

Cultivating My Antique Garden

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PERIODICALLY, I am asked the short story writer's overwhelming question—and one which he wishes would be, in every sense and for everybody, the *ultimate* question. And that is why I don't write a novel. All I can say is that my mind just doesn't seem to work that way, that I'm really not interested in such projects, and that, for good or for ill, I prefer to continue cultivating, in my stories, what one of my friends has called my antique garden, which is mostly populated or vegetated by old women sitting on front porches, recollecting the past, assessing the present, and more or less dismissing the future: after all, they came out of the past into the present and that's enough for *them*. (I recall that Thoreau, adjured on his deathbed to think of the future state, replied, "One world at a time." And that's pretty much why I don't relish science fiction, even fiction as fantasy very much. Again, I would agree with Thoreau that the Concord nights are stranger than any of the Arabian nights.)

And, for what it's worth, I just don't believe I can, at the moment, read another single novel about the burden of the Southern past or the weight of Southern guilt or the search for Southern identity, whether personal or social. And I can't, at least for a while, stomach many more agonized grapplings with Southern sexual function, which often seems to me to get tied in with sectional function. And I don't much care for violence as a means of working out one's identity, whether in the smaller com-

munity or wider regional context. As a Southern writer of sorts, I think we are about overstocked on these items at the moment. Which is not to say that I am underestimating the great achievements of Faulkner and his heirs and assigns. And God forbid that I should be taken as knocking the War Between the States and General Lee. But, to be perfectly frank, I'm not a Civil War buff in the sense that I love to wander over battlefields, map in hand and zeal in the heart, pondering on what might have been, if only

I suppose what I am trying to say here is that I don't find the themes that seem to be recurrent ones in my stories among the obvious choices which seem certified as approved topics for Southern writers. I should interpolate here that I don't think Southern writers are different from any other writers, except that they are born and bred in the American South, and, for what it's worth, find that the geography and the history of their region have helped to define them both as persons and as writers. They have been both lucky and cursed in that the air they breathed, the ground they trod was, by its very nature, of the stuff of which fiction and drama are made. But they have always had it in their power to say yea, yea or nay, nay to their inheritance. Like writers from anywhere else, they can be either good or bad. And that is the only classification in the arts that ultimately counts.

Really, I am just trying to do my own thing, certainly no one else's, which I might do even worse. It's not that I don't think the themes I have dismissed as not my own are not legitimate subjects for fiction. But I suppose I think too many people, for too long now and much too often, have been trying to cash in on as theirs something that Faulkner and Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor and Robert Penn Warren long ago established as *theirs* though of course not exclusively so. But how many times does one pick up a first novel by a "new Southern author" and read one sentence and observe sadly that, yes, here's another one that's read too much Faulkner! Or too much something else.

And how tiresome it is to hear Tennessee Williams extolled in the same breath as Faulkner, Carson McCullers in the same sentence as Flannery O'Connor, with a bow along the way to Truman Capote! I don't much think Williams has ever been *real* in the sense Faulkner was; and I think that, despite Mrs. McCullers' genuine triumphs, she ultimately betrayed her own gift and began willing herself to venture away from her true country into foreign lands, even to write up the news of the day, which is always fatal for the truth-telling novelist. I have even had some reservations on this latter head about so eminent a figure as Robert Penn Warren, and certainly William Styron. And if one wants to know the difference between ersatz grotesque and the real thing, just let him ponder the kinks coiled up by Williams, McCullers, Capote, and Company, where none of them seems to go anywhere except to show that life is, yes, very strange indeed, contrasted with the really functional horrors realized by Miss O'Connor, where that which is crooked is always seen as such, because, behind it, we get some sense of something that is straight. The dealers in the spurious grotesque cited earlier always remind me

of a high school Latin teacher I had who, though she could easily have qualified as a member of the German General Staff where drill and order were concerned, was not long on the strictly *literary* merits of what we were reading. And when she didn't know what else to say about a passage, she would observe with some exasperation, "O, class, Virgil just put that in." Well, I think that's what Messrs. Williams and Co. often do with their horrors; and good writers never "just put in" anything.

Whatever else the fiction writer's job is, I think it's mainly to tell the truth. It's *not* to report the news of the day or the signs of the times but to send back from that farthest of all countries the news from the human heart and perhaps to discern there those signs which are for all times. Any subject is open to him; he can do anything, as Flannery O'Connor once observed; that he can get away with but, as she quickly added, no one has ever gotten away with much. So I really can't worry about those subjects which don't seem mine.

And one of them which very much does not seem so is race. I simply do not have Negroes or whites as such on the brain, and I don't have sex on the brain either. (The late Tallulah Bankhead said the brain was no place for that latter item, and I don't think it's much place for the former.) These may seem shocking confessions in these times when the "relevant" is so much in request. But perhaps I may go even further and suggest that most of the stories which occur to me seem almost willfully "irrelevant," as such matters go. Because they're mainly not about Negroes or sex or violence or what-not but about old women sitting on the front porch hating and loving each other now as they hated and loved each other in the past, and as they presumably will continue to do after death—in some sort of Communion of Saints, I suppose. It's the love—and the hate—which

is stronger than death, the jealousy cruel as the grave which has been gnawing at their gizzards all their lives—that's what keeps them going and turns me on. And that's where all good writing begins, I think—with what's gnawing on your gizzard, not what you may be compelling yourself to write out of your mind's concern, however valid such concerns may be. That's all right for reporting the news, maybe even teaching the Sunday School lesson; but it's not where the passion is—and has been—all your life.

And it's where the passion is, I'm convinced, that the writer finds his only real subject; and this is going to be as different as the writers are as individuals, though they obviously are not immune—and God forbid they should ever be—to the influences of place and time. We in the South have been particularly fortunate here: our geography, our society have been forced on us, intensified and solidified by defeat and humiliation; and verily, history has happened to us with a vengeance. All these things have worked together to produce writers whose imaginations are inevitably concrete, with wholesome respect for what Donald Davidson called the "wild particular" and perhaps a healthy distrust of what Mr. Davidson called the "tame abstract." And around all of them have been talkers and tale-tellers, operating within a well established and highly respected convention. Perhaps it's no wonder then that the art of narrative seems almost bred in the bone for many Southerners.

But to return to my own case, I must go back to my antique garden—those old women on the front porch. They sit there in their high-back rockers, their voices raspy, their wrinkles many, their eyes cloudy with age. In moments of exasperation, both in real life and in my fiction, I've often thought that, if you gave them a hard shake, you could even hear the rustle of

their dead and dried up wombs. But their vision, as distinguished from their sight, their sense, as distinguished from their brains, are as acute and penetrating as ever. And I know I should ignore them at my peril. It's their voices I keep hearing wherever I go, their judgments I find myself taking more seriously than I'd like, and it's to them that I keep returning, both in body and in spirit. I know now that I can never outrun them; indeed, I'm not sure that I want to, when I consider some of the alternatives—certainly the alternatives as a writer.

No, my stories don't deal explicitly with sex—any more than do the old women I write about or who serve as my narrators. But, as my faithful friend who spoke of them as my antique garden pointed out, most of them are *seething* with sex. I replied that perhaps they were but that was their trouble and I couldn't do anything about it! And though I don't see myself as ever writing up the news of a riot or a lynching, I find that there's a lot of controlled or undercover violence in what I write. My God, how people can hate each other, both dead and alive, without ever *doing* anything about it! Don't readers ever think of this? The last time I was home, I was talking with an old friend, now nearly eighty, whom I still can't think of as an old woman because of her liveness in both mind and body. And she remarked of some long dead and gone cousin whom I had only just heard of but never known: "Why, Cousin Joe died loving my father." And I thought how wonderful that was and how I'd never forget it—for people to be embedded in a context where both love and hate lingered on beyond the grave and where every minute might be seen as but another portion of eternity, sands upon the Red Sea shore, and perhaps one might be judged not by how he had lived but how he had loved.

Something else I can't will myself into is the business, currently so evident (and maybe that's part of the trouble, it *is* so current), of collective guilt. In moments of exasperation, I sometimes think white Southerners who write fiction—or indeed almost anything else—are in the Collective Guilt Stakes—guilty because they've mistreated the black man, guilty because they've been "over-privileged," and God knows how many other collective misdemeanors. Well, again, I just can't join the happy group (and they *are* happy in their misery, just as are the blacks who have discovered white guilt and draw not back from tightening the screws yet further). I've done lots of bad things in my life—things I'm ashamed of and for which I've asked forgiveness and trust my Maker to forgive. But among them is not guilt *en masse*, which, for me, is as silly as asking pardon for being born. I refuse to shoulder any of my ancestors' guilt in racial or in any other matters, albeit I've lived long enough to concede that the sins of the fathers *are* visited on the children. But I've got quite enough of my own, thank you, without taking them on too; again, I would say, with Thoreau, one world at a time, whether past or future. Or perhaps I could go even further and say, with Emerson, "Thy love afar is spite at home." And that's what I sometimes think all this collective guilt is in aid of—setting a screen between the individual and his own particular black dog which is marked out for him and him alone. There *is* safety in numbers—or at least people act as if there were.

So have I painted myself into a corner? Must I continually be on the defensive about cultivating my antique garden? Not really. For good or for ill, that garden is the one part of the world I know best, where I can command the terrain, which I could never do in trying to write what I

didn't really *know*. And I think the vegetation in this garden, though often rank and deformed, is my own; and no one can ever take it from me or accuse me of taking it from someone else. Writing fiction, I think, is a dreadfully moral business, in the sense that it must be grounded in truth-telling. And as such it forces a desperate kind of honesty on the perpetrator—and on the reader too, I should add. Dishonest reading and dishonest writing always go together, just as do honest reading and writing. So I am compelled to say, "Here's my garden, whether you like it or not. It's what I know about life. And maybe it will answer your needs and expectations, maybe it won't. But it's mine, and no one else has ever seen it or cultivated it precisely as I'm doing. A poor thin thing perhaps, but my own. So I wish you joy of it. But if you don't like it, well, be damned to you! I can't worry about that." Strong language perhaps but true, and I'm not sure that it can be said more effectively any other way. And it's this position that one more or less has to get into, or else the Job's comforters, the discouragers, the never-wases of the literary world will get him for sure: "Now if you'd take my advice, you'd . . ." or "Well, you know, you can't write in the first-person forever . . ." or "You haven't said a word about any of the South's *real* problems. . ." and so on *ad infinitum et ad nauseam*.

My only refuge is my antique garden, peopled as it may be by harpies, even monsters, the dying and the dead. But it's *my* garden, and the spirits there do indeed come when I do call them. And I can't help but think my quiet antique garden has some pertinence for those who dwell outside in the wide world of affairs, in the busy hum of men. All lives, whether one wills or no, are both private and public. Let no one assume therefore that my garden is nonetheless public for being so private.