

IS SOUTHERN POETRY SOUTHERNER THAN SOUTHERN FICTION?

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Review of: *A Southern Omnibus: Contemporary Southern Short Fiction and Poetry in Two Volumes*, Univ. of Arkansas Press, pb., boxed set, \$20 — Leon Stokesbury, ed., *The Made Thing: An Anthology of Contemporary Southern Poetry* (1987), 326 pp.; Donald Hays, ed., *Stories: Contemporary Southern Short Fiction* (1989), 454 pp.

Probably with disdain and possibly even with contempt, we can look back to our counterparts of a century ago and say, "Shame on you! Two of the greatest poets of your age have just died — Dickinson in 1886 and Hopkins in 1889 — and who among you knew a thing about either of them? Who among the smug intelligentsia gave them the least encouragement? **People**: wake up and smell the genius!"

Alas. Our counterparts of a century hence will probably say the same sort of thing to us. Born in 1930 and 1944 instead of 1830 and 1844, Dickinson and Hopkins would have had to go through much the same agony and to die in much the same obscurity. It is no big chore to imagine our descendants, three or four generations from now, crying, "**People**: you lived among the likes of Truman Capote and Tom Wolfe but relegated them to the bland fecklessness of talk shows and gossip. Either of them, alive anywhere but the American South and at any time but the late twentieth century, would have been praised to high heaven".

Even restricting ourselves to the South, we could make a similar argument for Robert Penn Warren, Reynolds Price, William Styron,

George Garrett, Larry McMurtry, Harry Crews, Donald Barthelme, or Priscilla Bigelow. The last-listed is a name I made up for that Dickinson *de nos jours* sobbing away in an upstairs room in Tupelo or Tampa, her 1800 poems rejected or unseen.

That several writers inferior to any of those named above have been given Nobel Prizes presents a problem. It is hard to say whether we are more or less civilized than the inventor of dynamite. The writer who is the incumbent President of Czechoslovakia would be the equivalent, I reckon, of an associate professor of dramatic art at Georgia State. Conversely, the first-rate Americans who occupy positions at about the level of assoc. prof. of Drama at Georgia State would very probably be ambassadors and ministers of culture in other countries. It hasn't even mattered, when Ecuador, say, chooses its ambassador to Norway, that the poet who fills the position has been a firebrand surrealist-anarchist iconoclast. As I say, it's hard to decide whether such disparities and discrepancies signify advanced civilization or collective imbecility. Maybe we Southerners should just be proud that the wittiest and most brilliant satirists are ours — I'm thinking of John Bloom and Roy Blount — as are Wolfe, Capote, Styron, Ammons, Price, etc. etc. At the moment (fall '92) people are making a big fuss about the nonfiction prose of an octogenarian named Joseph Mitchell, a native of North Carolina. My sentiment is that the large number and great distinction of Southern writers is a sign of genuine sophistication. I would not be the first to suggest that Southern writers resemble Europeans more than they resemble their fellow Americans, while Easterners like Thomas Pynchon and John Updike as well as Mid-westerners like Robert Bly and James Wright are generically American.

Anthologies serve as good indexes of our attention to current writing. As far as I know, the boxed set from Arkansas called *A Southern Omnibus* is unique in giving selections of stories and poems. It's a relief that nobody on the production end paid much mind to symmetry or uniformity: the volumes fit inside a box, true, but the designs of the spines are not matched. The poetry book has a very brief preface and photographs of the poets; the fiction book has a less brief preface and no photographs. Both books had the same designer (Chiquita Babb), but the typefaces are different (Palatino and Goudy Old Style). It is possible that the two anthologies were developed independently and only made a boxed set as an afterthought. Separately, the volumes sell for \$12.95; the set is \$20 — not bad for handsome paperbacks. *Stories* consists of thirty stories by twenty-seven writers (Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty are

represented by two apiece). *The Made Thing* consists of about 265 poems by fifty-one poets. George Garrett and Alice Walker are the only writers included in both anthologies.

Reviewing anthologies can be almost as fun as compiling them, and in some cases almost as jejune or as hazardous as well. You just can't please everybody. You can have taste or you can have friends but you cannot have both taste and friends.

Anthologists are vulnerable to attack on every front: principles, procedures, selections, proofreading, layout, everything. Reviewers may admire deeply but silently. I mean, what remains to be said about Flannery O'Connor's "Parker's Back" or James Dickey's "Shark's Parlor"? They are impressive achievements that touch common folklore and uncommon wisdom alike. One anthology that I edited contains the only correct version of an important work by Gertrude Stein; it also solved the eighty-year-old problem of "Woodrow Wilson's Limerick"; but nobody ever said a word about either accomplishment. Along with silence — which I interpret as silent admiration — comes noisy fault-finding. Maybe I should say here, before my own noise-level rises, that my remarks do not mean that I admired nothing in these anthologies; in fact, most of what I did was to admire. However,

Donald Hays says that he considered only writers who produced "at least one full-length collection of short fiction". That may work expediently enough, but it excludes Styron's short fiction, which, according to Hays, has not been published in a full-length collection during the past thirty years. The same blade may cut off Capote. I'm not sure it's the blade that excluded Harry Crews, Max Steele, Horton Foote, or — what the hell — Erskine Caldwell, even. But it's regrettable. I wish Hays had found a way to include a few things of overwhelming merit even though the circumstances of their publication didn't quite satisfy his rather arbitrary regulations. The fact is that publishers are very reluctant to publish books of short fiction, so that many a worthy story by many a first-rate writer has come out in a magazine and nowhere else, ever.

Maybe poetry partakes more of language as such, and maybe language as such partakes of region; whatever the explanation, the stories in *Stories* are practically international and can, as a rule, take place as easily in Italy or Canada as in Alabama. George Garrett's narrator in "A Wreath for Garibaldi" makes a case for what Garrett has elsewhere called "the Southern thing": "Like every Southerner I know of, I can't escape the romantic tradition of brave defeats, forlorn lost causes. Though Garibaldi's fight was mighty small shakes

compared to Pickett's Charge — which, like all Southerners, I tend to view in Miltonic terms, fallen angels, etc. — I associated the two". That voice, however, is not Garrett's but a narrator's, a teller who is as big a faux-rustic ("mighty small shakes") windbag as hundreds of others spawned in the South, carrying on at length, passing time in thousands of barbershops and novels. Not a windbag who tells the truth, necessarily, just one who tells a story. When I was a child, "story" meant "lie". Garrett's story could be narrated by anybody, although it remains possible that Southerners share something, whether because they are from the southern region of the U.S.A. or are in the south of another continent. (A Vietnamese teacher assured me once that South Vietnamese pronunciation was lazier than North Vietnamese — like that, he said, of American Southerners.) Elisabeth Spencer's lovely story "I Maureen" is in, of, and about Montreal, rendered very convincingly, French and all.

William Harrison's "The Arsons of Desire" registers a good Chicago, with much fire-fighting detail. I know about the Great Fire of 1871, and the University of Chicago's emblem is a phoenix rising from ashes; there has just been a movie called *Backdraft*, about Chicago firefighters, and Norman Maclean's posthumous *Young Men and Fire* has just been published (Maclean taught at Chicago for forty years). The mood of Harrison's story is what you might call psycho-lyric: "The Arsons of Desire" begins like "The Fire Sermon" and ends, literally, like "Little Gidding". I don't know why there should be such a Chicago-fire nexus in a story by a southern writer, unless such artists are attracted by elements and elementary violence. If this sounds like Nashville music, I can report that the singer-songwriter Tom T. Hall has a short short story in *Stories*; Jimmy Buffett does not, but I notice that he writes fiction.

It is probably a blessing that songwriters don't publish poetry very much. Even with Cole Porter, Paul Simon, Gerald Goffin, Kris Kristofferson, and other good songwriters, the lyrics alone tend to get stale on the naked page. Besides, there are enough poets around, in four or five salient schools. **Some** of the schools are in *The Made Thing*, enough to prompt Leon Stokesbury, in a Tacitean preface, to assert that "Southern poets in general are somewhat conservative in their approach to form".

That will be scanned. As Karl Popper might have complained, Stokesbury has not come through with a scientific induction. He seems to have gone in search of technical conservatives, while leaving out A. R. Ammons, Coleman Barks, Rosanne Coggeshall, Amon Liner, Jonathan Williams, and several other less conservative but no

less worthy poets. Then having found some conservatives (but not so reactionary, on the whole, as to write metered verse with rhyme: only about fifty poems, less than 20%, fall into that category), proclaims a general truth. But it is one of those truths that — as one can imagine Samuel Goldwyn or Yogi Berra arguing — wouldn't even be true if they were true. That is, even if all the poems in the book rhymed, that still might not necessarily represent a conservative approach to form.

Rather in the manner of George Garrett's windbag narrator quoted earlier, Stokesbury also notes "a preoccupation with the past as history" and "a profound relationship to the natural world". Well, you can't dispute those airborne assertions. Even after seconding such motions, however, you can't do much else, either. It seems to be the nature of poetry to attend to the past (as well as the present) and, for the past two centuries, to honor nature. Beyond those plateaux of platitude, it seems to be inordinately difficult to compose a wholly serious sentence including the words "profound relationship". I wonder if the press might not have pressured the editor to keep his preface brief and uncontroversial.

In too many of these poems and in quite a few of these stories — just as in any number of movies — *Steel Magnolias*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Doc Hollywood*, *Rambling Rose*, *Prince of Tides*, *Paradise*, *Cape Fear* (both), *Driving Miss Daisy* — the people could as well be Klingons as Kentuckians or whatever variety of Southerner they're supposed to be. It's no wonder that, from Vivien Leigh to Jessica Tandy, British actresses have portrayed Southern women with accents and attitudes never otherwise witnessed on sea or land. Joe Bob Briggs once classified *Room with a View* as a horror film; likewise, *Fried Green Tomatoes* (not to mention some of the stories in *Stories*) might as well be science fiction or fantasy, set long ago in a galaxy far away. When I was a kid in Concord, North Carolina, I did not know that my South was also the home of Tara and Dogpatch, and I did not realize that so few states observed Memorial Day on May 10 (remembering the day in 1863 when Stonewall Jackson died). Once in a great while, something in a story, poem or movie will provoke a "Bingo!" Maybe we'll have to wait for the film version of *Lie Down in Darkness*, but that would not be a very promising title for a movie. For now, I must be satisfied to reflect that the South is a tissue of certain accents, religions, sports, jobs, landscapes, and dishes, all related in messy ways. I've been to so many Primitive Baptist funerals that every time I hear "Amazing Grace" I start craving a devilled egg.

Somebody ought to record a complaint about the text of *The Made Thing*, which has too many mistakes that could have been

avoided with more scrupulous proofreading. Bin Ramke, who probably has a lot of trouble with both his names, becomes "Ranke" at one point. What we veterans remember as Tu Do Street in Saigon becomes "To Do". A line from Robert Morgan's "Passenger Pigeons" is garbled, with "and Audubon" becoming "the Audubon".

I do not want to end on such a quibbling note. I want to say in Stokesbury's favor that he had the wisdom to include a couple of poems by Everette Maddox, a wonderful poet who died not long after the anthology was published. Partisans like me could wish for more than three short poems, but we should rejoice that those three are in an anthology. Very early, at about age twenty-five, Rette had one poem in *The New Yorker*, which then shut its door in his face; he amassed a large collection of Howard Moss autographs on rejections thereafter. He was a fine poet, with eloquence and wit and learning to spare. He was a friend of poets and poetry, but his luck was lousy, and he died at forty-four, pathetically fulfilling the prophecy in his own "The Great Man's Death: An Anecdote":

the famous poet Everette
Maddox has been advised
by a team of wrong-headed
specialists that one more
snort of the Devil's Brew
would turn his lights and
livers puce.

Well: evil and brief hath been my pilgrimage, but I want it recorded in my dossier that I provided a blurb for Rette's first book and gave him all the encouragement I could. If it turns out that he has been the Gerard Manley Hopkins of our age (and both his dates fall almost exactly a century after both of Hopkin's), then some of us will not look so stupid after all.