

ever, they have raised the stakes for conservative postmodernism and committed themselves to the ambitious project of recovering the hierarchy of being and perfection that is central to the metaphysical and moral realism of Thomas Aquinas.

## ***The Agrarian Mood***

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### **Beyond the Chandeleurs** by David

Middleton, *Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999. 73 pages.*

AS THE EPIGRAPH to "At Franklin," the most ambitious poem in his new volume of poems, David Middleton quotes Donald Davidson's question from a letter to Allen Tate: "And where, O Allen Tate, are the dead?" Davidson, the Southern poet and critic, wrote sharply to his lifelong friend on February 15, 1927, about the soon-to-be-famous "Ode to the Confederate Dead." Praising it for being "sonorous and beautiful in a strict proud way," Davidson nevertheless told Tate "that when you deal with *things themselves*, the things become a ruin and crackle like broken shards under your feet.... And where, O Allen Tate, are the dead? You have buried them completely out of sight—with them yourself and me."

In his second collection, *Beyond the Chandeleurs*, David Middleton's "quiet poems," as he describes them, present with remarkable steadiness the kind of vision that Davidson might have advocated: a traditional poetry that comes out of a shared, communal world. "*Things*

*trusted to our knowledge, use, and care / Within the givenness of what we are*" ("The Duck Hunt") still have an ample accessibility for the patient, attentive, and believing mind. Everywhere in these poems, Middleton shows himself calmly aware that contemporary life might be what Robert Frost calls a "diminished thing." But he faces the age's metaphysical poverties without the astringent ironies that he, like Tate, might easily have indulged.

In fact, more than seventy years after Davidson, Middleton mounts a poetic attack on the whole stance behind Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead." To readers outside the Southern tradition, his reasons for doing so might seem hopelessly out of touch—still another version of what Shreve McCannon, a Canadian in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), calls an "entailed birthright father and son and father and son of never forgiving General Sherman." But the reason that the Southern tradition retains its importance, the reason that such books as *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) continue to find new readers, has to do with an alternative to the vision of dehumanizing technological and economic globalization that the Southerners foresaw and feared. Tate, perhaps the most brilliant of the Fugitives who then became the Agrarians, wrote the most famous poem about the South and its past, but Middleton, like Davidson and many others since, finds that Tate imports into his account of the Confederate dead precisely those qualities of mind that the Southern tradition most hoped to avoid: abstraction from the "things themselves," narcissistic self-absorption, and the inability to trust in the common good of a shared world.

Tate's speaker in the "Ode" stands "*by the sagging gate, stopped by the wall,*" unable psychologically or spiritually to enter the graveyard, though he can "*praise the arrogant circumstance / Of those who fall / Rank upon rank, hurried*

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*beyond decision*"; in fact, he over-praises and, in effect, romanticizes the kind of mad charge that took place at Franklin. Chastising Tate for dwelling on his own incapacities rather than attempting "to voice and usher in / Those truths which history's dead keep hidden still," Middleton shows without palliation the slaughter in the Battle of Franklin, where, after a futile Confederate charge, "in the end the dead lay seven deep." The principal cause lay in the "deadly rhetoric" of the Confederate general, John Bell Hood: "Hyperbole made lethal by a mind's / Wild Viking will that nothing ever binds / To truth but tragic acts." Such irresponsible, willful exaggeration made him the blind perpetrator of terrible acts of destruction upon his own men, and Middleton goes a long way toward justifying his own habit of quiet, indicative statement when he describes Hood's irresponsible language—and Tate's, for that matter. History, like mute nature, needs the poet's sober naming, his sober questioning of those who pride themselves in the wild charge. One needs to ask, "But to what end and under what command / And to defend what cause, to take what stand?"

T. S. Eliot, close in many of his sentiments to Middleton, has a famous claim that the poet ought to "purify the dialect of the tribe." Yet Middleton's own contribution to his locale and the larger community of letters stems less from an obsession with purifying language per se than with a studious heedfulness to the inner names of things. From the first poem in this volume—actually, from the epigraph to the volume itself ("There is neither speech nor language; but their voices are heard among them," Psalm 19:3)—Middleton's concern is to apprehend the voices hidden in the world and to bring them out into conscious speech. In "Louisiana Passage: The Whippoorwill," he establishes a keynote of the volume with the birds that "sing their own name so clean and clear." He also

hints at the movement to a still more perfect silence, in which all things "listen with intent for one who calls / Each creature in the language of its name."

Poetry, in this Adamic vision of it, allows the poet to see in the petioles and pedicels of an azalea "Leaf-tongues and petal scrolls." In his vision of the ever-present messengers of being, Middleton claims with a powerful simplicity, that "All things are angels sent / Blazing into creation, / The Word's embodiment" ("Azaleas in Epiphany"). At least three poems specifically allude to Adam's naming, and still others, such as the poem to his daughter, "Walking the Roots," envision naming as the primal fulfillment of being. As he writes his daughter's name in the dust at her command, she marvelously watches her "symbolized self / Emerge from earth and essence as it must." The last poem of the volume, "Beyond the Chandeleurs," refers to the islands just off the Louisiana coast at the mouth of the Mississippi; they were named on Candlemas or the Feast of the Presentation (February 2) in 1699 by their European discoverer, Iberville, who took wax from the myrtles on the islands for that day's rituals. Middleton finds in the sands of those islands "so near black dregs of marshes and the rigs" the same "glimmering hints" that old Simeon saw in the eyes of the Christ child presented in the temple. Those eyes "glowed with heaven's native light" like the stars that now "blaze the blatant purpose of the world / Beyond the Chandeleurs...." The "given name" of the islands is, for Middleton, another of those hints of divine purpose, because poetic naming itself is a signature in the great chain of being—one supposedly lost some centuries back.

Middleton's most powerful poems are those in which he actively takes up the cultural gauntlet, such as "The Yeoman Farmers: Northern Louisiana, 1840-1914." Voicing the complaint of the Louisiana farmers, for example, Middleton writes

how the self-sufficient agrarian life, “*Where all is seen and done as sacral act,*” was ruined by the money economy of other Southerners:

*Then came that blighted time when cotton  
lords  
Drove us into a war to save their slaves,  
Men just like us, yet who had worked the  
land,  
Not as themselves, but others' property.  
And in defeat we, too, were all but slaves  
Sold into debt and tenantry and lien.... (“The  
Yeoman Farmers”)*

The farmers go on to lament the emergence among them of a “*strange, detached, new terrifying mind / Both bestial and angelic in its pride*”—its manifestations such phenomena as clear-cut forests and the “*dreadful silhouettes*” of oil wells.

Like Andrew Lytle, who argues that the bookkeeping requisite to numbering one’s resources ruined the old agrarian South, Middleton has a keen sense of what so-called “subsistence farming” actually was. Nevertheless, he does not scorn any evidence of Christian stewardship, whatever its basis. In Middleton’s quiet world, the things trusted to us might be young children (“Walking the Roots”), the grounds of an Episcopal church (“Junior Warden”), or spouses in their old age and debility (“A Quiet Reply”). They might be the heritage of ancestors and heroes. They might even be—most unpoetic of subjects—actual money. “The Old Bank in Saline,” a poem about Middleton’s Grandfather Sudduth, a bank president, shows that the trust of others means that one does not think of “*profits maximized,*” but instead of the Biblical warnings against “*The temple’s moneylenders, talents hid, / Or Judas’ palm where silver burns the soul.*” One’s aim ought to be fruitful stewardship, not selfish gain, and when the labor is for charity, not profit, the long-term effects are beautiful to see. Visiting Saline, Middleton has a moving recognition that the two young bank of-

ficers he sees working late in the new bank are the granddaughters of a man whose land old Sudduth saved, “*Now helping as they once were helped themselves.*” God, it turns out, helps those who help others, even to the third and fourth generation. Ben Franklin’s Yankee adage takes on a mean and sorry look in the light of Saline.

The poems themselves exhibit the same virtues as Grandfather Sudduth’s loans. In their formal achievement, won through the mastery of received meters and patterns of rhyme, Middleton’s verse exhibits a conscious *habitus* of stewardship with respect to his own gifts. These poems are “*modest earnings hard and fairly gained*”—in some cases far more than modest. Their subjects are taken from the common life, and like those loans, they are deeply invested back in the real communities that Middleton inhabits. They articulate and deepen the bonds of love to his family, his friends, and his mentors; they honor Louisiana and its heritage; they serve as a response to the God who speaks through “*the grammar of creation.*”

With this book, David Middleton establishes himself as one of the most important poets who has chosen to take up the central, linked traditions—so important to the South that Davidson loved—of formal poetry and ritual forms. Unlike many poems of the “New Formalism,” Middleton’s never seem meant to *exemplify* a theory or indulge a merely clever turn of thought or image. With the exception of the lovely “Along the Banks of the Pischon,” I find his trimeter and tetrameter poems his most beautiful and verbally memorable. The first quatrain of “The Heron at the Weir,” for example, set in Middleton’s hometown, Thibodaux, Louisiana, has a lucidity reminiscent of Andrew Marvell:

*So still amid the foam that plays  
About his legs the heron stays*

*Atop a rock below the weir  
That brings the silver minnows near.*

His achievements are not always so felicitous. Sometimes his blank verse has a predictable feel to it, and if he has an habitual fault, it is explaining too much—that is, not trusting the things to speak for themselves, but directing the reader to an explicit Christian affirmation. He is at his best when he celebrates the good gifts of the “*shared world*.” Perhaps it is not surprising that the metrical variations, not to mention the enjambment, are especially masterful in lines like these, from the first section of “At Franklin”:

*Glazed hams and buttered cornpone, young  
snap beans*

*And winesap apples, thick biscuits and the  
sweet  
Spring water welling up, and bourbon neat.*

This is a local, Southern poetry of sustaining pleasures, profoundly centered in “*the givenness of what we are*.” As such, it is a major response to the contemporary loss of place and tradition, a major refusal to indulge in alienation. Ultimately, it is a poetry that takes on its fullest meanings when it enters the “*shared world*”—that is, when it is read aloud, in a tone almost of self-deprecation at the known happiness of a world these poems both recollect and freshly promise.