also teaches, and she has been attacked by a boy in her class. In retaliation the husband beats the boy, and he now appeals to the superintendent for protection against the boy's relatives. Stringer, who hears scores of such stories daily, responds cynically: "Don't you worry about his people doing something to you. The county attorney is free help to us and we'll protect you. That boy's people haven't got any money have they?...Well, he's out of luck. Money rings the bell. Money turns the tide. Money does everything in America but give you mother-wit." But Shan's Depression-era cynicism is belied by sympathy for the beaten boy: "Little mountain boy, angry and helpless—and he's going to be President, he thinks! Go out and split rails and be another Abraham Lincoln" (COC, 153).

Shan is caught. His job is to defend his employees, and he genuinely hates the patronage system which victimized Kentucky teachers, holding them in thrall to the relatives and friends of board members. But if he resolves his dilemma by simply protecting the teacher, he commits an injustice against the boy. Worse, he turns into one of the copperheads—those lawyer-hiring, back-biting, self-serving bureaucrats of the educational system.

He and the teacher fall silent and sit staring at the afternoon sky. The teacher breaks the ice, asking Shan what he is thinking about. Shan says he was fancying the sky was a virgin, forever beyond the reach of hills seeking to kiss her: "[The teacher] looked strangely at me. I wondered: Does he think I'm crazy? No he has the same idea that a lot of people have.

A school man should be so and so. A school man should be an ideal boy...But I was tired of it, and I would say what I damn pleased..." (COC, 153-4). This position is false, however, and he cannot escape the ethical dilemma. Dreams and poetry do not count in what he calls the "school racket," as he knew when he took the job. He is an imposter. He is caught in a no-exit plot. He next turns to a rhetorical solution, but it too will prove to have no exit, though Shan seems not to realize this.

The teacher asks how Shan can call the sky a virgin. Shan explains: "You know [the sky is up there] like that red apple in the topmost bough that Sappho the poet sang about. She said the men couldn't get it or hadn't got it. Sappho called the poem, 'Virginity.' So I went a little higher and took in more territory" (COC, 154). The teacher shakes his head at this and says, "I give them the pure old Grammar at this school. Some of these children can't decline a noun. They can't conjugate a verb!"

"The hell they can't," interjects Shan. And he now takes on the teacher on his own linguistic ground, "fighting fire with fire" and administering a verbal whipping that fulfills the beaten boy's angry intentions and that reveals in the process how fundamentally *negative* Stuart's hero is at heart:

"Let me see if I can give the order for declining a noun. Noun, kind, number, person, gender, case and relation. Now let me see: there are so many kinds of nouns....Isn't it funny your name is a proper noun and all parts of you are common nouns? Let's take that back to the old grammarians and get them to do something about the body's parts to make all proper nouns. You give them the old grammar, huh! Of course the number is very easy. Always one, perhaps, and always more than one perhaps! Now say there was one and a half. What would you do about it! Don't answer me! I'll fire you off the job if you do. I know what you'd do. You'd consult your old *Harvey's Grammar* wouldn't you? Don't answer me. . . ." (COC, 154-5)

Shan continues to bully the teacher, rebuking him with the weapons of old-fashioned grammar and declaring that as the "first person" in the conversation he commands the teacher's silence. When the teacher protests—"I'm tired of it"—Shan responds, "I was tired of it for about twelve years, but I had to listen. I'll soon be through here! Now you listen!"

As if that challenge to the teacher's authority were not enough, there follows a discussion of gender in which Shan challenges the teacher's manhood on the grounds first of grammatical gender ("Now if all of your parts are common gendered, how are we going to get masculine out of the whole of you?") and then second that teachers are by definition not manly ("You wouldn't be in this school room if you were!"). At this the teacher reaches the breaking point:

"I've never been treated like this in my life. I am the common parts of a noun and a lot of crap about the noun! And that Harvey was a fool and a lot of stuff like that. Are you the Superintendent of Wonder County Schools?"

I said: "School work has been bred in me for two hundred years. But it never did pop out until here of late! It popped out all over and as big as a mountain and like gummy drops of sweat! Let me explain the relationship of the noun to the rest of the sentence!"

"I don't want to hear it!"

"...Now you are a noun and the rest of your surroundings are the

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sentence. In this case you are liable to be important because you have a chance of being the subject. The subject is always the center of attraction and around it the city is built....Mr. Adjective over here is obligated to you. The Verb has to agree with you. Isn't that fine? Don't you have good company? Verbs are strong but adjectives are dangerous as well. The adjective is a dangerous piece of ground for the word-workmen to build a city on. The adjective is too uncertain. So watch your neighbor, the adjective! Keep your prepositions off at club reach, and if one starts toward you knock his block off with a club. Now you know there is a chance for you to be in the background as a noun. You may become an antecedent....Watch yourself, little noun! Yes, watch your sentence relationship to this bone-dry world!"

"I'm tired of all these nouns. I'm sick of this talk."

"I am too," I said, looking at the children.

"It's time for books. Won't you go in and make a talk for the children!"

"I've just made one talk. I don't feel like making two! I tell you I'll be around next year to discuss adverbs with you. They're nice upright clean things that help out occasionally." (COC, 155-7)

In this lecture Shan pursues two strategies. One is to usurp the language of the teacher. The other is to destroy that language's veracity by exposing its contradictions. Stuart's underlying point is no different here than elsewhere. He wishes to oppose superficialities, the materialistic level of grammatical *rules*, to the organic vitality of a living language—the kind that is connected to inner experience in such a way as to render the moment of "flood" or "surging," the emergence of the primal stuff from under the rock of the earth.

But an equally obvious unplanned consequence also emerges: the language machine, once turned on, runs itself. Shan's purpose is to show the inconsistencies of language in Harvey's Grammar. But he must first construct that language before dismantling it, and that language virtually runs off with the text as Shan dwells on "noun," "kind," "number," "person," "gender," "case," and "relation" *ad nauseam*. His diatribe suggests, moreover, that *all* texts have rules and are therefore open to such dangers. In "fighting fire with fire," then, Shan's rhetoric becomes an "equal opposite" of what he attacks. It destroys simply by holding up a mirror, but the mirror cracks as well. If all language has grammar, the destruction of grammar destroys language itself. Shan is left amid the wreckage.

Because that consequence goes unrecognized, however, this deconstruction happens also to Stuart as erstwhile hero of his own novel. To debunk the teacher, he becomes one; to oppose elitist art, he writes it; to shut out classical allusion (Sappho, for example), he invites it in. Stuart's Plowman Poet is at war with the aesthetic world he aspires to create. This is an inherent quality of Stuart's vision, a tension contributing to the beauty and the grotesqueness of his powerful imaginary world. The tensions here among education, language, and experience represent to us an aspect of the American psyche that has by no means departed. For me, it makes Stuart an indispensable American writer, one whose contradictions do not diminish but actually enhance his charm.

The dilemma of Shan is really the dilemma of a society striving for "literacy" and "progress" while it laments the loss of its past. It is the

paradox of a nostalgia for what we have ourselves actively destroyed. And it is the aesthetic predicament of the modernist writer drawn in bold brush strokes. How, as Eliot often wondered, does one reach the essential with words?

Words, after speech, reach
 Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
 Can words or music reach
 The stillness...¹²

But words "crack and sometimes break," as Eliot said. And for Stuart, who rejected modernist aesthetics, no "pattern" will reach that silence. Since one must weave a pattern anyway, better to make it "patches on a crazy quilt," a phrase which became the title of one of the central chapters of *Cradle of the Copperheads*. But what are the aesthetic consequences of a devotion to the "crazy"?

"Craziness" marks the site of Stuart's ambivalence about that nonrational, raw, *untutored* existence he celebrated as a writer yet as an educator sought to cure. "Craziness" marks such a site because it poses an obviously unresolvable problem. Observe Stuart's thoughts on a mountain "idiot boy" who appears in the chapter "Patches on a Crazy Quilt":

It is so hard for a crazy person in the hill country to live...often times they are worked unmercifully in the fields like a mule would be worked. It seems to me a crazy person is less respected among the hill people than anyplace else. They are amusement for the sane people in a world where amusement is so hard to find. This brings to mind how I once saw an old woman fastened up in a corn crib. She was crazy...she was the mother of many normal-minded children. Yet they allowed their mother [to be] fastened in a corn crib and it was in late autumn. Her hair was gray and it had fallen down over her face. I can never forget the long skinny arms she poked between crib slats and waved at me as I passed. And now this little idiot boy would have to work all his life. (COC, 90)

How does this sort of "craziness" fit into Stuart's natural-organic "quilt" of farms in his Kentucky hills? He has no real answer: "There was not any use to send him to school for the other children to play with. It was better to let him run around wild at his home" (COC, 91). More disturbingly, the ground-of-being itself falls silent in the face of this madness: "The hills would not hear him. The hills were asleep. The trees would not understand him. They were silent and the wind moved on" (COC, 91).

Stuart's world is thus unable to accommodate the consequences of either alternative he faces: Primitive or Progressive. He would continue after 1933 to peer obsessively into this glass, unable to give up his fierce loyalty to the "uncooked," unable to accept a traditional "literary" role for himself. Stuart leaves the student of Appalachian literature with a haunting vision: A man whose life was one mad rush to write it all down before "progress" (which he himself purveyed) would finish his world; a writer who denied the efficacy of language and in the same breath consecrated old altars to the "living speech" of natural man. Those who remain untouched by Stuart's ambivalences, and by his harsh discipline of writing which restricted itself to rural and rudimentary implements will probably not recognize how deeply the "modern" actually touched him. But his recoil is a measure of the impact of the modern on Appalachia. And *Cradle of the Copperheads*

cradle of the copperheads

is a measure of that recoil.

NOTES

1. H. E. Richardson, *Jesse: The Biography of an American Writer, Jesse Hilton Stuart* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), p. 220. Further references to this volume (*Jesse*) will appear in the text.

2. Mary Washington Clarke, "Jesse Stuart's Educational Saga as Humanistic Affirmation," in *Jesse Stuart: Essays on His Work*, ed. J. R. LeMaster and Mary Washington Clarke (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1977), pp. 130-48.

3. In this I challenge the judgment of Ruel Foster (with whom I am in agreement on many other points) that Stuart "does not suffer from the divided mind and the carefully nurtured ambivalences of modern intellectualist poetry." Ruel E. Foster, *Jesse Stuart* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1968), pp. 150-1.

4. J. R. LeMaster, *Jesse Stuart: Kentucky's Chronicler-Poet* (Memphis State University Press, 1980), p. 195.

5. Robert Penn Warren, introduction to *The Best-Loved Stories of Jesse Stuart*, selected and with commentary by H. E. Richardson (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), p. vii.

6. Jesse Stuart, *The Thread That Runs So True* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 215.

7. In this, at least, Stuart is like William Carlos Williams.

8. Jesse Stuart, *Cradle of the Copperheads* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988), p. 54. Further reference to this volume (*COC*) will appear in the text.

9. See T. E. Hulme, *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art* (London: Kegan Paul, 1924), pp. 149-53. These connections have been developed by many, including Murray Krieger, *The New Apologists for Poetry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956); Ronald Schuchard, "Eliot and Hulme in 1916: Toward a Reevaluation of Eliot's Critical and Spiritual Development," *PMLA*, 88 (Oct. 1973), 1083-94; William J. Handy, *Kant and the Southern New Critics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963); and Paul Douglass, *Bergson, Eliot, and American Literature* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986).

10. "Teaching the Short Story," typescript by Jesse Stuart, contained in the archives of the University of Louisville Special Collections.

11. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. A. Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1911), p. 127.

12. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1971), p. 121.