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Y'all Go Out and Make Us Proud: The Commencement Address and the Southern Writer

by

DANA J. NICHOLS

Under the Direction of Thomas L. McHaney

ABSTRACT

The college commencement address is traditionally regarded as the low point of an otherwise auspicious occasion. An ephemeral form of ceremonial oratory, the commencement speech is reviled for its conventional platitudes, its easy piety, and its abstractions on the well-lived life, the sunny future, and the ethics of adulthood. The South may differ, however, in its approach to the commencement speech genre, especially in the years between World War II and the millennium, when one of the South's most significant assets became the southern writer. Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to situate eight commencement addresses given by such prominent and dissimilar writers as W.J. Cash, William Faulkner, Wendell Berry, Will D. Campbell, Lee Smith, Clyde Edgerton, Maya Angelou, and Fred Chappell, within the context of the times in which they were delivered and within the speakers' written works. Through my analysis of these graduation talks, I discovered that southern writers typically abandon those repetitious conventions that render the commencement address forgettable in favor of the innovative techniques that were already at work in their written works.

INDEX WORDS: Commencement address, W.J. Cash, William Faulkner, Wendell Berry, Will D. Campbell, Lee Smith, Clyde Edgerton, Maya Angelou, Fred Chappell, Ceremonial oratory

Y'ALL GO OUT AND MAKE US PROUD: THE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS AND THE SOUTHERN WRITER

by

DANA J. NICHOLS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2006

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Dana Jo Nichols
2006

Y'ALL GO OUT AND MAKE US PROUD:
THE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS AND THE SOUTHERN WRITER

by

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Chapter One

Y'all Go Out and Make Us Proud, you hear?

Traditionally, the college commencement address is regarded as the low point of an otherwise auspicious occasion. Replete with canned expressions and clichéd references to the promise of a new generation, many commencement speeches deserve the genre's negative reputation because "surprisingly few speakers say anything that hasn't been said at least two hundred times across the country, either that year or in a previous year" (Peter Smith 16). Author Dennis Lehane sarcastically refers to the monotonous nature of commencement talks in his 2004 speech to graduates at the University of Massachusetts in Boston: "I've been to a few commencements myself, sat where you're sitting, so let me dispense with the traditional bromides right off the bat: dare to dream, follow your heart, be true to your school, don't forget the values your family and your elders gave you, blah blah blah" (*Take This Advice* 197). Likewise, at the University of Maine commencement on 7 May 2005, Stephen King notes that "most speakers are able to assemble only the usual bunch of platitudes - row, don't drift (that's for the phys ed majors); a penny saved is a penny earned (for the economics majors); a good man is hard to find (for the sociology majors); to be or not to be (for the English majors); and for the superstition majors, like me, step on a crack, break your mother's back." The sort of repetition found in such orations, however, is not necessarily indicative of their authors' poor rhetorical skills or weak intellects. Over the long history of graduation speeches, the genre has developed many conventions – too many conventions,

one might say, that set the commencement address apart for banality or at least easy piety.

The best source for determining commencement speech conventions is the speeches themselves since countless commencement orators review what is expected of them. For example, William Allen White, former owner of the *Emporia Gazette* whose editorials earned him the title "the Sage of Emporia," recognizes that commencement speakers are expected to assess the past, consider the present, and predict the future. "About all that a commencement orator can do for his auditors," explains White in the opening to his 1936 Northwestern University graduation talk, "is to turn their faces around. He looks back upon the world as he thinks it was. Then he considers the world as he thinks it is. Finally in his receding perspective he discloses the pictured phantasm which he hopes will be the future." Irish poet Seamus Heaney also characterizes the "prescribed routes" that a commencement address should follow, emphasizing the speaker's responsibility to see into the future. "The world," he explains, "expects a commencement speaker to arrive with a set of directives, a complete do-it-yourself success kit, which he or she then issues to the graduating class; the commencement speaker's appointed role is to provide a clear-cut map of the future and a key to navigating it as elegantly and profitably as possible" (*Take This Advice* 83). But the future must not be too dismal. On 27 June 1877 at Union College's commencement exercises, George William Curtis, former *Harper's Weekly* editor, cautioned that commencement orators should take care not to squelch the optimism of the occasion.

"The counsels that fall from older lips should be carefully weighed," he warns, "lest they chill the ardor of a generous enthusiasm or stay the all-conquering faith of youth" (365).

Convention further dictates that there be a moral-ethical dimension to the commencement address. Asked to address the 2004 baccalaureate class at Princeton University, historian James M. McPherson points out that the baccalaureate speech, by definition, should mimic the moral instruction found in sermons: "The dictionary defines 'Baccalaureate' as an address in the form of a sermon to the graduating class at a college or university." He continues, "What I have to say may seem very much like a sermon, although a secular rather than denominational one." In her 1993 Wellesley College speech, famed feminist Gloria Steinem proclaims that "no commencement speaker can resist giving advice" (*Take This Advice* 152). And author-commentator Michael Ignatieff corroborates, naming "the staple fare of any commencement address: moral advice" (*Take This Advice* 178).

Peter J. Smith, one of few scholars to undertake the task of enumerating the genre's characteristics, provides in his book *Onward!* what is perhaps the best description of these conventions:

> Part memoir, part summation of the year that's already gone by, part tribute to the person the speaker was at age twenty-two, part entertainment . . . part bulletin from the front (the work front, the adult front), and part sermonette, the commencement speech differs from any other type of speech. The best of them bring out the best in everyone. They instruct. They warn. They reflect. They advise. They exhort. They persuade. They reassure. They impose an agenda. They update us, whether spiritually, socially, politically, or philosophically. And they inspire . . . . At the same time, commencement speeches are as personal as any formal speech delivered to three hundred or more people can be. Few other kinds of speech possess their peculiar authenticity. (16-17)

From Smith's description, the duty of commencement speakers appears dauntingly broad. We expect much from them, yet we monitor them carefully for long-windedness, a concern so widespread that many commencement orators comment on the possibility themselves while assuring the audience that they will be brief. We expect brevity, but we also expect to be taught about life and how to live. Then, we complain when we are preached at. We expect almost clairvoyant wisdom about the future, yet we promptly forget what we have heard.

On 8 May 2003, American soprano Renée Fleming admits to Julliard graduates her own trepidation of "summarizing your Julliard education, while inspiring you to glorious futures in ten minutes or less," but "then I took a poll, and not a single friend could remember who spoke at their graduation, which increased my confidence dramatically" (49). In 1980, Benjamin R. Civiletti, then attorney general of the United States, spoke to graduates at the University of Notre Dame about a private survey he claimed to have conducted on commencement addresses. He had found that "86.2 percent of them were too long. Of those, 19.8 percent were *far* too long. In addition, over 70 percent of the audiences remembered the subject of the address for as much as an hour following commencement. But less than 10 percent recalled the subject one week after the address was delivered. By the time one month had elapsed," he claimed, "that figure had dropped below 1 percent" (Civiletti qtd. in Miscamble xv). Though Civiletti's survey may be spurious, its "findings" ring true. The job of a commencement speaker is a tough one: inspire and entertain profoundly in as short a time as possible.

The South may differ in its approach to the commencement speech genre, especially in the second half of the 20th century, when one of the South's most significant assets became the southern writer. Reputed as natural-born storytellers, Southerners are sought after because they cast aside trite conventions and bring to the graduation address their own unique perspectives, which often make for a memorable and entertaining listen. Speaking at Misses Tewksbury's School for Girls in Maryland on 9 June 1909, for example, Mark Twain[1]

> mocks the usual practice of giving moral advice to graduates:
> I don't know what to tell you girls to do. Mr. Martin has told you everything you ought to do, and now I must give you some don'ts . . . . There are three things that you should never do on any occasion. First, girls, don't smoke -- that is, don't smoke to excess. I am seventy-three and one half years old, and have been smoking seventy-three of them. But I never smoke to excess -- that is, I smoke in moderation, only one cigar at a time. Second, don't drink -- that is, don't drink to excess. Third, don't marry -- I mean, to excess. Now, if you young ladies will refrain from all these things you will have all the virtues that anyone will honor and respect. (645)

Author John Grisham likewise flouts graduation speech tradition in a 1992 commencement talk given at Mississippi State University, in which he describes the three categories into which such orations normally fall. "First, you have Peace Corps speeches," he says, "in which the speaker attempts to motivate you, the graduates, to forsake jobs and money and credit cards and ignore your student loans, and go off to the Third World and teach starving people how to grow food . . . . Second," he continues, "you have the good citizen speech in which the speaker attempts to motivate you to become productive, vote properly, run for office, enjoy paying taxes and in general build a new society. The world is at your feet. The future is yours. You can move mountains, etc., etc." Finally, "you

have the current affairs speech in which a distinguished politician or statesman or diplomat talks about the current mess in world politics and what we should do to solve the problems." Though Grisham hastens to add that there is nothing inherently wrong with these types of speeches, he nonetheless informs his audience that "I will ignore tradition and try to say something you might remember for more than twenty-four hours."

Similarly, in her 1993 address at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, fiction writer Doris Betts humorously opens her speech with a nod to the "Chancellor, distinguished guests on the platform, proud parents and relatives, and you 2400 new taxpayers" before going on to liken America to those "two drunks riding the roller coaster at Myrtle Beach, one said to the other, 'We seem to be making good time but I've got the feeling we're on the wrong bus.'" In spite of – or perhaps because of – this engaging, performative aspect of their graduation talks, southern writers invited to give commencement addresses often win favor with their audiences while providing their listeners with special insight into the South as part of the larger Western tradition, and instead of repeating conventional pieties, they frequently challenge conventions and chastise their audiences.

This statement rings especially true for Wilbur Joseph (W.J.) Cash and William Faulkner, whose commencement addresses are the subjects of chapter two. Known for his nervous disposition and his poor public speaking skills, North Carolina journalist W. J. Cash would seem at first an unlikely commencement speaker for the prestigious University of Texas at Austin. However, after its release in February 1941, Cash's

uncommon *The Mind of the South* not only propelled its author to regional stardom, but also earned him national recognition:

> To Cash's surprise and pleasure, praise came in from all over the South . . . . The southern press reaction was mainly positive . . . . [and] the national reviews were even better. "Anything written about the South henceforth must start where he leaves off," *Time* concluded. The critic for the *New York Times Book Review* praised Cash's scholarship, saying that in all the recent books on the South no one had attempted the scope or succeeded as brilliantly, in prose or argument, in analyzing the southern mind "in such a philosophical and illuminating manner." (Clayton 166-167)

Along with all of this fame and achievement came numerous invitations for speaking engagements, everything from some book signings at bookstores throughout North Carolina to several swanky soirees hosted by the literati to participation in a CBS radio documentary on Yugoslav resistance to Hitler. And most of these engagements were accepted by Cash, who managed to get through them with the help of a supportive wife and hefty doses of alcohol. So when Homer P. Rainey,[2] then president of the University of Texas, offered Cash an honorarium of $200.00 plus expenses to deliver parting words to the class of 1941, Cash readily agreed.

The earliest speech analyzed in this study, Cash's Austin, Texas, speech inspired my interest in this topic. After stumbling across the audio recording of Cash's speech on the Internet, I noticed that his talk paralleled his book in interesting ways and that Cash's words differed significantly from every commencement speech I had ever heard or heard of. His comments, for instance, do not succumb to the customary optimism that normally accompanies such a talk, and for good reason. Delivered the same year that World War II began, this speech serves as a cultural indicator, assessing the damage created by

longstanding myths and prescribing the means by which to overcome their damaging effects. In a harsh critique of the South, Cash gave a brief talk that was accepted by his largely southern audience because Cash, a native southerner and a proven expert on the region, methodically builds camaraderie with his audience through strategic rhetorical devices as well as the identification of a common enemy, the Yankee. And like the vast majority of southern-born commencement speakers, Cash stops just short of prophesying the future, a rebellious deviation from the conventions of the graduation speech genre.

With piqued curiosity, I began to question whether the anomalies I noted in Cash's speech were unique to Cash and the uncertain times during which he spoke or were symptomatic of a deviation from the norms of the genre that appeared in the speeches of other Southern writers as well. A quick Internet search produced full-text commencement addresses by Fred Chappell, John Grisham, and Tom Wolfe, and also hinted tantalizingly at many other Southern-given graduation addresses. Lee Smith, Doris Betts, Will D. Campbell, Clyde Edgerton, Bobbie Ann Mason – all had delivered parting words at graduation ceremonies across the country, but the texts of their speeches were not publicly available. Undaunted, I contacted each author, explained my research interests, and humbly requested a copy of their commencement speeches. Happily, the old platitude about southern hospitality and generosity proved true: Each writer I contacted promptly sent me copies of their remarks, most with apologetic notes belittling the content of the speeches. Phone calls to library archives produced speeches by Wendell Berry, Ferrol Sams, and Maya Angelou, while emails to libraries housing the manuscript collections of Paul Green, Donald Davidson, and Allen Tate located speeches

by those writers. A precious few commencement addresses – William Faulkner's and Mark Twain's – have been collected in volumes and published.

Upon reading the speeches I had obtained, I discovered that, although a few succumbed to the conventional expectations of a graduation talk, a goodly number of them deviated from the norm, as Cash's did, and revivified a throwaway genre. A decade after Cash spoke to the 3500 Austin graduates, for example, another controversial expert on southern folkways addressed commencement attendees in Oxford, Mississippi, utilizing renegade techniques. According to biographer Joseph Blotner, when Jill Faulkner phoned her father in New York "to say that the principal of the high school had asked if he would talk to her high-school class," Faulkner understood it to be "some sort of informal talk." However, "on arriving home, he found that it was the featured address at the commencement ceremonies for her graduating class" (541).

Even though Mississippian William Faulkner delivered in December 1950 what is still reputed to be the best Nobel Prize speech in history,[3] like W.J. Cash, he much preferred the lonely act of writing fiction over oral public discourse. Indeed, Faulkner originally declined the invitation to speak at the Stockholm gathering, and even after he was persuaded to do so, he "delivered his acceptance speech to the [Swedish] academy in a voice so low and rapid that few could make out what he was saying" (Padgett). However, when his beloved daughter Jill graduated at the top of her class – first from University High School in 1951 and then from Pine Manor Junior College in 1953 – Faulkner readily accepted speaking invitations from both schools. Though perhaps not as eloquent as the Nobel Prize address, both of Faulkner's commencement speeches echo

the themes of his much-lauded Stockholm speech, chiefly the crucial importance of individualism as well as cultural fear in the Atomic age and the stifling impact it was having on the creative impulse.

Although his remarks – with the benefit of a hindsight perspective on World War II – are somewhat more hopeful than Cash's had been, Faulkner's hopefulness should not be mistaken for full-blown optimism because, as he makes clear, much depends on what impact the new graduates will have on the world. His message, therefore, is tinged with an uneasy anticipation. It is worth noting too that, since both of Faulkner's speeches were delivered at the height of the "Red Scare," as the U.S. fought against communism ideologically and militarily in far-flung Korea, excessive optimism of the type expected in graduation talks would perhaps have been as difficult to muster as it was for Cash at the start of World War II. Like Cash, Faulkner chooses to chastise, rather than praise, his audience even while he settles himself among them.

The graduation speeches of Wendell Berry and Will D. Campbell, analyzed in chapter three, exude remorse and culpability for the failures of their generation. Equipped with a wringer washing machine, two wood burners, and a team of plow horses, Wendell Berry lives and works on a 125-acre hillside farm in Henry County, Kentucky, that has been cultivated by five generations of his paternal ancestors. One of the South's last practicing agrarians, Wendell Berry espouses an anti-industrial, anti-agribusiness ethos in his poetry, essays, and novels, censuring greedy developers, whose "exploitation of timber and coal and people" has redefined the landscape over the past century to the detriment of all, and condemning misguided conservationists whose "assumption that

some parts of the world can be preserved while others are abused or destroyed" has allowed the decimation of thousands of forest acres and the widespread pollution of air and water (*Another Turn* 65, 71).

These concerns at the forefront of Berry's writing form the basis of his commencement speeches as well. And while Berry suggests methods for approaching and solving these environmental issues, methods which he himself utilizes, he accepts squarely on his shoulders the blame of his wasteful generation. In this way, he presents himself as not better than his audience, but rather like them, a part of the problem, so his criticisms are more readily accepted, with Berry even receiving a standing ovation – a rarity, indeed – after his College of the Atlantic speech in 1989.

A scan of Will D. Campbell's autobiographies *Brother to a Dragonfly* (1977) and *Forty Acres and a Goat* (1986) proves that this "bootleg preacher" and "freelance civil rights activist" has little to apologize for. In the 1950's and 1960's when southern schools balked at Washington-ordered integration, for instance, Campbell staged non-violent sit-ins, teach-ins, and protest marches to advocate racial equality. (*Forty Acres* 13). Thus, his entire life has been devoted to eradicating societal ills, such as hunger, violence, and racism, and to spreading the Good News according to a "steeple dropout." However, Campbell's 1999 University of Southern Mississippi commencement speech, like Berry's, moves toward an apology to the young graduates. In a cadence and idiom that owes much to his days as a Baptist preacher in Louisiana, Campbell delineates for his audience the major social problems that he addresses also in his written works, and he urges the graduates to look to God for the strength and wisdom necessary to overcome

them. In a virtual exhibit devoted to his work as preacher, writer, and speaker, the University of Southern Mississippi library explains that

> Will Campbell translates his gift for the written word into evocative speeches and sermons. Will's pacing, inflection and style are distinctly southern, but uniquely his own. Like his books, Campbell's speeches reflect his yearning for reconciliation and community. Powerful themes dealing with racial conflict, the evil of institutions and Christian responsibility are all told in the same down-home manner of a simple man with an Ivy League education looking to bring the first-century Christian church to the world of today. ("Will D. Campbell: A Man of the Word")

Such a summation succinctly characterizes also the themes and delivery of Campbell's 1999 graduation "sermon" at Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

If Will D. Campbell transforms the podium into a makeshift pulpit, then Lee Smith and Clyde Edgerton treat it as a grand stage on which to perform. Cognizant of the fact that ceremonial orators too often bore their listeners, both Smith and Edgerton enliven their speeches with performance techniques traditionally utilized by oral storytellers and comedians. Focusing on a 1993 speech given by Smith at Hollins College and a 1998 address delivered by Edgerton at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, chapter four illustrates the performance aspects of Southern-given commencement talks and shows that content is not sacrificed to entertainment, but rather made memorable through it.

Always a poised and entertaining speaker, Lee Smith seems to have begun working her audiences as a student at Hollins College when she performed, along with writer Annie Dillard, as a go-go dancer in the all-girl rock band they called the "Virginia Woolfs." No doubt this experience taught her much about stage presence – the importance of non-verbal communication, the appropriate use of space, the need for high

energy – and about audience expectations and attention spans. That she mastered these skills in her post-Virginia Woolfs career is proven in the dizzying schedule of appearances that Smith keeps up annually. In 1985, for instance, she spoke at seven major events from New York to Miami, including a month-long writing workshop at Bennington.[4] With so much of her time devoted to teaching others to write and speaking on the narrative impulse, it is logical that Smith chooses to share her thoughts on the nature of fiction with the Hollins graduates. Couched in anecdotes from her own past, Smith argues that stories bring delight as well as utility, escape as well as companionship, age-old wisdom as well as youthful unawareness.

Clyde Edgerton grew up with aspirations of performing, though the field did not seem to matter much. R. Sterling Hennis points out that those who knew Edgerton as a child would have placed odds "on his being either a professional baseball player or a rock musician, or, if his parent's wishes had been fulfilled, a missionary or a concert pianist." Early in life Edgerton seems to have learned what kind of impact a performer could have on his audience, notably that a true performance could communicate ideas that would resonate in an audience's memory long after the show ended. Indeed, his decision to become a writer, he claims, stemmed significantly from a televised reading by Eudora Welty. Though he had read and been impressed by Emerson, Thoreau, and Twain in high school and had been inspired to teach literature by Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, it was Welty's performance that provoked him to try his hand at writing literary works that lend themselves to stage productions and comedic readings.[5] In an interview with Dannye Powell, Edgerton says that Welty's "voice is so wonderful, and when the show

was over, I said, ‘Tomorrow morning, I will start writing fiction seriously.’ I wanted to do for other people what she had done for me” (88-89).

Though Clyde Edgerton’s graduation address may be less inspiring than Welty’s reading and more superficial than Lee Smith’s discourse on stories, he always puts on a good and memorable show, which may well be his primary goal anyway. Humor and entertainment are key elements both in Edgerton’s novels and in the ’98 commencement address that I take up in chapter four. During a talk that resembles more a stand-up comedy routine than a ceremonial oration, Edgerton makes fun of commencement traditions, but he also weaves some important advice, such as paying attention to the elderly, preserving family stories, and valuing music as a cathartic medicine.

However, Southern-born writers are, as orators, more than burlesquers who indulge in the easy joke. They are also prone to use the commencement stage as a forum for cultural debate. Chapter five contrasts commencement addresses by Maya Angelou and Fred Chappell. In a 1980’s press packet, the stately Maya Angelou, dressed in African apparel, looks you square in the eye, and the bold print above her proclaims, “Today’s most sought after speaker! MAYA ANGELOU.” Indeed, she is a prolific speaker, bringing her many talents to bear on numerous graduation audiences from Mount Holyoke in 1987 to Louisiana’s Lafayette College in 1999 to Lehigh University in 2005.

The message she delivers, though, is often incongruent with the pride and prejudice of the university system. Lauded in her press packet as “a sensitive, intelligent and eloquent woman who speaks lyrically with vigor, wit, fire and perception,” Angelou

is also referred to as “a lady of many talents. . . . With just a high school education, she has been a singer, educator, dancer, author, historian, lecturer, actress, producer, editor, song writer and playwright. And she speaks six languages fluently.” From her perspective, one need not obtain a university diploma in order to achieve success, fame, or wealth, and she says as much in her 1980 Smith College and 1981 Wheaton College commencement speeches.

Described as a “study in rumpledness,” Fred Chappell is Maya Angelou’s antonym in every sense of the word (Powell 33). In fact, as he opens his 1998 commencement speech at East Carolina University, Chappell acknowledges his disheveled appearance:

> I count it the grandest of honors to be invited to East Carolina University to address you today. Poets are not often entrusted with such august responsibilities. If honored at all in this manner, we are usually given a place on the platform, tucked away in the shadows of more splendid and better known and – one might say – more presentable personages. So I'd like to take this opportunity to make poets look good. Unfortunately, I'm the last person to do that. I've been written up more often than is good for me in magazines and newspapers over the years and there is hardly an article that has not mentioned my rumpled, not to say haphazard, appearance. It is good that an academic robe covers so large a multitude of sins, some of them verging on scarlet. (East Carolina Speech)

Although far from the stately Angelou in appearance, Chappell proves her equal in the debate on education. A proud alumnus of Duke University’s class of 1964, Chappell counters Angelou’s assertion that the university degree is an extravagance. In his 16 May 1998 commencement address at East Carolina University and in his 16 May 1999 graduation talk at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, he argues in both of these speeches that higher education is well worth the time and effort required to attain it

because it offers more than inconsequential facts and equations. For Chappell, universities offer students a critical thinking template, from which they learn quadratic equations, the impetus for the Battle of Lepanto,[6] and the like, but which also accompanies them into Angelou's real world where such a template might be useful in solving those societal ills which Angelou and others crusade against.

A platform for heated debates, a stage for memorable performances, a pulpit for moving sermons, a confessional for regretful sinners, an arena for myth-slaying – the commencement address is indeed a genre bound in tradition, but in the hands of Southern writers, it breaks free of many of the strictures of the genre. Whether relying upon their commonality with their audiences, their uniquely southern perspectives powered by the inescapable guilt of a defeated society, or their ironic sense of humor, this sample of southern writers who take the podium on graduation day have managed to deliver messages that resonate not only with their audiences, but also with their own body of serious writing. Despite widely disparate backgrounds and experiences, the authors considered in this study share much in common.

Unfortunately, almost no scholarly attention has been bestowed upon these commencement addresses or their place in the canon of Southern literature. Some, such as Faulkner's, have been collected with miscellaneous essays and letters; some – Will Campbell's, for instance – remain unpublished, stored away in the dusty files of their creators; and some, like Maya Angelou's, are hidden in the deep recesses of a college's archives department, uncatalogued and underappreciated. Almost none have been analyzed and given their appropriate due. The aim of this study is to put right this

oversight in Southern literary studies and to contextualize each speech to the speech-giver's other writings and in relation to the time and place in which it was delivered. Not merely a matter of determining whether the universities and colleges that invited these speakers got their money's worth, this is an attempt to determine how and why a select group of Southern writers performed as they did when they risked themselves in such a generally overlooked corner of rhetorical expression.

NOTES

[1] This commencement address was, in fact, the last speech that Mark Twain would deliver. He died less than a year later on 21 April 1910.

[2] "On April 28 the Charlotte *News* proudly headlined a news story 'Cash Invited to Talk to Texas U. Graduates' and quoted President Homer P. Rainey's invitation to Cash. 'I have been for a number of years studying and thinking about the problems of the South,' Dr. Rainey wrote, 'but in all of my reading I have not found any analysis that I think is so courageously penetrating and so fundamentally sound as the analysis which you have given'" (Morrison 121).

[3] Joseph Blotner notes that the impact of Faulkner's message in Stockholm caused one scholar to "say that each year at Nobel time it would be recalled as the best speech ever given at a Nobel dinner" (533).

[4] According to North Carolina State University's Lee Smith Manuscript Collection, Smith spoke at the Arts and Education Council Conference on Southern Literature in Chattanooga, TN on 22-23 February 1985; gave a lecture entitled "New Woman of the South" on 8 May 1985; gave a reading at the University of Richmond, specific date unlisted; conducted the Bennington Writing Workshops, 30 June-27 July 1985; gave a reading at Three Lives, New York, NY, 3 October 1985; spoke at the Miami Book Fair International, 3-10 November 1985; & spoke at the University of Richmond on 10 November 1985.

[5] To date, Clyde Edgerton has published nine novels, of which two have been made into films and three have been made into musicals.

[6] A naval battle that took place off the western coast of Greece on 7 October 1571, the Battle of Lepanto was a crushing defeat for the Ottoman Empire which suffered 30,000 dead and wounded and which lost all but approximately fifty ships

Chapter Two

"The Golden Warp and Woof of the Legend:" Commencement Address as Social Indicator[1]

World War I accomplished what Reconstruction had failed to do: It brought a stray South back into the national fold, uniting Johnny Reb and Billy Yank against a common foe while feeding the southern craving for righteousness and victory. The Great War also sparked an enlightenment of sorts in Southern literature. In the early 1920s, the Fugitive poets – John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren – embraced progressive changes in the cultural and intellectual life of the South. However, as the Roaring Twenties gave way to the Great Depression, those same poets, along with other southern intellectuals, became apprehensive about the rapid pace of change taking place around them. They feared that too many southern traditions were being forfeited in the name of progress, and in November 1930, they released a manifesto expressing their concerns that the South was losing the qualities that made it unique. As its title suggests, *I'll Take My Stand* announced a preference for Old Dixie over the New South, denounced industrialism in favor of agrarianism, and praised religious fundamentalism over blasphemous science. In other words, this book resurrected the ideals of the Old South and reified the legends that supported them.

Not everyone in the South, however, subscribed to this nostalgic yearning. In fact,

> It is frequently forgotten that there were two opposing points of view within southern thought itself, so completely did one group – the Agrarians – capture the imagination of both North and South. The battle was not joined over whether or not the South should become a province of the North; it had, in fact, been in that unhappy circumstance for sixty-five

> years. On the contrary, differences of opinion lay in the charting of a course by which the South could recapture its individuality. (Lawson 11)

As World War II and later the Korean War threatened, some southern writers vehemently rejected the Southern Agrarians, citing the dangers of provincialism, of myth-making, of phobia, and of mass mentality. Chief among these writers were journalist W.J. Cash and novelist William Faulkner, both of whom addressed these dangers in wartime commencement speeches.

There is no record to indicate Cash's thought processes as he considered what to say to graduates at the University of Texas at Austin in 1941; however, Book Two of his sociological masterpiece *The Mind of the South* (1941) offers a critique of southern colleges and universities that provides some insight into the speech he ultimately delivered. He writes:

> For philology and textual criticism as applied to the Holy Writ, for anthropology, ethnology, archaeology, geology, comparative religion, the very findings of chemistry and physics, the effort to establish a history which should be more than a form of folk-boasting, a science of politics, economics, and sociology which should be more than a mere rationalization of the *status quo* – not one of these entered fully and generally into the curricula of Southern colleges. (141)

To their own detriment, contemporary southern colleges and universities ignore modern discoveries and theories in order to maintain the comfortable status quo and to encourage "folk-boasting," which makes the Southerner out to be courageous and noble, honorable in all dealings, while the Yankee stands as the evil and exploitative offspring of Satan. "Darwin, Huxley, Ben Butler, Sherman, Satan – all these," says Cash, "figure in Southern feeling as very nearly a single person" (*Mind* 139). The evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin and Thomas Henry Huxley imperiled that most fundamental of Southern myths:

the Christian Creation Myth; however, they also represent modern thought and progress in this time, and according to Cash, to dismiss their findings is to do a tremendous disservice to the students who graduate from Southern institutions.

In both his book and his commencement speech, Cash's primary concern is to expose as many folk-boasting myths as possible, to reintroduce Southerners to the reality of their frontier past and mentality, and to accomplish these tasks before threats from abroad take advantage of a people living in unreality. Alarming events taking place in Europe during the late 1930s, for instance, had so troubled Cash that they impeded his ability to focus on the writing of *The Mind of the South*, and "as war loomed in August, 1939, Cash observed the foreign scene with a despair born of an awareness of how calamitous Hitler and war would be for the Western world" (Clayton 155). Instead of focusing on his own manuscript's deadlines, Cash focused on actively reading Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, on following the news reports of Japanese aggression, and on tracking totalitarian victories across Europe.

Small wonder then that, on 2 June 1941, when Cash stood before the graduating seniors in Austin, Texas, he cast aside his prepared remarks[2] and spoke of the importance of tradition in the face of totalitarian take-over:

> I emphasize tradition here because tradition is very important in the world in which we live at present, the world into which the Class of 1941 will be going forth. Totalitarianism is apparently sweeping over the world. It certainly swept over Europe and is at the present threatening the United States. Well, there are people who tell you that it's an irresistible wave – men and women in the United States – who say that the only rational thing to do is to give up quietly, that we are seeing the decay and death of an order of civilization. Well, for my part, I shall not believe that till I see it proved. (University of Texas Address)

But the South was never far from Cash's mind, and in the midst of his nationalist fervor and anxiety over European affairs, he entered into his second theme:

> Since tradition is everywhere under attack – since the whole tradition of the Western world is under attack, and our tradition in the South of course is ultimately just a part of that tradition of the Western world – I think it is very necessary that we should try not only to approach the problems of the times that are coming with good will, but also with as intelligent as possible an understanding of what our tradition is. . . . Well, what then is our Southern tradition? (University of Texas Address)

Cash answers this question by debunking some of the "legends" that the South had created for itself, legends which Cash believed the Southern universities – and the Fugitive poets as products of Vanderbilt University – sought to perpetuate. In essence, Cash realizes that the antebellum South had developed a southern mythology as a defense against first ideological and then actual attacks on the traditions it held so dear. A native South Carolinian, Cash presumed that this body of myth was, by the 1930s and 1940s, so deeply entrenched that Southerners either could not or would not look beyond it to the reality of their collective past. Viewing this inability (or unwillingness) to distinguish fact from fiction as a detriment to future progress and a threat to individualism, he sought to deconstruct for the graduating class that most fundamental of southern myths: the myth of a widespread and elegant aristocracy throughout the Old South.

With an amused tone,[3] Cash reminds the 1941 Austin class that "Of course there's the tradition of the Southern aristocrat. We've all heard of them all our lives and a great many of us even now and then claim to be descended from them. Well who were they? The answer is that we created to a certain extent our own aristocrats" (University of Texas Address). In *The Mind of the South*, Cash expounds at length on how the

aristocracy myth came to be, employing what he calls the "concrete case" of an Irish pioneer. As the story goes, this stout Irishman arrived to Carolina in 1800 with a bride and little else. He immediately set about acquiring a small plot of land on which he built a modest log cabin, and "one winter, with several of his neighbors, he loaded a boat with whisky and the coarse woolen cloth woven by the women, and drifted down to Charleston to trade. There, remembering the fondness of his woman for a bit of beauty, he bought a handful of cotton seed, which she planted about the cabin with the wild rose and the honeysuckle – as a flower" (*Mind* 14).

But soon the wife learned a practical use for the cotton, realizing that the fiber could be spun into yarn once the seed had been removed. Then, the happy pioneers got word of a new machine, the cotton gin, which would make cotton into a prosperous crop, if a person had enough land on which to grow it. This news inspired the Irishman to invest his entire life savings into forty acres of land, which he began to clear himself. The clearing would prove an arduous task: "Rising long before day, he toiled deep into the night, with his wife holding a pine torch for him to see by. Aided by his neighbors, he piled the trunks of the trees into great heaps and burned them, grubbed up the stumps, hacked away the tangle of underbrush and vine, stamped out the poison ivy and the snakes" (*Mind* 15). The South was not a haven for colorful and idle aristocrats but a place where hard work paid off because the soil was fertile, and in a few years, it would yield a plentiful harvest, encouraging the Irishman to steadily purchase more and more horses for plowing, slaves for cheap labor, and land for additional cotton.

By the time the Irishman turned forty-five, he was wealthy enough to quit work and build a "wide-spreading frame cottage" (*Mind* 15). In five years more, he had become a magistrate, purchased a carriage, and outgrown his cottage, so he built for his family a large white house with columns in front and a marble mantelpiece inside. Further,

> the Irishman had a piano in his house, on which his daughters, taught by a vagabond German, played as well as young ladies could be expected to. One of the Irishman's sons went to the College of South Carolina, came back to grow into the chief lawyer in the county, got to be a judge, and would have been Governor if he had not died at the head of his regiment at Chancellorsville. (16)

Finally, our "frontiersman" arrives in the Legislature in Columbia attired in "the long-tailed coat, stove-pipe hat, and string tie of the statesmen of his period" (16). By this time, his youngest daughter had grown into a beautiful young woman of marrying age, and after accompanying her father on a trip to Columbia, she meets a Charleston gentleman who would become her husband.

When the Irishman grew old and died, he left his daughter and son-in-law "two thousand acres, one hundred and fourteen slaves, and four cotton gins," and "the little newspaper which had recently set up in the county seat spoke of him as 'a gentleman of the old school' and 'a noble specimen of chivalry at its best'" (17). And as for his wife, she "outlived him by ten years – by her portrait a beautifully fragile old woman, and, as I have heard it said, with lovely hands, knotted and twisted just enough to give them character, and a finely transparent skin through which the blue veins showed most aristocratically" (17).

Thus were coon-hunters and frontiersmen metamorphosed into successful people who, in popular thought, confused hard-won wealth and native intelligence with the genteel nobles and aristocrats of the Old World. Though he lacks the time to flesh out such elaborate pauper-to-prince stories in the 1941 Austin graduation talk, Cash offers his audience the example of two of Virginia's most prominent lineages and their humble beginnings: Adam Thoroughgood,[4] "the greatest planter in Norfolk," who "came into the colony as an indentured servant" and William Randolf who "paid his passage across the sea as a ship's carpenter" (University of Texas Address).

"Well," explains Cash, "I instance these cases merely by way of insisting on the primary simplicity of our origins. . . . But that still leaves the question of how the notion of aristocracy got so widely established in the South" (University of Texas Address). Cash manages to blame the Yankees for the South's self-created aristocracy myth, likely winning favor with his predominantly southern audience. In a rather lengthy and circuitous manner, he explains how this myth came to be:

> One of the most important things to understand about the South, [is] that it has been . . . from the beginning of the fight over slavery, a society on the defensive. It was on the defensive because it had a guilt complex about slavery. The South was settled not only by Christian people – but mainly by Protestants and they brought over with them the great dislike of slavery which has always distinguished Calvinism. In the early days of the Abolition movement, the antislavery cause actually won more support in the South than it did anywhere else in the American colonies, the American nation. But the South had a self-interest in slavery and didn't want to give it up. Now you notice that I say the *South* had a self-interest in slavery and not merely the slave owners. The introduction of Negro slavery over the South generally had brought in the notion of racial superiority. And though slavery involved a great deal of hardship – economic hardship – and disadvantage for white people who did not own slaves, it was always pretty well balanced out by that feeling of racial superiority plus a more or less conscious protection from the danger of

> competition, economic competition, which the Negro, if he were freed, would bring on. . . . You see, for the South to paint itself as an aristocratic society was to say that it was a superior society, and it set up this doctrine that it was an aristocratic society undoubtedly as an answer to the Yankee's – the North's – moral superiority over slavery. (University of Texas Address)

Cash acknowledges also that "the rapid acquisition of land and slaves by a great many people who had been poor and plain up until after the invention of the cotton gin" partially explains "the question of how the notion of aristocracy got so widely established in the South," but this reason is significantly downplayed. Yankees were the main, if unconscious, driving force behind the establishment of a false aristocracy.

Attacking as he was such a deeply-rooted sociological perspective, it is a wonder that Cash did not rouse the anger of the fiercely defensive Southerners who traditionally do not take kindly to *any* form of criticism, well-founded or not. These were fighting words indeed, yet Cash's audience "listened thoughtfully while he lashed them with his truths: that the Old South with its vaunted aristocracy was a fairy tale" (Brooks). Certainly, the timing of the speech – just after the Great Depression and on the cusp of America's entrance into WWII – played a significant role in the ready acceptance of Cash's criticisms. But undoubtedly, the aspect of the address that won favor with the graduating class and university administrators was the uniquely southern logic with which Cash argues his points.

The cornerstone of Cash's southern logic is, of course, the vilification of the Yankee. Present within both Cash's graduation talk and his book, however, are subtle rhetorical devices that also ingratiate Cash to his audience. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown notes in his introduction to the 1991 edition of *The Mind of the South*, Cash's "upbringing

in the southern back country influenced the rhetoric he employed and the way he intended to be understood. . . . he did not wish to threaten his audience with prophecies of doom. Rather, he sought to engage their minds and bring them to a sense of self-recognition by every rhetorical device that he could muster" (viii-ix). In the 22 February 1941 edition of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, David L. Cohn wrote that Cash is, "in the Nietzschean phrase, a great despiser because he is a great adorer. And being such, he lashes out in language which reveals not only his admiration of the South but his own essential Southerness" (16-17). Or as Bruce Clayton more succinctly states, "It took a southerner to take the measure of another southerner" (168). In approaching the deconstruction of the aristocracy myth, for instance, Cash wisely begins his criticism by identifying himself as a Southerner through the use of unobtrusive collective pronouns as in the phrases "*our* Southern tradition," "*we* were a plain people," and "*we* face now a need for renewed sacrifices (italics mine)" (University of Texas Address).

Although ideologically Cash is nearer to the caustic Maryland editor H.L. Mencken than the sentimental Virginia writer Thomas Nelson Page, it was essential for him to attain commonality with his Texas audience, for an outsider's opinions would never be welcome. This technique, as Bertram Wyatt-Brown has pointed out, is not unique to Cash's public address, but is utilized also in *The Mind of the South*:

> Rather than describe a characteristic response to a situation from the outside, the narrator [Cash] enters the mind of the one reacting and recreates the expressive language appropriate to that subjectivity. Take, for instance, his description of the hard-pressed, post-Civil War landowner trying to send son "Will" [a derivative of Cash's first name] to college. With regard to his black tenants, such a planter had to be realistic, Cash caustically notes. He then enters the hard-eyed landlord's inner debate: "But even a nigger had to have a suit of overalls once in a while? Not at

> all: put him in guano-sacking and meal-bagging instead. And as for shoes – why, the damn rascal had a pair year before last" (p. 152). . . . The message cannot be escaped and the method guarantees an uncomfortable, even guilty response of complicity. Most Southern readers – Cash's intended audience – would at once recognize that the landlord's reaction was one that they had often entertained themselves. (xv-xvi)

This landlord vignette further suggests another technique that Cash uses frequently in both his written work and in his remarks to the 1941 Texas graduates. He refrains from the lofty lecture and delivers his critiques and instructions by "indulging in one of the Southerner's most traditional and cherished roles, that of the hospitable storyteller . . . . (which includes, of course, a bit of the orator)" (Dean 298).

Cashian scholars notice immediately his tendency to recognize his reader/listener in a style reminiscent of the dramatic monologue. Explaining that Cash found "engagement with the reader congenial because of his upbringing as a Southerner steeped in an oral culture," Bertram Wyatt-Brown likens Cash's style to that of many nineteenth-century novelists who incorporated liberal references to the "gentle reader" with the goal of teaching a moral lesson (x-xi). Michael P. Dean concurs, admiring Cash as "the stump-speaker, the pulpit pounder, the dream-weaver par excellence" (301). W.J. Cash himself admits to "the Southern fondness for rhetoric" and posits that "it early became a passion – and not only a passion but a primary standard of judgment, the *sine qua non* of leadership. The greatest man would be the man who could best wield it" (*Mind* 51). The Southern propensity for rhetoric also troubles Cash, however, because it serves as one of the "channels of discharge" for "romanticism and hedonism" which infected the South (*Mind* 51).

As he concludes his remarks in Austin, it becomes clear that Cash has turned the tables on the status quo, wielding the weapon of rhetoric *against* these vices instead of protecting them with it. "I made this critical speech," declares Cash, in order to

> point out what seem to me to be the vice of unreality, of romanticism, excessive romanticism and excessive sentimentality. I have no desire to attempt to stamp sentiment out of the world. We have had too much of that recently in Europe. But "sentimentality" is a false sentiment which exists for the purpose of hiding something, for dodging something, and it is a very dangerous vice in the South now. (University of Texas Address)

Though he speaks in reference to W.J. Cash's essay titled "The Mind of the South" published in *American Mercury*, Lewis A. Lawson characterizes Cash's book and speech as well when he asserts that Cash "argued that the South deserved individuality only if it threw off its reliance upon Southern Shintoism, superstition, hypocrisy, and Confederate cant" (11).

Noticeably absent from Cash's commencement address is the convention of predicting the future in order to guide graduates onto the proper life course. W.J. Cash's mind was very much in the present, and he often declined to speculate on the future, believing the exercise to be preposterous. For example, he ended *The Mind of the South* (1941) with a disclaimer of sorts: "Of the future I shall venture no definite prophecies. It would be a brave man who would venture them in any case. It would be a madman who would venture them in face of the forces sweeping over the world in the fateful year of 1940" (*Mind* 429). Likewise, as he ends his commencement speech, Cash does not speak of the future. Full with the idea that the South might be a great and inimitable region if only it were grounded in reality, Cash instructs his young audience to cast aside sentimentality and bogus traditions, to preserve traditions grounded in reality, and to

nurture pride and individualism "kept in check by the realization that man after all is a social creature and that none of us has the right to stand outside the social organism" (University of Texas Address).

Though his treatise is less straightforward, William Faulkner demonstrates a similar concern for the well-being of the social organism, but the mentality of Faulkner's 1951 and 1953 graduates is very different from that of Cash's 1941 audience. Faulkner's is a post-Hiroshima, Cold War audience conditioned by WWII propaganda and Cold War political rhetoric to fear and despise the godless Communist. Faulkner characterizes this Cold War mentality in his 1950 Nobel Prize Address. "Our tragedy today," he explains, "is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up?" ("Address Upon Receiving" 119).

This fear of annihilation pervaded all aspects of American life. Politically, this fear ignited an arms race, with Truman authorizing the production of a bomb even more powerful than the one that had obliterated Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and in late June 1950, Soviet-backed North Korea instigated another armed conflict upon sending troops across the 38th parallel. "That July, American troops began to swarm into the field, taking sides in a war that would never really end. Fear of proliferating war combined with anxiety about the atomic bomb," and fall-out shelters became common additions to, and sometimes the primary selling point of, single family suburban homes (Parini 322). The Red Scare also infiltrated Hollywood where, on inconclusive evidence, the House Un-American Activities Committee interrogated and blacklisted such iconic American

figures as Charlie Chaplin, Lillian Hellman, and Arthur Miller. Neither were grade schools immune: children were routinely drilled in safety procedures and shown informational films on the H-bomb in preparation for a communist attack.

Over time such fears begin to paralyze a society, especially the individualist impulse within and the cultural output of that society. Faulkner addresses the detrimental effect of this climate of fear on writers in a famous passage from his Nobel speech: "The young man and woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat" (119). According to Faulkner, until the young writer relearns "the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed," he will labor "under a curse. He writes not of love but of lust, of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, of victories without hope and, worst of all, without pity or compassion. His griefs grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars. He writes not of the heart but of the glands. . . he will write as though he stood among and watched the end of man" (Nobel Prize Speech 120). But like Cash, who said in Austin "I shall not believe that till I see it proved," Faulkner defiantly states, "I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure: that when the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking" ("Address Upon Receiving" 120).

The same themes treated in Faulkner's Nobel Prize address resurface several months later in a less articulate speech given at Jill Faulkner's high school graduation on 28 May 1951. Addressing an audience of southern teenagers, Faulkner blames fear again for what is wrong with the world, but in the six months since he addressed the world from Stockholm, he has determined that Americans should not fear annihilation so much as the powers behind the bombs. "What threatens us today is fear," he says,

> Not the atom bomb, nor even fear of it, because if the bomb fell on Oxford tonight, all it could do would be to kill us, which is nothing, since in doing that, it will have robbed itself of its only power over us: which is fear of it, the being afraid of it. Our danger is not that. Our danger is the forces in the world today which are trying to use man's fear to rob him of his individuality, his soul, trying to reduce him to an unthinking mass by fear and bribery – giving him free food which he has not earned, easy and valueless money which he has not worked for; – the economies or ideologies or political systems, communist or socialist or democratic, whatever they wish to call themselves, the tyrants and the politicians, American or European or Asiatic, whatever they call themselves, who would reduce man to one obedient mass for their own aggrandizement and power, or because they themselves are baffled and afraid, afraid of, or incapable of, believing in man's capacity for courage and endurance and sacrifice. That is what we must resist, if we are to change the world for man's peace and security. (Address, University High School 123)

This denunciation of not only the vilified communists and socialists, but also the democrats, not only European and Asiatic tyrants, but also American ones suggests that the real threat to University High School's class of 1951 is as much domestic as foreign. Speaking just as McCarthyism is reaching a fevered pitch, Faulkner warns his audience against conformity to the mass mentality, insisting that individualism will eradicate "in one generation all the Napoleons and Hitlers and Caesars and Mussolinis and all the other tyrants who want power and aggrandizement, and the simple politicians and time-servers

who themselves are merely baffled or ignorant or afraid" (Address, University High School 124).

Such sentiments mirror the allegorical novel Faulkner was working on at the time. Joel Williamson summarizes the development of this, Faulkner's self-proclaimed magnum opus:

> In the summer of 1943 he had begun to think of an anti-war story about a corporal in World War I who, amid the carnage, leads a nonviolent mutiny that spreads through the army. In time it becomes clear that the corporal was something like Christ come to earth again, and the story ends with his execution arranged by the Generalissimo, who was actually his father. It was another curious Faulkner mutation; the man who had tried so hard to get into two great wars suddenly becoming pacifist at the very height of the second war. (Williamson 267)

A Fable (1954) is essentially a demonstration of the power of the individual. More than a modern passion play, *A Fable*, like its author, is itself an emblem of individualism. Neither wholly fable nor wholly novel, it defies any attempt at neat classification, a fact that has remained troubling to Faulknerian scholars since the book first appeared.[5] However, as John E. Bassett points out in "*A Fable*: Faulkner's Revision of Filial Conflict," although "*A Fable* is a troublesome work . . . it is essential to understanding Faulkner's intellectual and artistic identity after 1940" (15).

Set mainly on France's western front in May 1918, the plot of *A Fable* revolves around the complications that ensue after a French regiment, under the command of General Gragnon, suddenly and mysteriously refuses orders to attack and the opposing German regiment does not take advantage of the mutiny. Peace spreads along the front like wildfire, and soon it becomes clear that the instigator of the impromptu ceasefire is a character simply referred to as "the Corporal" and his twelve disciples who had been

urging pacifism behind the lines. As Bassett has surmised, "What is threatened by the corporal's action, in which no officers or NCO's have been allowed to participate, is the generals' power to govern war once it has started. The stoppage of war is not a problem, but the possibility that people may learn their ability to stop war is dangerous" (21). The division commander articulates this very sentiment early in the book when he states, " – if the world thinks it wishes to stop fighting for twenty-five or thirty years, let it. But not this way. Not like a group of peasants in a half-mown field suddenly shouldering their scythes and lunch-pails and walking off. Chaulnesmont this afternoon. Because there are rules . . . Our rules. We shall enforce them, or we shall die" (Faulkner 45).

Thus, in straying from the obedient masses, the Corporal stands as a model of individualism, of what mankind can accomplish when he resists fear and thinks and acts for himself, while the Generalissimo, in his desperation to enforce conformity, symbolizes mankind's darker side, his lust for power and control over others. Though lampooned by some as an unsatisfactory character lacking in personal magnetism,[6] the Corporal proves nonetheless a powerful foe to the Generalissimo, resisting the Generalissimo's offer to escape and martyring himself at novel's end (King, Roma 135). Even in the Corporal's execution, however, there is evidence of man's duality. As Ralph Mills, Jr. points out in "Faulkner's Essential Vision," the Generalissimo intends to use the Corporal "as an instrument by which to control this mass humanity: his death will be another illusory trick to satisfy their emotional cravings, their demands for revenge. At the same time he will become an heroic image for those few who believe in man" (194).

There is also a sense in which Faulkner utilizes the Christ story in the same way in which Cash uses the aristocracy myth. Pointing out that Faulkner treats the Christian myth ironically not only in *A Fable*, but in many other novels as well, Edmond L. Volpe reminds us that in an early sketch Faulkner referred to Christ's story as "a fairy tale that has conquered the whole Western earth" (36). Indeed, near the end of *A Fable* the Corporal is given an alternative telling of the Passion: "It wasn't He with his Humility and pity and sacrifice that converted the world; it was pagan and bloody Rome which did it with his martyrdom" (Faulkner 307). Thus, the Corporal and the common man that he allegorizes are associated with "the human 'passion for unfact,' ranging from the profane to the divine, man's capacity for belief, hope, sacrifice, love, unselfishness – all the manifestations of what Faulkner in his public speeches during the final years of his life seemed to refer to as 'the human spirit'" (Volpe 285-286). Or as Faulkner writes in *A Fable,* "people still – so far at least – [are] keeping pace with, holding their own still within the fringe of a fading fairy-tale" (283).

In his highly influential *The Achievement of William Faulkner*, Michael Millgate posits that "*A Fable* had for Faulkner the significance of a cumulative statement and affirmation, and it seems to have been no accident that the completion and publication of the book closely coincided with a number of important speeches and other public statements which Faulkner made during the early and middle 1950's" (51). *A Fable* is so closely linked to themes presented in Faulkner's 1951 University High School commencement address, in fact, that one critic urges readers unable to extract an interpretation from "the involuted, labyrinthine sentences of *A Fable*" to seek out "the

identical sentiments in a speech Faulkner gave at his daughter's high school graduation" (Stavrou 433).

By the time Jill graduates from Pine Manor Junior College on 8 June 1953, Faulkner has lengthened his commencement speech, but he has added no novel insights. The same climate of fear that had pervaded Jill's high school graduation also infused her college ceremony, and, at least from Faulkner's point of view, individualism was still under siege. His 1953 commencement address is, therefore, largely a conglomeration of sentiments recycled from his Nobel Prize speech and his University High School remarks.[7] Once more, Faulkner characterizes the world as an incomplete creation and emphasizes the privilege of mankind to shape it as he chooses. "It is man's high destiny and proof of his immortality too," explains Faulkner,

> that his is the choice between ending the world, effacing it from the long annal of time and space, and completing it . . . . it is your turn now in your flash and flick of time and space which we call today, in this and in all the stations in time and space today and yesterday and tomorrow, where a handful of aged people like me, who should know but no longer can, are facing young people like you who can do, if they only knew where and how, to perform this duty, accept this privilege, bear this right. (Address, Pine Manor 135)

This passage echoes the opening of the 1951 talk in which Faulkner quotes "a wise Frenchman [who] said, 'If youth knew; if age could,'" and explains "that when you are young, you have the power to do anything, but you don't know what to do. Then, when you have got old and experience and observation have taught you answers, you are tired, frightened; you don't care, you want to be left alone as long as you yourself are safe" (Address, University High School 122).

But whereas the University High School address proceeds from here into "a fairly conventional speech, full of exhortations to speak out as individuals, to stand up to criticism," the Pine Manor address launches into a sermon of sorts that begins with a gloss of Genesis 1 and 2 (Parini 335). "In the beginning, God created the earth. He created it completely furnished for man. Then," proclaims Faulkner, "He created man completely equipped to cope with the earth, by means of free will and the capacity for decision and the ability to learn by making mistakes and learning from them because he had a memory with which to remember and so learn from his errors, and so in time make his own peaceful destiny of the earth" (Address, Pine Manor 135-136). With a Rooseveltian treatise against fear, Faulkner hastens to add that God did not eradicate fear because "Man does not have the right to be free of fear; we need only use our capacity to not be afraid of it and so relegate fear to its proper perspective" (Address, Pine Manor 136). Thus, Faulkner derives credibility for his speech from the supreme authoritative text that had provided the framework for *A Fable*, a book that famously took ten years to write and was only a year away from publication when Faulkner spoke at Pine Manor.

In opening with an allusion to Genesis, he also provides the setting for his parable of the dark spirit through which his graduation message will be revealed. According to Faulkner's parable, the angels – "the serene and blameless seraphim, that white and shining congeries" – looked on patiently as God created earth and man, "content merely to watch, uninvolved and not even caring, while man ran his worthless and unregretted course toward and at last into that twilight where he would be no more" (Address, Pine Manor 136-137). But there was one who looked upon the scene differently, "the splendid

dark incorrigible one, who possessed the arrogance and pride to demand with, and the temerity to object with, and the ambition to substitute with – not only to decline to accept a condition just because it was a fact, but to want to substitute another condition in its place" (Pine Manor Speech 137). This dark spirit held man in very low regard, believing that "baseness had been inculcated in man to be used for base personal aggrandizement by them of a higher and more ruthless baseness" (Pine Manor Speech 137).

But even this dark spirit served a purpose in God's plan, according to Faulkner. After all, God "did not merely cast it shrieking out of the universe as He could have done. Instead, He used it. He already presaw the long roster of the ambition's ruthless avatars – Genghis and Caesar and William and Hitler and Barca and Stalin and Bonaparte and Huey Long," and *A Fable*'s Generalissimo, and He had created a foil for them. "The men and women who have anguished over man's condition and who have held up to us not only the mirror of our follies and greeds and lusts and fears, but have reminded us constantly of the tremendous shape of our godhead too . . . . the philosophers and artists, the articulate and grieving who have reminded us always of our capacity for honor and courage and compassion and pity and sacrifice" (Address, Pine Manor 137-138). Faulkner is careful to explain, however, that these philosophers and artists

> can only remind us how, not lead us, since to be led, we must surrender our free will and our capacity and right to make decisions out of our own personal soul. If we are to be led into peace and security by some individual gauleiter or gang of them, like a drove of sheep through a gate in a fence, it will merely be from one enclosure to another, through another fence with another closable gate in it, and all history has shown us that this will be the gauleiter's enclosure and fence and his hand which closes and locks the gate, and *that* kind of peace and security will be exactly the sort of peace and security which a flock of sheep deserve. (138)

At a time when sovereign nations were being herded neatly into democratic or communist camps and men like Senator Joseph McCarthy were employed to force conformity onto troublesome strays, Faulkner naturally deemed his message against the "sheep" mentality appropriate for his 1953 audience of graduates and his 1954 reading audience.

Thomas L. McHaney has noted that "the chief obstacle, to judge by the failures in Faulkner's fiction, is the difficulty of carrying the ideals a good youth accepts without question through the crucible of adolescence" (74). Chief among the ideals McHaney refers to are individualism and courage, so through his characters, Faulkner shows that failure stems from mankind's ultimate surrender to mass mentality, fear, and cynicism, a surrender that typically occurs in early adulthood. By his own definition, Faulkner's role as artist-writer thus becomes "to remind us, out of our own recorded anguish, of our capacity for courage and endurance" (Address, Pine Manor 138). Likewise, as philosopher-speaker to Jill's graduating class, a group just entering that critical stage of early adulthood, Faulkner urges vigilance against succumbing to these vices. He reminds graduates that any peace and security obtained under the leadership of the gauleiter is mere illusion. To combat those who would play upon our fear and manipulate our free will for their own self-aggrandizement, mankind must call upon its courage to resist being led and its endurance to continue such resistance. Speaking to the 1953 Pine Manor audience, Faulkner asserts "it is we ourselves who must employ them. This time it is you, here, in this room and in all the others like it about the world at this time and occasion in your lives. It is us, we," he continues,

> not as groups or classes but as individuals, simple men and women individually free and capable of freedom and decision, who must decide, affirm simply and firmly and forever never to be led like sheep into peace and security, but ourselves, us, simple men and women simply and mutually confederated for a time, a purpose, an end, for the simple reason that reason and heart have both shown us that we want the same thing and must have it and intend to have it. To do it ourselves, as individuals, not because we have to merely in order to survive, but because we wish to, will to out of our heritage of free will and decision, the possession of which has given us the right to say how we shall live, and the long proof of our recorded immortality to remind us that we have the courage to elect that right and that course. (Address, Pine Manor 138-139)

If readers are to judge character success by these words, then the Corporal in *A Fable* is triumphant because he resists becoming one of "the sheeplike acclaiming mass" (*A Fable* 213). In going against military orders and refusing to relent in his battle for peace, the Corporal represents an exemplar of bravery and survival that has successfully carried those youthful ideals of individualism, courage, and endurance through to adulthood, and of these ideals, endurance seems particularly important to Faulkner during the early 1950's. Besides Faulkner's now famous Nobel Prize address on man's ability to endure, the concordance to *A Fable* notes that the word "endure" appears twenty times in the book while "enduring" appears fifteen times, an astounding statistic indeed when one remembers "that neither 'endure' nor 'enduring' appears at all in *The Sound and the Fury* while it became such a handy epithet for describing Dilsey and the human race" (Broughton 348).

In the fictional world of *A Fable*, man's endurance comes at a high price: the Corporal's life must be sacrificed, just as Christ's had been, to procure freedom, security, and peace. However, in the real world of 1953, Faulkner tells the Pine Manor graduates that "We do not need, the end does not even require, that we dedicate ourselves from this

moment on to be Joans of Arc with trumpets and banners and battle-dust toward an end which we will not even see since it will merely be a setting for the monument of martyrdom" (139). Thus, according to Faulkner, we need not martyr ourselves as the Corporal did; instead, we must simply

> break ourselves of thinking in the terms foisted on us by the split-offs of that old dark spirit's ambition and ruthlessness: the empty clanging terms of 'nation' and 'fatherland' or 'race' or 'color' or 'creed.' We need to look no further than home; we need only work for what we want and deserve here. Home – the house or even the rented room so long as it includes all the houses and rented rooms in which hope and aspire the same hopes and aspirations – the street, then all the streets where dwell that voluntary association of people, simple men and women mutually confederated by identical hopes and aspirations and problems and duties and needs, to that point where they can say, "These simple things – security and freedom and peace – are not only possible, not only can and must be, but they shall be." (Address, Pine Manor 141-142)

If we can effect this alteration in our thinking, then we will finally be free of "the ruthless and ambitious split-offs of the ancient dark spirit," who will say "'There is nothing for us any more anywhere. Man – simple unfrightened invincible men and women – has beaten us' Then man can put that final signature to his job and say, 'We finished it, and it works'" (Pine Manor Speech 142).

Perhaps Faulkner's parable of the dark spirit suggests that the region's descent into fear and "the pattern of Southern unreality" was inevitable, preordained (Cash *Mind* 121). W.J. Cash suggests a similar notion when he writes that "the Southern physical world" is

> itself a sort of cosmic conspiracy against reality in favor of romance. The country is one of extravagant colors, of proliferating foliage and bloom, of flooding yellow sunlight, and, above all perhaps, of haze. Pale blue fogs hang above the valleys in the morning, the atmosphere smokes faintly at midday, and through the long slow afternoon cloud-stacks tower from the

> horizon and the earth-heat quivers upward through the iridescent air, blurring every outline and rendering every object vague and problematical . . . . The dominant mood, the mood that lingers in the memory, is one of well-nigh drunken reverie. (*Mind* 46)

But eventually one must always face sober reality, and for Faulkner and Cash, the time for confronting and eradicating romantic fairytales was long overdue. In their efforts to dispel the myths and alleviate the fear that made the South vulnerable to foreign gauleiters and tyrants, W.J. Cash and William Faulkner inevitably tread upon some of the southerner's most cherished legends, but amazingly, did not provoke the anger and defensiveness of a traditionally violent people. Certainly, Faulkner avoids such a provocation by couching his critique of modern southern society in so many characteristic abstractions of fear, dark spirits, and artists, that his audience was more perplexed than angry. In other terms, his commencement address may well have been as incomprehensible to Pine Manor's 1953 graduates as *A Fable* would prove to be to literary reviewers one year later. But Faulkner also speaks the shibboleth of his people: He gives credence to the southern paradox and validates the region's connection with its past.

W.J. Cash's critique, on the other hand, was indubitably clear and even more harsh than Faulkner's, yet somehow his call for an end to folk-boasting and romantic myth, especially the myth of the aristocracy which forms the bedrock of southern mythology as a whole, may have seemed a natural and positive loss to Southerners in attendance at the 1941 Austin graduation who, after all, did tend to keep track of their forebears and history. They perhaps tolerated Cash's deconstruction because he clearly elevated those southern virtues of hard work and ingenuity, which are common enough in

the characters of the frontiersman but which are noticeably absent from the labor-disdaining aristocrats, and his re-telling of the story of the South also actually matched the famous American dream of success that was so recently threatened by the Great Depression and the impending European War. They would also have been likely to tolerate Cash because he spoke frankly, but not condescendingly, using concrete examples, and he never stooped to abstraction or to that caustic brand of criticism made famous by Yankee outsiders and such southern scalawags as H.L. Mencken.

NOTES

[1] Chapter title quotation is taken from William Faulkner's *A Fable* (215).

[2] Bruce Clayton tells us that Cash "got through the commencement ceremonies without any difficulty, though he decided to ignore his prepared remarks and generalized along the lines of his book, about the southern mind" (183).

[3] The audio recording of Cash's 1941 commencement speech is available online at http://www.wjcash.org. This 27-minute recording made just 29 days before his suicide in Mexico is the only known recording of Cash's voice. Originally captured on 78 r.p.m. phonograph records, the recording has been digitally transcribed to reduce surface noise, procuring a surprisingly good sound quality.

[4] Cash discusses Adam Thoroughgood also in *The Mind of the South* (7).

[5] The flaw that most critics cite in the book is that it "sadly suffers from excessive rhetoric and unnecessary verbiage" (Pladott 81).

[6] Roma A. King, Jr., for instance, calls the Corporal "perhaps the most unsatisfactory character in the novel. In almost laborious detail his life parallels that of Christ, and it is all too clear that he is intended as the instrument of man's salvation. Yet, he has neither the personal magnetism nor the spiritual and intellectual force to oppose the powers of darkness, so effectively symbolized in the old general and his military following. . . . Perhaps it is too much to ask that he measure up to our expectations; perhaps Faulkner should not have attempted what even Milton failed to do. He not only did, however, but he made the Christ-figure pivotal in *A Fable*, so that his inadequacy seriously reduces the effectiveness of the novel" (135).

[7] In *William Faulkner: American Writer*, Frederick R. Karl posits that Faulkner's "speech was cloned from his address at the Cotton Council in the Delta" (860).

Chapter Three

"Now you know the worst": Commencement Address as Apologia[1]

A region so often described as Christ-haunted and guilt-chastened has regularly produced writers and intellectuals who are concerned with more than sentimental portrayals of the South or chauvinistic myth-making. Avoiding the vices Cash and Faulkner warned against, many literary figures of the South have looked, over the years, with eyes clear of fear and nostalgia, regarding their region's past and future. Like Cash and Faulkner, they have sought to illuminate pressing issues that trouble the region, not only violence and racial prejudice but also pollution and the exploitation of the natural world. Leading the way are Kentuckian Wendell Berry and Mississippian Will D. Campbell. Both have struggled with issues of land, race, and poverty, the South's endemic and enduring qualities, and in commencement speeches both encourage the new generation to take up the fight.

By the time Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, invited him to speak at its June 1978 commencement, Wendell Berry had already published fourteen poetry collections, six non-fiction books, and three novels,[2] an impressive body of work that earned him a reputation for defending rural farm culture and for eloquently warning of the moral and spiritual consequences of alienation from this culture. When he took the podium, he acknowledged the trite tradition of commencement remarks but also recognized the benefits of such a custom, saying, "the same truths are told in one form or another to every generation. Inexperience doubts them as it must, as perhaps it should, and experience proves them true; the benefits being that the old truths thus remain fresh, and

each new generation thus learns something about humility." The "old truth" that Berry conveys in this brief speech at Centre College's 1978 graduation is "the inescapability of connections and of dependences," emphasizing that we are all part of a divine order "that we did not make, that we cannot finally comprehend, that includes and sustains our lives, and that we cannot too radically change without destroying ourselves" (Centre College 1).

This notion of an interconnected and ordered community has long appeared in Berry's poetry. As Morris Grubbs and David Abner explain in their article "Helping Us to See: Wendell Berry and the Community of Creation," Berry's canon "is concerned with the local and far-reaching effects of humanity's increasing attempts to divorce itself from the natural world" (44). "The Farmer among the Tombs" (1970), for instance, suggests that, according to the natural cycle, death should beget life: "I am oppressed by all the room taken up by the dead,/ their headstones standing shoulder to shoulder,/ the bones imprisoned under them./ Plow up the graveyards! Haul off the monuments!/ Pry open the vaults and the coffins/ so the dead may nourish their graves/ and go free, their acres traversed all summer/ by crop rows and cattle and foraging bees" (*Collected Poems* 105). The same sentiment is echoed in "Enriching the Earth" (1970), in which Berry describes plowing "in the seeds/ of winter grains and of various legumes,/ their growth to be plowed in to enrich the earth," and the farmer stirred "into the ground the offal/ and the decay of the growth of past seasons/ and so mended the earth and made its yield increase" (*Collected Poems* 110). The poem ends with the assertion that "after death, willing or not, the body serves,/ entering the earth. And so what was heaviest/ and most

mute is at last raised up into song" (*Collected Poems* 110). In these poems, as in his commencement talk, Berry's message is that any interference with nature's birth-growth-death-decay-rebirth cycle will negatively impact the environment, and by extension, the human life that exists within it.

Speaking near the end of a decade of unprecedented waste and profit-minded exploitation,[3] Wendell Berry specifically stresses the human aspect of interconnectedness in this commencement address. He contends:

> So great is the magnitude of the order of Creation that no one ever understands the ultimate cause or foresees the ultimate consequence of any act. The human meaning of this is that we are not, have never been, can never be, alone. There is clearly some comfort in that. But I hope I am making equally clear the difficulty and even the fearfulness that also are in it. No one can act simply in his or her own behalf. (Centre Speech 2)

As Thomas Strawman has pointed out, Berry's written works also demonstrate "how modern technology's ability to place the individual outside the natural cycles and responsibilities of life may actually work to vitiate the highest goal of the humanistic tradition, namely individual freedom and the fulfillment of each person's highest potential" (56). In an essay entitled "The Tyranny of Charity," published in *The Long-Legged House* (1969), Berry had approached this same issue through an intimate look at a poverty-stricken furniture maker living in "the coal country of East Kentucky in the summer of 1965" (4). Though incredibly gifted in his craft and a successful farmer to boot, the furniture maker lives on "the most meager home site imaginable, starkly and heavily ugly, sterile and coal-stained and raw" (4). Coming upon the dismal scene, Berry reacts in such a way as to suggest that humanity, like the flora and fauna of the natural world, is inextricably connected, one to another: "Getting out of the car there at the edge

of the road, standing up to face that black yard and the bitter shambles of a house, you are inclined to forget the good you know of the place, and to be overcome by a foreboding of hopelessness that by being theirs is also mysteriously yours" (5).

In this essay, too, Berry suggests that the furniture maker's plight is the result of the modern American way of life, that his wares are rejected because they do not bear traditional marks of machine mass-produced distinction, such as "Broyhill," "La-Z-Boy," or "Chippendale." In spite of their non-designer status, the furniture maker's

> chairs are certainly the strongest and best-made of their kind I know of. They are beautifully proportioned and balanced. Such ornamentation as is used is modest, and tasteful in a way that transcends fashionableness. They are made to last a lifetime and more, and their strength is achieved without expense of grace. It is hard to think of a room, rich or poor, that would not be dignified by the presence of one of them. (7)

And yet the Kentucky craftsman cannot sell enough chairs to afford to send his daughter to school with ice cream money. Thus, "The Tyranny of Charity" attacks the gluttonous appetite for machine-produced goods – for MORE of everything – driving the consumers of this time period.

In his remarks to Centre College graduates, Berry speaks to the evils of gluttony. Near the end of his speech, Berry states,

> Gluttony is not sinful merely because it consumes too much and leaves too little for others; it is also sinful because it belittles what it consumes, and belittles the source: '. . . swinish gluttony/ Ne'er looks to Heaven amidst his gorgeous feast . . .' That is John Milton, writing in 1634 a perfectly apt criticism of the 'consumer society' of the 1970's. Gluttony gives only the soon-jaded pleasure of the little we can consume; temperance gives the joy of inconsumable abundance. (Centre Address 3)

The belittling nature of gluttony included in Berry's commencement remarks is addressed also in the beginning of *Remembering* (1988). In this short novel, Andy Catlett has a nightmare in which

> a great causeway had been built across the creek valley where he lives, the heavy roadbed and its supports a materialized obliviousness to his house and barn that stood belittled nearby, as if great Distance itself had come to occupy that place. Bulldozers pushed and trampled the loosened, disformed, denuded earth, working it like dough toward some new shape entirely human-conceived. The place was already unrecognizable except for the small house and barn destined to be enrubbled with all the rest that had been there. Watching, Andy knew that all the last remnants of old forest, the chief beauty and dignity of that place, were now fallen and gone. (122)

And worse still, Andy comes face to face with "swinish gluttony" personified: "a fat man sat behind a desk, eating the living flesh of his own forearm, all the while making a speech in a tone of pleading reasonableness. 'I have to do this, I am *starving.* Three meals a day are *not* enough'" (122-123). Berry's message, whether delivered in a fictional tale or a matter-of-fact oratory, warns of turning good farm land and green spaces into wastelands stripped of beauty and fertility by wastefulness or overindulgence of profit-seekers like the fat man of Andy's subconscious. Reducing the problem to a simple but valid equation, the poem "We Live by Mercy if we Live" sums up the situation as Berry sees it: "Cost + greed – fear = price" (*Timbered Choir* 191).

With a statement that links him to his audience, Wendell Berry concludes his brief remarks to the Centre College graduates: "And so, as it has been for many another graduating class, the old is news for this one of 1978, of which I am honored to count myself a member" (Centre College Address).

Eleven years later when he speaks at the College of the Atlantic[4] (COA) in Bar Harbor, Maine, Wendell Berry seeks again to link himself and members of his generation with the young graduates. He explains the purpose of his remarks:

> It is conventional at graduation exercises to congratulate the graduates. Though I am honored beyond expression by your invitation to speak to you today, and though my good wishes for your future could not be more fervent, I think I will refrain from congratulations. This, after all, is your commencement, and a beginning is the wrong time for congratulations. Also I know enough by now of the performance of my own generation that I look at your generation with some skepticism and some anxiety. I hope that in fifty years, having looked back at the lives that you are now commencing, your children and grandchildren will congratulate you. What I want to attempt today is to say something useful about the problems and opportunities that lie ahead of your generation and mine. (COA Address)

And again he stresses the interdependent nature of the world, saying "no place on earth can be completely healthy until all places are" (COA Address).

With a few omissions for brevity's sake and some noteworthy additions, Berry's words in 1989 are virtually a verbatim rendering of an essay entitled "Word and Flesh" that would be published in *What Are People for?* (1990). In this essay as well as his 1989 graduation remarks, Berry argues that esoteric rhetoric and abstractions fail at provoking any substantial and valuable change. He tells the College of the Atlantic graduates, for instance, to beware the word "planetary," the latest buzzword of the environmental movement: "Nobody can do anything to heal a planet. The suggestion that anybody could do so is preposterous. The heroes of abstraction keep galloping in on their white horses to save the planet – and they keep falling off in front of the grandstand" (COA Address). The same warning, in fact the same image of the ineffectual white knight, appears in "Word and Flesh."

In addition, this essay laments the fact that years of rhetoric have inspired few positives: "Though we have been talking about most of our problems for decades, we are still mainly *talking*. The civil rights movement has not given us better communities. The women's movement has not given us better marriages or better households. The environment movement has not changed our parasitic relationship to nature" (199). For the 1989 graduation speech, Berry includes a sentence missing from the published essay. It further accentuates the failure of mere rhetoric: "Though we have been talking about most of our problems for decades, we are still mainly talking about them. *We have failed to produce the necessary examples of better ways* [my italics].The civil rights movement has not given us better communities. The women's movement has not given us better marriages or better households. The environment movement has not changed our parasitic relationship to nature" (COA Address).

Most importantly, in both the speech and the essay, Berry makes it clear that Nature will exact her own revenge if we fail to heed her signs. Interpreting for Gaia, the name applied to a once unified mother earth, Berry states: "Now she is plainly saying to us: 'If you put the fates of whole communities or cities or regions or ecosystems at risk in single ships or factories or power plants, then I will furnish the drunk[5] or the fool or the imbecile who will make the necessary small mistake.'" Berry's published essay concludes on this ominous note, but the College of the Atlantic graduation talk continues with some advice that is deceptively simple and devoid of the esoteric rhetoric that Berry deems ineffective. Hoping to provoke change through responsible action and awareness, Berry winds up his remarks:

> And so, graduates, my advice to you is simply my hope for us all: Beware the justice of Nature; Understand that there can be no successful human economy apart from Nature, or in defiance of Nature; Understand that no amount of education can overcome the innate limits of human intelligence and responsibility. We humans are not smart enough or conscious enough or alert enough to work responsibly on a gigantic scale; Make a home; Help to make a community; Be loyal to what you have made; Put the interest of the community first; Love your neighbors – not the neighbors you pick out, but the ones you have; Love this miraculous world that we did not make, that is a gift to us; So far as you are able, make your lives independent of the industrial economy, which thrives by damage; Find work, if you can, that does no damage; Enjoy your work; Work well. (COA Address)

Though he arms his audience for an uncertain future with this advice, Wendell Berry's messages at Centre College in 1978 and at the College of the Atlantic in 1989 recall the cheerless opening lines of his 1995 poem "Now You Know the Worst:" "Now you know the worst/ we humans have to know/ about ourselves, and I am sorry,/ for I know that you will be afraid" (*Timbered Choir* 192).

A decade later on behalf of his generation, Will D. Campbell likewise offers an apology to his young audience before lifting their hopes. Self-assessed as a good ole boy with some crazy ideas, Will D. Campbell, born in Liberty, Mississippi, in 1924, would become a controversial preacher who renounced institutionalized religion and built

> a reputation as a mediator, strategist and adviser among such disparate groups as SNCC, SCLC, NAACP, the church, the press and the power structure of a score of Southern communities. He was a confidant of Negroes on the firing line, a trusted source for the working press, a man who could sit on a cabin porch and pray with troubled parents as easily as he could sit in the Establishment's paneled board room and tell the powers how to end the trouble. He was his own man, belonging to no one, having no vested interests to protect. And he was effective. (Edgerton 21)

At his base, Campbell is the southern contradiction personified, and he understands that "the good in Southern culture [is] not easily defined" (Connelly 123). Though his

opinions have never been set down in a regular manifesto of the South, Campbell espouses a philosophy that bears a strong resemblance not only to that of Wendell Berry, but to that of W.J. Cash as well. Much like Cash, Campbell is a Southerner who stands ideologically just outside the South, observing and criticizing what is imperfect in southern society. Further, he resembles Cash in his extrapolation of southern social problems as an expression of the whole Western tradition. By his affability and religious concern, he nevertheless seems to earn the respect of Southerners even as he points out their misgivings.

But unlike W.J. Cash expressing his concerns for a generation destined for World War II, when Will Campbell agreed to deliver his commencement address in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, he was speaking to graduates enjoying a decade of peace. By 17 December 1999, when Campbell accepted his honorary degree before the University of Southern Mississippi's graduating class, the Berlin Wall had already been gone for ten years.[6] The world had also witnessed one courageous demonstrator stop a column of tanks in Tiananmen Square.[7] And the prevailing political attitude had been one of *glasnost* since the Reagan administration. Indeed, much seemed right with the world; however, Campbell's commencement speech focused not upon the successes of his generation, but upon its failures:

> Much as I hate to I must acknowledge that my generation has not solved all of the world's problems. My generation came upon the scene in a time of great optimism. America had just won a global war to end all wars [WWI]. Or so we were told. But we still have wars. We are leaving you the horrendous problem of war. (USM Address)

Having served in the South Pacific during WWII, Will Campbell was acquainted firsthand with the horrors of armed conflict, and he was keenly aware of how many armed conflicts existed even in a world seemingly at peace.

War and the solider figures, in fact, preoccupy much of Campbell's written work. The writer-preacher's first autobiography, entitled *Brother to a Dragonfly* (1977), recounts Campbell's wartime experiences as well as those of his older brother Joe. In *Covenant* (1989), an innovative collection of photographs and fictional soliloquies, a veteran named Launey Bass tells a census taker: "My plumbing ain't none of your bidness. And it ain't none of Uncle Sam's bidness. I spent almost three years fighting for the right to mind my own bidness. From Bougainville to Saipan. Nobody asked me nothing about no indoor bidness then. And they ain't gonna ask me now" (115).

One of Campbell's most extensive treatments of the war theme appears in *The Glad River* (1982). A fictional account of three southern men who form an indelible bond after being drafted into WWII, *The Glad River* takes on the moral implications of government-sanctioned killing. When Doops Momber didn't join the throng of enlistees upon America's entrance into WWII, he was ostracized by his community:

> I was twenty-one years old, and they started looking at me kind of funny like when I didn't race down and sign up. Hell, I thought they taught me in Sunday school that believers didn't kill. One of our neighbors wrote the draft board that I wasn't a believer, that I hadn't even been baptized. You know, if you get to be ten and haven't been baptized, you're some kind of a deviant. Weird. Yeah, man. I went down to the draft board and tried to tell them why I hadn't ever been baptized, but they just laughed at me. Then they got mad when I said I didn't believe in killing people. Told me about how Jesus drove the money changers out of the temple with armed might. (55)

Meeting during maneuvers in the Kisatchie National Forest, Doops Momber and Kingston Smylie further reveal their pacifist leanings:

> A small army plane, part of the Louisiana maneuvers, moved out of the treetops above them, dropped a small sack filled with powdered chalk, banked sharply, and flew off. The sack landed in a bayou fifty yards away, breaking open when it hit and spreading a film of white dust over the dark water. . . . 'That's a bomb,' Doops said. 'If the war umpires find you with any of that flour on you they declare you dead. Or hurt, depending on how much gets on you, I guess. . . . I suppose if we have to have a war, that's the best kind to have' . . . . 'Yeah, I guess so,' the man [Kingston] said. (4-5)

Later in the novel Doops and Kingston encounter Fordache "Model T" Arcenau, a Cajun Catholic who resolutely vows not to kill: "'Ah got to say you somet'ing, me. . . . I will not kill anybody. I will not run, I will not turn back.' He was speaking slowly, weighing and forming each word perfectly but with little inflection. 'But . . . I will not kill'" (64).

And in *". . . and the criminals with him . . ." Lk. 23:33* (1973), Campbell and fellow editor James Y. Holloway include among a series of essays critiquing America's penal systems the voice of a man named David Miller whose essay is titled "The Draft Resister in Prison." Discussing the unique situation of so-called draft dodgers behind bars, the essay is written by "a young, white, middle-class college graduate who spent twenty-two months in federal prison for burning my draft card" (87). In an essay closing this volume, Campbell and Holloway remind readers that "Jesus read a passage of Gospel from Isaiah, and announced that God was coming through on His promises, reconciling all men to each other, and to Himself. The hatred, warfare, and death between and among us is over: God is with us the way He is with us in Jesus" (141-142). Published just as President Nixon brought the Vietnam War to an end in 1973,[8] Campbell's essay had

prophesied an end to hatred, warfare, and death, a prophecy made all the more poignant when contrasted to his 1999 remarks at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Campbell's feelings about war reflect a quotation he used in his 1999 commencement address at the University of Southern Mississippi: They are the words of Philo of Alexandria: "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle. . . .Are all our enemies fighting a great battle? Of course. All of them" (USM Address).

Besides failing to eradicate wars, Campbell admits also that his generation did not, in spite of an abundance of available food, solve the problem of poverty and world hunger:

> My generation, born in a time of optimism, came of age in a time of pessimism, a time of poverty, the year of the Great Depression. Did we solve the problem of poverty? Nay. We read of starvation daily. In Africa. In Europe. And in our own country far more than statistics certify. Is there not enough food in the world? Of course there is. A drought in Africa[9] but a bounteous harvest in Kansas. The scorching winds of summer blow across the Midwestern plains, leaving fodder in its wake while the alluvial deltas of the southland blossom from the same warm breath. The wherewithal for bread for the world exists but we use it for missiles and submarines and the building of ever more prisons. We leave you the problem of hunger in the world. (USM Address)

This theme too recurs in Campbell's writing. In the first-person accounts of his book *Covenant*, Campbell's fictional characters elaborate on the theme of Depression-era poverty, ineffectual government programs, and the incredible resilience of people during that time. Allen Wingfield, whose very name ironically calls to mind prosperity and old money, laments these hard times: "Lots of folks around here lost their land to the banks or the timber companies. We've been able to hold on. At least so far. You lose your land, and you're in the road. This old house ain't much, but it's free and clear. Nothing owed

on it. Even though all those programs Mr. Roosevelt come up with almost lost it for us" (75). Likewise, Edna Louise Lowry recalls her father's resilient response to the news of the stock market crash: "I reckon we don't have no stock on Wall Street, but we do have some stock here behind this fence. . . We'll go on doing the best we can" (141).

Brother to a Dragonfly (1977), Campbell's memoir, represents an intimate portrayal of poverty from the perspective of an adult Campbell looking back at his childhood. In this widely praised account of his amazing life, Campbell writes of the "'teet' bucket," a lard bucket in which Campbell and his brother Joe carried their school lunch. According to Campbell,

> it was socially more acceptable to take one's lunch in a brown paper sack but sacks were not always available to us. So Joe and I generally shared the same bucket. . . . Our lunch was usually biscuits with fried ham, a baked sweet potato, or sometimes a piece of corn bread with some kind of vegetable. . . . Such a school lunch was not a thing of pride. Those who had light bread and bologna sandwiches tried to eat where everyone could see them. The ham and biscuit crowd ate as far from everyone else as they could. . . (Today ham/biscuits have been franchised throughout the South, and sell for a respectable price. But now was not then. Then ham and biscuit was the lunch of the poor.). (49-50)

Thus, Campbell and his brother bore the very symbol of poverty to school each day, a revelation which renders Campbell's admission that poverty still plagues the world even more touching.

It is in another novel, *The Glad River*, however, that Campbell crafts his most poignant depiction of hunger. Fleeing alone into a South Pacific jungle after his lieutenant steps on a land mine, Doops Momber encounters an unarmed Japanese man too weak from dysentery and malaria to stand. Clearly dehydrated and malnourished, the Japanese man, who Doops comes to call "Reuben," exists literally at Doops' – the

enemy's – mercy. Though Doops has only K-rations, tea, and "a small cache of food" he found in a destroyed hut, he shares his food with Reuben and takes great pains to ensure that Reuben's system can digest it (95). After dropping a hard tack biscuit into a cup of water to dissolve, Doops

> stirred it round and round with his finger, added a little more water, and stirred again. Then taking a small bite from the chocolate, so hard that it took all the strength of his jaws to crack it, he held it in his mouth and let it gradually dissolve in the warm saliva. He swished it between his cheeks and teeth so that there would be no solid pieces left, then held it a while longer in his mouth until it was as thin as the mixture in the cup. Turning quickly away from the man, he spewed it into the leafcup. 'Damned, if I ain't a mother pigeon,' he mumbled to himself. (82)

In sharing with his starving enemy rather than making war against him, Doops Momber personifies the cure for both war and world hunger that Campbell offers in his 1999 talk at Southern Mississippi.

Campbell also points out to his graduation audience that prisons – in spite of the ninety-four million dollars spent annually to maintain them – do not eliminate crime: "Three decades ago there were less than 200,000 people in prison. Soon there will be two million. Doesn't that tell us that prisons are not the answer to crime?" (USM Address). Published twenty-six years prior to his USM talk, the collection of essays titled *" . . . and the criminals with him . . ." Lk. 23:33* also attempts to prove that prisons are inadequate to the task of eradicating crime. According to Campbell and Holloway, the essays in this collection are realistic, unedited, unabridged firsthand accounts from America's prison system: "We asked these men and women to write to us about their life in prison. They did, and we've let it stand" (146-147). Whether juvenile or adult, male or female, the

writers consistently corroborate Campbell's position that prisons do not free a society of crime.

One contributor, for instance, named Patricia Halloran admits: "I don't know what the answers are, but I do know that we better start looking to ourselves and in the communities rather than giving up people to 'institutions' run by people who don't care or even understand the problem" (122). In the end of her essay, she calls for readers to find ways to reform the "bureaucratic monsters called institutions" (122). Contributor James Douglass takes a Marxist approach in his essay, but also agrees that prisons are inadequate for deterring crime:

> Our prisons are techniques for America's violent control of her rebellious poor, and in recent days, increasing numbers of young political resisters. To claim any further purpose for these institutions is, I believe, to dignify them beyond reality. From the experience I have had both within them as a prisoner and visiting others in them, I believe that their clear purpose is raw power in the service of a ruling class. (130)

A. Puchalski, another contributor, argues that prisons are currently ineffective because they do not rehabilitate inmates, but rather dehumanize them through demanding a "serf-like dependency" on their "keepers" and through their controlled isolation from the outside (16). He writes that

> an entirely new concept must be implemented, one with less emphasis on brain-washing a man into submission. Rehabilitation that must depend on the lash is soon discarded the moment the man takes his first step through the prison doors and into the free world. . . . There is absolutely no sense in isolating men, ninety percent of whom will be returning to the communities they left. Nor is it wise in denying them some social contact that will keep them abreast of current events during their period of incarceration. At present we are nothing but social misfits who find it impossible to fit ourselves into what have now become strange surroundings. (22)

Ominously, Puchalski goes on to assert that unless these and other changes are implemented, "American prisons will continue to serve as nothing more than a convict factory – turning out *educated* criminals" (23). Campbell agrees, telling the 1999 USM graduating class that more than one million non-violent offenders were locked up in 1998 and that "most will be released, and many will have become cynical, bitter, violent by then, making the communities more dangerous. Not less" (USM Address 3).

Campbell's preoccupations with another unsavory aspect of prison emerges in his novel *The Glad River*, where the avowed pacifist "Model T" Arceneau is tried and convicted of the rape, mutilation, and murder of his girlfriend. Though everyone knows that Model T is incapable of such brutality, and though he was seen buying cigarettes in a store too near the time of the murder to have been in both places, Model T is housed in prison until his execution in the electric chair. With this character's story, Campbell suggests that prisons are ineffective because they too often house and punish innocent individuals. These individuals will either meet their martyred end like Model T, or more commonly, they will be turned loose upon society with a vehement disrespect for law and justice and a newly jaded outlook. Either way, "instead of considering that every person who gets in trouble with the law is fighting a great battle within, we resort to violence of our own. Prisons, all prisons, are violent institutions" (USM Address 2).

The final social ill Campbell addresses in his graduation remarks is the lingering issue of race. Although he acknowledges the great strides made during his lifetime, Campbell laments the fact that his generation failed to bring about racial equality. Describing the problem of race as an "aneurysm on the heart and soul of the nation that

has plagued us from the beginning," he warns portentously that "an aneurysm if left untreated will one day burst and is generally fatal."

Race also emerges as an important theme in virtually every work Campbell writes. In *The Glad River*, he writes a World War II scene in which American troops are loaded up and taken to observe a train filled with Japanese-Americans en route to a relocation center in Arkansas. Amidst racial derisions like "sneaky slopeheaded bastards," the company commander orders: "Don't point and don't talk. Just look. Pay special attention to the shape of their eyes, their size, their color, and the way they talk and move around" (18, 20-21).

Campbell's character Kingston Smylie faces countless difficulties because of his Redbone heritage, which is "a mixture of Spanish, Indian, and . . . *Negroid*" (248). And in an essay entitled "The World of the Redneck," Campbell defends the oft-discriminated against poor white farmer as well. Recounting an anecdote about a conference he participated in, Campbell explains: "The morning was given over to the subject, 'The Black Church Today.' The speaker was a black man, a former professor of philosophy, holder of earned and honorary degrees, author of several books, a man highly respected in the academic world. His presentation was brilliant and entertaining. It was filled with the dialect of his heritage and numerous racial anecdotes. . . . he was well received" (34). The afternoon session that Campbell would lead was titled "Redneck Religion," and he

> began by noting that the two titles ranged from one of extreme sophistication to one of extreme vulgarity. 'The Black Church Today' was a title filled with dignity, intellectual sophistication and liberal, academic acceptance. But the other title, 'Redneck Religion,' was just the opposite. I wondered aloud what the response would have been if the morning subject had been 'Nigger Religion,' and the afternoon had been given over to

> discussion of 'The Church of the Culturally Deprived and Increasingly Alienated Caucasian Minority.' (34)

As he continued his discussion, often speaking in his native idiom, Campbell was not applauded as the morning speaker had been. Instead, he was chastised by the session chairman who attacked Campbell "as a fraud, posing as a 'know-nothing.'" He did that, Campbell complains, "because he knew that I had graduated from an Ivy League school and 'knows better than to use that kind of grammar'" (34). In another example, Campbell compares the ebullient crowd response to a song entitled "Rednecks, White Socks, and Blue Ribbon Beer" and the hostility with which the same crowd greeted another song, "Niggers, Muleguards, and Red Ripple Wine." Campbell's facetiously-made point is that "the term 'redneck' is as filled with emotional intensity as the word 'nigger'" (34).

The Campbell book most wholly devoted to the question of race is *The Stem of Jesse* (1995). A non-fiction account of Mercer University's road to desegregation during the 1960s, *The Stem of Jesse* describes the missionary-inspired process that led up to the enrollment of Mercer's first black student, a Nigerian named Sam Oni, and the clandestine efforts of Mercer faculty and staff to tutor Macon-area blacks so that they could score higher on college entrance exams. In this book, readers get an unprecedented behind-the-scenes look at the difficulties encountered by the university as it sought to move beyond "tokenism" and as it ultimately eclipsed the University of Georgia in black enrollment even though "Georgia had five times the total enrollment of Mercer and was desegregated by mandate of Judge Bootle's Court" (115, 107). Noticeably, Campbell here reaffirms his metaphor of race as a disease, declaring that "The ergots of segregation and inequality had diseased the body politic for too long" (105).

The legacy of failure that Campbell addresses in his 1999 commencement speech and in his written works is indicative of the guilt-chastened southern mind that Cash had spoken of. "Too wedded to the Puritan ethic that success is a sign of Jehovah's grace, too fearful of violating the chivalric code garnered from the words of Sir Walter Scott and other romantics," Thomas L. Connelly writes in *Will Campbell and the Soul of the South* (1982), Southerners were driven to seek success as failure signified a fall from grace (Connelly 122). And beginning with its defeat in the Civil War, the South had viewed itself as a fallen angel, accepting its disgrace but never veering from "an optimistic Christian faith in the value of striving" (Connelly 9). This message that Campbell bestowed upon the 1999 graduates was that even when failure seems imminent, Southerners strive to succeed. Campbell's disturbing truths were accepted by this audience, much as Cash's and Berry's had been, because Campbell utilized this collective southern guilt complex to convey his criticism and because his first gesture upon the podium was to identify himself as a child of the South: "You do me great honor. I have received awards in other times and places. But I have long known that unless and until one is recognized by his own people, he is not recognized at all. I am full-blooded piney woods. You are my people. And I thank you for claiming me. Albeit a bit late perhaps."

And in spite of the disheartening legacy that Campbell outlines, the piney woods man, like the Kentucky agrarian, does not leave the podium without offering hope to the new generation:

> But we leave with hope . . . . Dare we talk of hope in so bleak a portrayal? Yes, we dare. For it is in darkness hope is born. No need for hope in bright sunlight. So for every soul among you brave enough to empathize with the great burden of these little ones there is hope. For every hand of yours

> willing now to reach out of the darkness and cry out there is a better way, there is hope. The shadows are the dwelling place of hope. So in our darkest night hope blooms into benevolence and the Star of David glows anew, the Islamic Crescent lights up a doleful sky, and the Star of Christmas shines again, for there is Immanuel. God with us.

"*Immanuel! God* with us!" (142). These words are repeated in the concluding chapter of Campbell and Holloway's *" . . . and the criminals with him . . ." Lk. 23:33*, and they lie at the base of all of Campbell's works.

Will D. Campbell and Wendell Berry seek to dispel, as Cash instructed all Southerners to do, the myths of existence. For Campbell, the myth is that violence will end violence, that one race's oppression indicates another race's supremacy, and that God's grace is with us only in times of triumph. For Berry, the most dangerous myth is that one region may be exploited and given up to harm without causing harm to befall other people and places. As Faulkner argued in his 1953 speech against the fear he saw manifested as the U.S. and the Soviet Union escalated the Cold War nuclear threat, Berry and Campbell also speak against fear – the fear of giving up abusive environmental behavior, or the fear of spending more money on education than on missiles, or the fear of reforming prisons or of instituting genuine – not merely nominal – equality among races. Fear makes needless enemies, stifles dissent, and retards empathy for others and thus true understanding of ourselves and the world. Odd sentiments, perhaps, from so many loyal sons of the land behind the "Magnolia Curtain."

NOTES

[1] Chapter title quotation is taken from Wendell Berry's *A Timbered Choir* (192).

[2] Novels published prior to 1978 are *Nathan Coulter* (1960, reiussed 1985); *A Place on Earth* (1967, revised 1983); *The Memory of Old Jack* (1974, revised 2001). Poetry collections published prior to 1978 are *November twenty six nineteen hundred sixty three* (1964); *The Broken Ground* (1964); *Findings* (1968); *Openings* (1968); *Farming: A Hand Book* (1970); *The Country of Marriage* (1973); *An Eastward Look* (1974); *Horses* (1974); *Sayings and Doings* (1975); *To What Listens* (1975); *The Kentucky River* (1976); *There Is Singing Around Me* (1976); *Clearing* (1977); *Three Memorial Poems* (1977). Berry's non-fiction essay collections published prior to 1978 are *The Rise* (1968); *The Long-Legged House* (1969, 2004); *The Hidden Wound* (1970); *The Unforeseen Wilderness: Kentucky's Red River Gorge* (1971, revised 1991); *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural & Agricultural* (1972, 2004); *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (1977, 1978, 1986).

[3] Although both the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration were established by President Nixon in 1970, their recommendations and legislations proved toothless, failing to rein in profit-seekers who disregarded environmental health. Throughout the decade, for instance, Brazilian rain forests weare decimated, and negligent strip mining in the Virginias and Kentucky left lands pocked and depleted. And in the name of profit, several damaging oil accidents marred the late-1970s. In 1976, for example, a significant oil spill occurred off the coast of Spain, and a Liberian tanker crashed only 27 miles off Nantucket Island, leaking nine

million gallons of oil. The Amoco Cadiz wrecked in 1978 off the coast of France, losing 68 million gallons of oil (six times the amount of the Exxon Valdez spill) and producing an oil slick that ultimately covers 110 miles of coastline. And most frightening of all, an investigation of some unusual health problems in children living in the Love Canal neighborhood of Niagara Falls, New York, revealed that the children's ailments were the direct result of exposure to toxic waste dumped on site in the 1940s and 1950s.

[4] On its web page, COA boasts its "curriculum with a conscience," and declares that "COA is geared to understanding the relationships between humans and our environments. Even more important, students and faculty expect to do something to improve those relationships - in policy, in art, in science, and in a multitude of fields that defy categorization. We call this quest Human Ecology. It is the one degree that all COA graduates receive" (http://www.coa.edu/html/about.htm). With this in mind, Wendell Berry seems a particularly inspired choice for commencement speaker; however, it should be noted, too, that Berry did not shape his remarks only to match COA's curriculum goals, but rather had spoken of human-environment relationships as early as 1978.

[5] Berry alludes here to Joseph Hazelwood, the captain of the Exxon Valdez who admitted to consuming three alcoholic beverages before boarding ship and striking a reef in Prince William Sound in March 1989. This accident dumped 11,000,000 gallons of crude oil into the Sound, costing over $2 billion in clean-up and uncountable wildlife death. Speaking in June 1989, Berry no doubt had this catastrophe fresh in his mind.

[6] The border separating East and West Germany was effectively opened on 9 January 1989.

[7] This protest occurred on 5 June 1989, and the identity of "tank man" is still unknown.

[8] 27 January 1973 is generally marked as the official end of the Vietnam War.

[9] African nations suffered devastating droughts often throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In 1984, for instance, average rainfall in Ethiopia was about 22 percent below the national average, and American media outlets assaulted viewers with images of walking skeletons and distended bellies. Similar rainfall deficits afflicted Sudan, Tanzania, and other African nations as well.

Chapter Four

"Mow 'em down, Rev 'em up, Get Some Excitement Going": Commencement Address as Performance[1]

The frequency with which Southerners receive invitations to speak at graduation ceremonies nationwide is quite telling: Between 1991 and 2004, for instance, more than half of the graduation speakers that Rice University[2] hosted were born in the South. Between 1992 and 2005, Duke University hosted only three commencement speakers without formidable ties to the South, actress Jane Alexander, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright – and a whopping fifty percent of Duke's speakers were writers and journalists who either hailed from or spent significant time in the South. Further, of the 222 excerpts to appear in Peter J. Smith's book on America's best commencement addresses, fifty-four of them represent writers, journalists, and publishing politicians born in or having significant ties to the South. Maya Angelou is quoted twice in this collection; Wendell Berry boasts one of the longest quotations in the book, but why?

In a decade when presidential-hopeful Bill Clinton scored votes through playing his saxophone on late night television, the undeniable popularity of Southern commencement speakers owes as much to *how* they deliver their words of wisdom as to the substance of their messages. As compelling as Cash's analysis of southern mythology is, as urgent as Berry's warnings against society's status quo are, performance-oriented writers such as storyteller Lee Smith and writer-musician Clyde Edgerton best exemplify the allure of Southern speakers. In her 1993 commencement address at Hollins College,

Lee Smith showcases her anecdotal humor and storytelling skills while inspiring writer-hopefuls. And in his speech to graduates at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNC-W) in 1998, Clyde Edgerton incorporates his musical talents and his gift for parody into his didactic advice. Surfacing likewise in their major fiction, these techniques make Smith's and Edgerton's speeches and works both memorable and entertaining.

Of Southerners, Lee Smith has said:

> They have innate storytelling ability. Even though the South has changed enormously and is more like the rest of the country today southerners still retain a narrative ability. My mother can spin a story out of thin air about something as simple as a trip to the grocery store. So can my daughter. Everything translates to stories. We are not given to abstraction, and there is a kind of "speakerly" delight in the stories which are often told in first person. (Smith qtd. in McDaniel)

A prolific speaker, Lee Smith regularly enchants audiences with her poise, approachability, and to use her phrase, "speakerly delight." In a biographical essay on Smith, Jeanne McDonald captures the consensus impression of those who see the writer in person:

> As they say in the South, Lee Smith has never met a stranger. Five minutes after you meet her, you are exchanging intimate secrets and discussing weighty things--metaphysical issues, humanity, the really important stuff. Smith demonstrates an empathy and involvement with the concerns of others that are so sincere, you realize immediately that she herself has been on the same emotional plateau at one time or another. Her lively blue eyes are as friendly and approachable as a cool lake you can wade into, and her smile and expressions seem completely implicated with everything you are telling her. (McDonald)

Janet Walker McDaniel concurs: "With a warmth and grace Southerners are often noted for, Lee Smith shares her craft and the skills she has developed with other writers,

involving herself in workshops and writer's conferences and encouraging adults and students alike to take the risks involved in writing and to open themselves to the world around them" (McDaniel). These descriptions characterize the approach that Smith takes not only to classroom lectures and writer's conferences, but to commencement addresses as well.

On 16 May 1993, Lee Smith stood before the 246 new graduates and countless guests at Hollins College, her own alma mater, and delivered a commencement speech titled "Once Upon A Time: Telling Stories." She immediately involved her audience, asking them to ponder that entrancing phrase – once upon a time – and how it customarily signals the beginning of a story, how it brings us "a kind of anticipatory calm," and how "we suspend our own disbelief, and prepare to be transported" upon hearing the phrase. Then, she poses a series of rhetorical questions: "What's the appeal? Why do people need to tell stories? Isn't it enough for us to simply live our lives? Can't we just shut up?" Then she answers her own question: "Well, no. We can't just shut up," because, as she humorously explains, the storytelling impulse extends all the way back to Adam in Genesis 2.

Though the claim that our inborn need for stories originated with Adam's naming of each beast of the field and each bird of the skies is hyperbolic, Smith insists convincingly on the fundamental nature of the story, citing fellow southern writer Reynolds Price, who once said

> A need to tell and hear stories is essential to the species homo sapiens – second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter. Millions survive without love or home, almost none in silence, the opposite of silence leads quickly to narrative, and the sound of story is the

> dominant sound of our lives, from the small accounts of our day's events to the vast incommunicable constructs of psychopaths. (qtd. in Smith "Once Upon a Time")[3]

Having thus illuminated our vital and universal appetite for stories, Smith proceeds to tell her own story, and in so doing, discusses four main functions that stories perform, functions brought to fruition in many of her own Appalachian narratives as well.

In her 1993 remarks, Smith indicates that the most ancient function of the story has been the attempt "to answer the question, Why? The sun rises and sets because Apollo is driving his golden chariot across the sky, for instance." Indeed as Dorothy Hill has noted, "All people need myths to legitimize their existence – ennobled stories that make conscious and collective, hence accessible, visions of reality that inspire" (52). Likewise, in much of Smith's own fiction, Appalachian folklore and legend form the basis for explaining, for legitimizing, certain occurrences, particularly those of a tragic nature. Her breakthrough novel *Oral History* (1983), for example, depicts the steady downfall of Almarine Cantrell and his descendants. At the outset of the novel, Almarine is literally the golden child, "all that pale gold hair and them light blue eyes, and so tall and so straight" (26). Handsome, young, strong, and "any sweetness in that family, it went straight to Almarine" (22). Having attained near-Greek god proportions, Almarine is successful too, owning all the land that he sees, so when he suffers an obvious fall from grace, everyone in the settlement seeks an explanation. Wise Granny Younger obliges: "Almarine's eyes that used to be so blue had turned pale and runny. His collarbone showed through his shirt. His hair, that used to be so beautiful, looked just like old dry straw and that's a fact. I was talking to a man bewitched" (46). Thus, Granny Younger

diagnoses the cause of Almarine's physical deterioration: He is under the spell of Red Emmy, reputed throughout the mountains to be a witch pledged to the devil long ago by her father.

Almarine had encountered Emmy after he was lured off the beaten path by a red bird with a siren-like song. The bird led him straight to red-headed Emmy who immediately bewitched Almarine. The two lived together passionately in Almarine's cabin for what Granny Younger calls "froze-time," in which

> Everything stood still, Almarine took care of his chickens and his mules and he even planted . . . . But he moved like a man under a spell, which is what he was . . . . he moved like a man in a dream. And that Emmy? Lord, she was a-dusting, and a-sweeping, and a-cooking and milking the cow. As I said she was playing house. She looked real young and real pretty . . . . But twerent natural, no moren a snow in July. (*Oral History* 40-41)

Soon enough, "Red Emmy's true nature come out. Which it'll do ever time . . . The devil mought loan out his daughter, but comes a time when he'll take her back" (44). Once this occurred, Almarine and his Hoot Owl Holler homestead began to suffer in ways that, according to mountain legend, are undoubtedly linked to bewitching: Almarine's prized horse dies suddenly, for example, and Almarine himself suffers from acute exhaustion because "a witch will ride a man in the night while he sleeps, she'll ride him to death if she can. . . . The same way she'll run a horse in the ground" (45).

Finally, Almarine too must face this undeniable evidence against Red Emmy, and he solicits Granny Younger's help in breaking the spell. She advises: "'You've got to throw her out. . . You've got to make the mark of the cross on her breast and her forehead with ashes, and throw her out the door and say the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost as loud as ever you can'" (46). In response, Almarine casts down his eyes

and asks: "'What iffen that don't work?'" (46). Presumably, Almarine has attempted this technique prior to his meeting with Granny Younger and found it unsuccessful, Red Emmy's spell proving too potent for mere ashes. Granny Younger orders Almarine to cut Emmy and use her blood to make the mark of a cross, but Almarine "turns whiter yet and shakes his head. 'I'll not do that, Granny'" because Red Emmy is pregnant with Almarine's child (46). His failure to take the steps prescribed by Granny Younger – supported by Mrs. Ludie Davenport's eyewitness account later in the novel – results in a perpetuation of the curse so that all subsequent tragedies to befall the Cantrell lineage are taken to be the result of Almarine's failure to adequately break Emmy's curse. Substantiating Smith's claim that stories answer the question "why," Ostwalt explains that "the curse is passed along through successive generations to visit tragedy on the family. This family myth operates as all myth does, to provide sacred explanations" (6). According to Smith's 1993 Hollins address, family myth further represents the best material available to writers. She states: "Our material is simply given to us, as our parents are given to us. And our best language is likely to be our first language, the language we grow up hearing. In my case it was the lovely, picturesque mountain dialect, spoken in an accent pretty much like mine today" (5).

Lee Smith continues to rely on her Appalachian heritage and dialect to legitimize another family's dreadful luck in *The Devil's Dream* (1992). A 150-year chronicle of the musical Bailey family, *The Devil's Dream* shares structural commonalities with *Oral History* in that both novels open and close with a frame story set in the present tense and both family sagas are revealed through multiple narrators with sometimes vastly differing

points of view; however, as John Kalb has noted, the two novels utilize similar mythical subtexts: "'The Devil's Dream,' which might be called the title track [of the novel], suggests the way the Baileys, like the Cantrells before them, are cursed" (213). The culprit of the curse this time is not a witch, but a musical instrument, the fiddle. And here, Smith draws her inspiration from a long list of legends revolving around cursed fiddles, the most famous of which involves Nicolò Paganini (1782-1840). Arguably the most famous violin virtuoso to date, Paganini allegedly sold his soul to the devil in order to achieve skill and fame with the bow: "No musician had more fantastic stories to his name, and certainly none took less trouble to refute them. . . . it was almost common knowledge that he was in league with the devil . . . yet the maestro, who undoubtedly knew the value of good publicity, seems almost to have encouraged these and similar rumours to spread" (Golding).

When Moses Bailey, a hellfire and damnation preacher-type, declares music a sin, he is, therefore, drawing on a mythical explanation that reaches back to at least the eighteenth century. Upon marrying Kate Malone, whose daddy Pink Malone was the best fiddler around, Moses "didn't make no bones about it. When he axed old Pink fer to marry Kate, he said right out that they was to be no music at the wedding" (23). Further, "Moses wouldn't hardly let her go back over there to visit, neither. He said that the Devil walked in that house, and that fiddle music was the voice of the Devil laughing" (23). But when Kate's mother becomes ill, Moses relents, allowing Kate and his eldest son Jeremiah to go back to the Malone home where Jeremiah's innate talent for music emerges and is cultivated by his maternal grandfather: "He took to the fiddle like a duck

to water, and when they got back home, hit was the first thing he told his daddy about the trip" (27). Flabbergasted, Moses warns: "'The fiddle is a instrument of the Devil, and iffen you ever take it up you will have to leave home. Fer you won't be my boy no more, you'll be the Devil's boy'" (27).

At the end of a second visit, feeling that "hit's a sin to put your talent under a bushel," Pink defies Moses and sends a fiddle back with Kate so that she can teach Jeremiah to play when Moses is away (27). And Jeremiah learns well, but soon his father discovers their sin and becomes violent, shattering the fiddle and savagely beating his wife and all of his children. Running in the night toward the Malone homestead, Jeremiah falls from a rocky cliff to his death, a tragedy which hastens the death of Moses, causes Kate to lapse into insanity, and negatively impacts future Bailey descendants. Undaunted, successive generations of Baileys expand their musical abilities and perform publicly, make records, and sing at the Opry, but always bad luck follows fame. Rose Annie Bailey, for instance, suffers a nervous breakdown after giving birth and ultimately shoots her husband, also her cousin, "who had been just waiting for that bullet his whole life long" (269). And Katie Cocker, granddaughter of Durwood Bailey and the most famous of them all, loses her beloved husband Ralph in a fiery bus crash. Although readers will likely attribute the Bailey curse to Moses' insistence that his family turn its back on their God-given talents, the novel's community of characters – with the notable exception of Pink Malone – ascribes the curse to the evil fiddle, an instrument with a sordid history.

Though Appalachian folklore is ultimately farther removed from the foreground, Smith's later fiction yields multiple examples of characters searching the written word for

answers too. Paula of the short story "News of the Spirit" seeks the source of her brother's mental problems in his plywood shed "entirely covered by tiny, tiny writing and drawings" which he calls "a new kind of book" (266). Harriet of *The Last Girls* searches her enigmatic friend's poetry for answers to her erratic life and sudden death. However, as Smith points out in her speech to the Hollins graduates, the telling of stories serves a greater good than answering why: it is an act that addresses our collective need for a way to escape occasionally, "a means for being transported beyond the boundaries of our own lives, and a means of bearing the pain of those lives." Indeed, in multiple interviews, Lee Smith has explained that she writes in order to transcend boundaries in her own life: "Anne Tyler once said – and I always thought it was the best remark I ever heard about writing – somebody asked her why she likes to write, and she said, 'I write because I want to have more than one life.' And I think many of us go at it for that reason. I mean, we wonder. We go in Linens 'n' Things and there's a girl interpreting dreams, and we wonder what it would be like to be that girl" (qtd. in Powell).

As multiple critics have noted, Smith often resists circumscription in the lives of her fictional characters as well. An entity unhindered and undefined by the passing centuries, Granny (age) Younger (youth) represents timelessness. "Granny Younger's name implies a bridging of opposites, as does 'oral history.' A reversal of full cycle, her name implies eternal return. That her voice is heard through the conveyance of modern technology, a tape recorder, is another analog of wholeness that breaks the barrier between past and present" (Hill 58). Likewise, bearing a name symbolic of immortality and eternal life, Ivy Rowe, the heroine of *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988), exists as a

character who defies the limitations of time and who finally sees the realization of her dreams through her daughter Joli: "I am counting on you now to be a writer which I never was" (280). Smith's characters are also unencumbered by gender boundaries. For instance, Red Emmy and Almarine of *Oral History* are presented as equals: "She was a woman as big as he was, a woman nearabout six feet tall" (Smith 35).Writing about *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Tanya L. Bennett posits:

> Not only does Ivy resist being controlled by the patriarchal system, but her letters also exhibit a blurring of the very boundaries of gender. She describes women who exhibit 'masculine' characteristics, such as 'Momma [who] stood too with her face as hard as a man's face' (41) and Molly who has 'a square hand like a man's' (304), and men who appear 'feminine,' like Revel who once dressed up like an old woman to avoid the wrath of the sheriff (39). Even more significantly, Ivy describes in a letter to Silvaney her merging with Honey Breeding, whose name surely suggests his gender blurring, in a scene in which the boundaries of their genders have no meaning: 'But I am as big and strong as he is, and I toppled him into the starry flowers where we laid face to face and leg to leg and toe to toe. He is just the same size as me. In fact I think he <u>is</u> me, and I am him, and it will be so forever and ever' (230). (Bennett 84)

Thus, breaking through arbitrary societal constructs, such as age and gender, forms the basis of much of Smith's most popular fiction.

In her Hollins commencement talk, Smith also admits that as a teenager she often felt the need to transcend geography. "My earliest childish efforts at writing," confides Smith, "often involved a journey, an escape. My very first book ever was written on my mother's stationery when I was nine, and featured as main characters my two favorite people at that time: Adlai Stevenson and Jane Russell. The plot was that they went West together in a covered wagon, and once there, they became – inexplicably – Mormons" ("Once Upon a Time"). Many of her most memorable characters share Smith's use of

narrative as a means to transcend. After all, Parrot Blankenship, a minor character from *Oral History*, is well-liked by Jink Cantrell primarily because Parrot – aptly named – brings stories with him wherever he goes, offering Jink a much-needed diversion from the nauseating task of hog killing. But in *Oral History* the character Sally best demonstrates the escapist power of storytelling. After her husband Roy, a lineman for Appalachian Power, falls and breaks his leg, Sally tells him the Cantrell Saga: "I told him the whole story, I never had told it before. Roy sitting home in a leg cast so he couldn't do anything else *but talk* . . . . It took me a day to tell the whole thing" (239-240). Thus, Sally offers her family story as a means for Roy to escape the discomfort and monotony of his injury.

The well-wrought story as haven for life's pain and disappointment alluded to in her 1993 talk at Hollins is perpetuated throughout Smith's shorter fiction as well. In her collection of stories entitled *News of the Spirit* (1997) Smith repeatedly pays homage to the cathartic properties of the story. The first story of the collection, in fact, illustrates the ability of the story to alleviate some of life's discomforts. In "The Bubba Stories," Charlene Christian, "a chunky size twelve, plucked up from a peanut farm near South Hill," has difficulty fitting in at school. To escape social ostracism, she creates elaborate, fictional stories about a handsome brother and his adventures "in order to increase my popularity with my girlfriends at a small women's college in Virginia" (2). Charlene's ploy apparently works, too, because by story's end, Charlene has become a happily married freelance fiction writer in New York who visits congenially with Lily, her college pal, over lunch.

Both Jennifer Dale, the thirteen-year-old narrator of Smith's short story "Live Bottomless," and her mother Billie escape the boundaries of their lives through stories. Jennifer's mother "hated regular newspapers. She hated facts. She also hated club meetings, housework, politics, business, and her mother-in-law," all the things of day-to-day female existence in the 1950s (*News of the Spirit* 56). She fled from such mundane concerns through the "love magazines and movie magazines that she was constantly reading," and she took her daughter with her (56): Elizabeth Taylor mourning the death of husband Mike Todd, killed tragically in a plane crash one week before the Academy Awards; divorcee Ava Gardner attempting to steal Shelley Winters's husband on the set of *The Naked Maja*. These tortured love stories with their alluring characters peopled Jennifer's imagination and offered her an escape from her own boring existence, which boasted "no breasts, no period, no sex, no art" (59).

Billie, "who had broken every heart in Charleston and had a charm bracelet made out of fraternity pins to prove it," would also tell her daughter about men from her own exciting past (59). According to Jennifer, her mother "used to tick them off for me one by one. 'Now that was Smedes Black, a Phi Delt from UVA, such a darling boy, and this one was Parker Winthrop, a Sigma Chi at W and L, he used to play the ukulele. . . .'" (59). Thus, Jennifer lives vicariously through her mother's stories, and she also reads voraciously, titles including *Peyton Place*, *The Search for Bridey Murphy*, and *East of Eden*, so when her father's affair is discovered and her mother subsequently suffers a breakdown, Jennifer logically retreats into story, even becoming an extra in a Tony Curtis film.

Set at a retirement community named Marshwood, "The Happy Memories Club" also treats the storytelling-as-escape theme. Elderly retirees form a writing group in order to transcend the stifling environment at Marshwood where "they want us to become children again, forgoing intelligence" (*News of the Spirit* 183). Former English teacher Alice Scully, narrator of the story, sees the writing group as an opportunity to delve into the full store of her memories because, as she says, "our memories are all we've got" (178). She pens her life story, which like all life stories necessarily includes some sorrow and hardship, because as Lee Smith tells the '93 Hollins class, "the only story you have to tell is – finally – your own" ("Once Upon a Time"). With the writing group, Alice shares openly and articulately specifics of her father's suicide, of a poverty-stricken childhood at a boardinghouse, and of her mother's collapse into reclusivity. However, Alice's story does not fit the mold of what the other group members had expected – indeed it displeases them – provoking its bossy leader, Martha Louise, to form ground rules that would ensure pleasant stories only: "If you wish to be a part of this group, Alice Scully, you will have to calm yourself down, and keep your subject matter in check. We don't come here to be upset" (196). Martha Louise, who shares a sanitized account of "growing up on a farm in Ohio, how her parents struggled to make ends meet, how the children strung popcorn and cut out paper ornaments to trim the tree when there was no money for Christmas," clearly sees the writing group as a chance to escape into a fairytale world where poverty produces only nobility, togetherness, and strength of character (186).

Perhaps the purest form of escapist literature, the romance novel makes an appearance in Smith's fiction thanks to the character Anna, an internationally-renowned

romance writer in *The Last Girls* (2002). Hailing from "a holler surrounded by mountains you wouldn't believe" in West Virginia, Anna suffered a less than ideal childhood, delimited by a sickly mother who died when Anna was a young teenager and a controlling evangelist father who would not allow his daughter "to dance, to take gym classes, ... wear jeans or sleeveless blouses or drink Coca-Colas either" (137). She confesses that "if I hadn't been able to read, I would have died. I'm not kidding. I would have been a twelve-year-old suicide" (119). So a young Anna learns to sidestep her own painful limitations through immersion in the stories of others. By the time she chooses Mary Scott College, where "it was possible to admit her secret wish to *be a writer*," she had decided to enroll in the Creative Writing program and create her own stories:

> She wrote one story about two abandoned, starving children who set their house on fire to summon help and another about a church organist who was so fat she didn't know she was pregnant until the labor pains began during Wednesday night prayer meeting while she was playing 'Amazing Grace.' She wrote a story about a girl who killed her young husband by accident with a tractor, then left her children with her mother and disappeared. These stories were seriously discussed in the workshop and then published in the college literary magazine. . . . Everybody thought she was tough, like her stories, but she wasn't. She didn't understand where these stories were coming from but they poured out of her onto the page like milk from a pitcher. They scared her. (*The Last Girls* 139)

In her first years at college, Anna, it seems, produced horrific stories that, by comparison, made her own past more palatable, but the most insufferable of Anna's hardships were yet to come.

In her senior year, she would be betrayed by her professor-lover at Mary Scott, she would forego graduate school and languish in a menial filing job, and she would marry a dope-smoking UNC deconstructionist, miscarrying his child after a five-month

pregnancy. After this marriage inevitably failed, Anna became pregnant again, took what little money she had, and migrated to Piggott's Island, Georgia, where she suffered a lengthy and difficult labor, delivering a baby girl "dead upon delivery." She then spent several months in a Milledgeville mental hospital before taking a job cleaning luxury rental estates (270). Eventually, Anna's desire to be a writer resurfaces, but she can no longer create the gritty stories she was known for at Mary Scott. Now she realizes that "she might as well write books where it all happened again and again just the way it was supposed to: boy meets girl, sparks fly despite the mad underlying attraction, et cetera, et cetera, until it all ended happily ever after, again and again and again" (275). So she writes a series of romance novels, with titles like *Come Home My Heart* and *¡Arriba! Baby*, which make her rich and famous. For Anna, her thirty-four books "are a comfort, to herself as well as to her readers. . . . She will write many more. She has to," proving that what Lee Smith said to the Hollins graduates in 1993 was true: people seek stories that offer a means of escape from their disappointments, their tragedies, and their boundaries (269).

Though Anna best represents Smith's assertion that stories provide escape, the character Ivy Rowe in Smith's hugely popular epistolary novel *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988) best portrays the idea that narration heals. Young and largely uneducated in the beginning of the novel, Ivy reveals in her letters the kind of profound wisdom that comes only to those who have experienced much. She writes poignantly of her sickly father, her alcoholic uncle, and her brother's murder, but always she delights in the writing of the story and breaks beyond her boundaries through reading: "I want to be a writter, it is

what I love the bestest in this world. Mrs. Brown says I have a true tallent she thinks, she gives me books to read but Momma gets pitched off iffen I read too much, I have to holp out and I will just fill my head with notions, Momma says it will do me no good in the end" (15). In spite of her mother's negative opinion of stories, Ivy's reading and letter writing are precisely what sustain her throughout further hardships as her beloved sister Silvaney is institutionalized, as her father wastes away and dies, as Ivy herself is "ruint" and impregnated by a boy who dies in the war, and as her mother dies suddenly. Ivy's letters offer her more than escape though: they also afford her a type of companionship. In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, readers play the part of the letter recipient whether it be Mrs. Brown, Silvaney, Beulah, or the others. And isolated as she is from so many family members, Ivy craves this variety of companionship so much that she continues to write letters to Silvaney even after her death, and she writes repeatedly to Beulah even though she never receives a response.

As Smith explains to the Hollins gathering, stories may merely "offer (again in Reynolds Price's words) 'the simple companionship of the narrative transaction,' 'the union of teller and told.' Caught up in the same story, we are united, teller and told, and our awful loneliness, which is the essential burden of our human condition, is lifted" ("Once Upon a Time"). Throughout her speech and her fiction, Lee Smith utilizes techniques designed to make the reader literally part of the narrative. Some of these techniques are merely psychologically suggestive. As Anne Goodwyn Jones points out, Smith apparently incorporates the roots "ora" and "or" in multiple character names, such as Dory, Davenport, Ora Mae, Isadore, Orvil, and Morris, to suggest the book's concerns

with the theme of oratory (17). Other times Smith's techniques are overt as in *The Last Girls* where a Mark Twain look-alike working as a Riverlorian mesmerizes even the mousy Harriet with his stories.

Most commonly, however, Lee Smith employs "characterized readers" in an effort to link character and reader (Wilson 848). As Jocelyn H. Donlon posits in her article "Hearing is Believing: Southern Racial Communities and Strategies of Storytelling in Gloria Naylor and Lee Smith," *Oral History* includes "overt references to a seemingly intra-textual listener, one who appears to share many of the allusive frames of this isolated community" (9). Near to the Victorian dramatic monologue, the Granny Younger section consistently refers to a silent listener using the second-person pronoun. Early in her narrative, for instance, she legitimates her position as Almarine's storyteller to an apparently skeptical listener: "I know moren most folks and that's a fact, you can ask anybody. I know moren I want to tell you, and moren you want to know" (Smith *Oral History* 17). Having thus established her authority, Granny Younger implies that her listener is intimately acquainted, if not with the specifics of the Cantrell saga, at least with the folkways of Appalachia, saying "I smoke a pipe too and you know it" (22); "Hurricane Mountain is a fine mountain and they's other folks lives here too, you can see for why" (25); "This was a deep pool, too, plumb full of that crystal-clear water, so you know how cold it is" (34); "Witches'll leave their bodies in the night, you know, and slip into somebody else's" (45). And she calls upon her listener's memory: "Now I loved him as a baby, you recall" (42). The "union of teller and told" is thus solidified in Granny

Younger's narrative; however, the novel's other storytellers seek to include their listener as well.

Like Granny Younger, Mrs. Ludie Davenport also treats the listener as an insider. After Rhoda Hibbitts succeeds Granny Younger as mountain elder and healer, Ludie Davenport takes a sampling of her freshly canned pickle lilly to Granny Hibbitts, explaining "you take her things when you put them up, just like you did Granny Younger, you know how you do" (*Oral History* 178-179). And she too calls on her listener's memory: "It was me, you recall, way back – must of been twenty-five years ago – that seed the witch a-leaving after Almarine had throwed her out" (177). Rose Hibbitts similarly shares what she knows of the Cantrell story with a listener whom she calls "you." With Rose's use of the second-person, there is an agenda: she hopes to persuade the listener to see things from her point of view. For instance, after establishing a contrast between Almarine – "He *was awful*" (*Oral History* 75) – and herself – "I have a good heart" (75) – Rose goes on to tell how Almarine, stricken with grief over the death of his wife, kicks open the door and orders Granny Younger to stop "laying out" Pricey Jane, adding "You see how hateful he is" (77). And she tells how she and her sister cleaned Almarine's house from top to bottom while everyone else was gone to bury Pricey Jane, saying "I'll tell you, we worked like dogs" (78). This repeated appearance of the second-person pronoun throughout *Oral History* serves to diminish the distance between the fictional characters and the reader so that readers become involved listeners, *hearing* the Cantrell story firsthand instead of reading a secondhand account, making "oral history" in fact the illusory medium of the novel. Likewise, Smith frequently references "you" the

audience in her 1993 Hollins talk, engaging and involving her listeners in her story and message and addressing them as if they were already acquainted with the writer's life.

In some of Smith's more recent work, this characterized reader is present as well. In the very first line of *The Devil's Dream* (1992), for instance, Old Man Ira Keen asks: "That the one you mean? Speak up. Well, that thar's 'The Preacher's Son,' and I'll play it plumb through fer you by and by, but first I'll tell ye how come I was to write it in the first place" (18). Later in this section, Ira Keen explains how Moses and Kate Bailey came to live in Cold Spring Holler, and he becomes agitated when his listener does not seem to follow, saying "*Hell* yes, that's what I'm a-telling you" (19). And "The Happy Memories Club," from *News of the Spirit,* opens with Alice Scully's validation of the elderly:

> I may be old, but I'm not dead. Perhaps you are surprised to hear this. You may be surprised to learn that people such as myself are still capable of original ideas, intelligent insights, and intense feelings. Passionate love affairs, for example, are not uncommon here. Pacemakers cannot regulate the strange unbridled yearnings of the heart. You do not wish to know this, I imagine. This knowledge is probably upsetting to you, as it is upsetting to my sons. (177)

And lest you, the characterized reader, forget that you are part of the problem rather than the solution, Alice reasserts that no one wants to hear about passion among the elderly, "any more than you do. You all want us to *never change, never change*" (200). Most recently, in *The Last Girls*, Smith's narrator issues imperatives – "think of that" (150) – and questions the reader: "She feels like she never even slept, though that can't be right, can it?" and "She leans forward to look at the river. Mist – or fog, which is it?" (148). Smith's repeated reference to the characterized reader throughout her fiction supports her

1993 pronouncement to the graduating students at Hollins that stories are attractive due to their ability to mimic actual companionship.

Smith winds up her commencement address saying as well that "through stories, the older generation gives crucial knowledge to younger listeners." She asks her audience: "How much do you know about your own past? How much time have you spent talking to your grandmothers? How much do you know about where your people came from, and why? And about what kind of people they were, anyway?" ("Once Upon a Time"). Then, she uses an anecdote from her own past to illustrate:

> My writing teacher here at Hollins College freshman year – Lex Allen – tried to be tactful about the first story I turned in. Now I myself thought this story was just terrific – it had everything I thought a story ought to have: an exotic setting, an incredibly complicated plot with lots of what I liked to think of as intrigue. The main character was a glamourous stewardess; the setting was Hawaii. Of course, I had never actually been to Hawaii; in fact I'd hardly ever been on a plane. Very gently, Mr. Allen pointed out that the big problem with my story was that it wasn't true. 'But stories aren't true,' I protested. 'They're just stories.' 'No,' he corrected me. 'Stories are not real. But all good stories are true.' ("Once Upon a Time")

Thus, from Lex Allen, Smith received the first germ of inspiration, passed from a professor to a young college freshman, yet ironically, in sharing her experiences in her commencement speech, Smith has now assumed the professor's position and is dispensing crucial knowledge to an audience composed of younger generation writer-hopefuls just commencing their careers.

The character Granny Younger functions in like fashion: she was the one Almarine turned to for help in ridding Hoot Owl Holler of Red Emmy, in delivering his children, and in nursing his milk-sick wife and son. She also possesses unusual skills in

interpreting the signs of nature, skills which she tries to pass on to Almarine: "'Ever thick fog in August means a heavy snow come winter,' I says and Almarine grins" (*Oral History* 27). An aged and infirm Rhoda Hibbitts also advises a member of the younger generation: "'I have knowed you since you was a girl, Ora Mae, and we both of us knows what you know. . . . If you've got a gift and you don't use it, it'll turn on you, mark my words. If you keep it inside it'll eat you alive from the inside out'" (213, 215).

The elderly figure prominently in Smith's other works as well. Granny Rowe of *Fair and Tender Ladies*, for instance, demonstrates her natural wisdom to a skeptical Beulah. As Ivy nears time to deliver her first child, Granny Rowe arrives unexpectedly at Beulah's home where Ivy lives. Ivy explains that Granny Rowe "just appeared, smack out of the blue . . . I figured Ivy would be needing me, she said. Then Beulah popped up and said, Why that is just ridiculous, Granny! You know nobody can tell exactly when a baby is coming, especially a first baby. . . . But Granny laughed, and in the dark you could see her pipe shine red when she pulled on it <u>It's the full moon, honey,</u> she said. <u>Just look at it</u>" (143). Granny Rowe understands something of the signs that Beulah does not, and although Beulah is unlikely to learn from Granny Rowe, Ivy internalizes the old woman's wisdom, jovially telling her daughter toward the end of the book "I guess I sound like old Granny Rowe, before long I will look like her too" (264).

The Devil's Dream, more than any other Smith novel, incorporates the wisdom of the older generations. Elder Stump significantly impacts Zeke Bailey in matters of religion: "Ezekiel did not understand the issues that split, finally, the Primitive Baptists from the Missionary Baptists, but he figured that if Elder Stump was against missionary

movements and infant baptism and Sunday schools and church choirs and instruments in the church, why then Ezekiel was against these things too" (46). And it is Stump who instructs a thirty-nine-year-old Zeke to find a wife, advice that Zeke follows immediately. Old Granny Horn, who delivers Nonnie Hulett, is a character reminiscent of Granny Younger and Granny Rowe before her, birthing babies, doctoring the sick, and laying out dead folks throughout the settlement. Miss Covington, a public health nurse, guides Lizzie Bailey into the nursing profession, offering her a chance at education and travel outside of the mountains. And R.C. Bailey, Zeke Bailey's adopted son, serves as the patriarch of the Bailey family music career, masterminding the first recording and performing gigs they have.

As the novel title implies, the women of *The Last Girls* – some of them grandmothers – are not women at all, but rather girls. Chronology dictates that they have reached an age when they should be passing their knowledge along to younger generations, but these "women" are still searching for wisdom themselves as Harriet herself points out in a scene early in the novel: "'To the girls of the *Daisy* Pickett!' 'The last girls,' Harriet adds oddly, involuntarily, causing everyone to glance at her as they drink. 'I mean, they'd call us women in the newspaper if it happened now'" (71). Looking like a caricature of the old maid in the deck of Old Maid cards, Harriet has never really lived her life, preferring to take care of others and to live vicariously through her reckless friend Baby instead (23). She never marries, she never has children, and she readily admits that she has had no sex life to speak of for a long while: "The phrase 'use

it or lose it' comes into her mind. Well, the truth is, she didn't *mind* losing it. In many ways, it has been a relief" (5).

Though on the surface Courtney appears to be living a charmed life, married to a wealthy and handsome man and looking like she "could have stepped from the pages of *Vogue*," Courtney's marriage is beleaguered by her husband's multiple affairs and by Courtney's boredom with her role as a society/trophy wife (23). Likewise, down-to-earth sculptress Catherine has achieved a modicum of fame and has a large family of six children and seven grandchildren. On the darker side, she has gone through a string of husbands to wind up with a libido-driven borderline alcoholic whom she fears will abandon her after finding out about the lump in her breast.

Anna, who has lived through so many trials, is alone among her peers because only she possesses the wisdom appropriate to a woman her age. Further, she is well aware of the generation gap: "Anna feels years older than Harriet, watching her slim back disappear down the deck. She feels a whole generation older. . . . Sweet, innocent Harriet: *Anna, Anna, whatever has happened to you? Terrible things, my dear*. Which will come to us all eventually" (268). Reflective thoughts such as these never surface in the musings of Harriet, Courtney, or Catherine, but Anna prefers to pour her wisdom into her fiction, imparting her wisdom on the page much like Lee Smith does. No wonder, then, that Lee Smith, sharing her wisdom orally from the dais, encourages her audience to tell stories because they perform a human and a public service of sorts: Stories provide explanation, escape, companionship, and wisdom of the ages, some important things Smith, at the

school to which she so innocently came as a mountain girl thirty years before, must deem important for commencing a life after college.

Like Lee Smith, North Carolina novelist Clyde Edgerton accepts many speaking engagements each year, and "Because of his ability to bring his literature to life in readings, he continues to be very much in demand as a speaker and reader of his own fiction" (Hennis). In fact, Edgerton's "book readings often segue into performances, with drama and music adding to the mix" ("altReader"). Playing the piano or banjo, Edgerton sings witty songs, shares personal stories, and reads from his work, adopting appropriate character voices as he goes. He used his dramatic and musical abilities on the UNC-W campus in a 1998 commencement speech in which he offers graduates four lessons to live by: "listen to your heart, listen to old people, talk to children, & listen to the blues." Though at times the tone of this address is tongue-in-cheek, these four points are serious business to Edgerton in whose major works one can easily trace these same themes.

Listen to your heart, Edgerton's first piece of advice, is common fare at graduation ceremonies worldwide, hackneyed words of wisdom promptly forgotten by those in the audience. However, Edgerton revitalizes his message through a short, humorous introduction that makes this lesson both meaningful and memorable. Under the guise of a letter from the writer's cousin, Edgerton instructs these recent graduates in the merits of Aunt Dormalee's brand of economy:

> I know what is wrong with the situation in the United States. The economy. And I know what people can do about it. If people would just look at my Aunt Dormalee we would stop needing companies to hire people because nobody wouldn't need much money . . . . Big companies wouldn't be needed to produce paper towels, for example, because Aunt Dormalee, right now, today, is using just one paper towel and one paper

> towel only, all day, and that is the very paper towel she started using in the winter of ’95, which is when the one she’d BEEN using since ’91 just disappeared into thin air. (UNC-W Address)

Along the same vein, he warns that “you graduates better start thinking about the economy and your place in it. And the next time you blow your nose on a Kleenex, if you must use a Kleenex, look at that Kleenex and realize all that room for other blows” (UNC-W Address). All of this by way of explaining that, though the comical reading of an unknown cousin’s letter by a commencement speaker is unorthodox, in his heart Edgerton wants to share the humorous economical philosophy of this letter, and so he does, following his own advice.

But Aunt Dormalee’s economics represents far more than a construct designed to revitalize a commencement cliché and to prove that Edgerton practices what he preaches; it is a no-waste-use-it-up-and-wear-it-out philosophy pictured throughout Edgerton’s Hansen County fiction and practiced by the Listre and Summerlin populace. Mrs. Claude T. Clark, devout church secretary in *Where Trouble Sleeps* (1997), for instance, prefers to bathe without a washcloth: “She’d never liked to use a washcloth. There’s no tool like your hands, somebody said. She just didn’t see any sense in it and besides that, a washcloth got to smelling bad if you didn’t keep it washed out, which didn’t make any sense” (53). Holister Jackson, head mechanic at Summerlin’s Sunrise Auto Repair Shop, and his son Vernon in *Killer Diller* (1991) see no need for paper towels; they use a single rag for all of their kitchen clean-ups (68). And then in *Lunch at the Piccadilly* (2003) there’s Clara Cochran of Rosehaven Convalescence Center in Listre who restates in her own rhetoric Edgerton’s remarks to the UNC-W class of ’98:

> Why people don't have sense enough to hang up and dry out and reuse a paper towel, she cannot for the life of her understand. At the hospital they use everything once and then throw it away, lock, stock, and barrel. At Rosehaven too. Any fool can see that's wrong. The power belongs to manufacturers and office people and government people all over the globe, fools who don't have sense enough to use something twice, always busy wasting somebody else's money, then going home and doing the very same thing, not ever thinking about how much they waste every day. (50)

But the most overt connection between Edgerton's message of thriftiness espoused at the Wilmington Commencement and his fictional characters is Aunt Naomi of *Raney* (1985) who practices a frugality with tissues that would make even Dormalee proud: "Aunt Naomi blew her nose on this Kleenex she had been fumbling with. She had a cold. She can get more nose blows on one Kleenex than anybody I ever saw. She always ends up with this tiny corner which she slowly spreads out, then blows her nose into" (8).

But beyond economy *Raney* illustrates Edgerton's larger message on the essentiality of hearing one's heart. Referred to as "a romp through the conservative mores and customs of the rural South," *Raney* is Edgerton's best and most illuminating fictional representation of this first theme from the '98 Commencement (Parker 156). Raney Bell, the title character, has grown up in the small-town Piedmont region of North Carolina among ages'-old legends and customs, lively family members, and the powerful influence of Bethel Free Will Baptist Church. For her and her family, tradition and sameness are paramount, so when Raney falls in love with and marries an Atlanta man with an Episcopal mother and a black best friend, she literally follows her heart, as opposed to her raising – as Edgerton urges the graduates to do – and breaks the mold of what is expected. Time and again Raney's husband Charles and she clash over issues that

threaten to end their marriage – Charles' appreciation of wine when Raney has been raised to view drinking as a sin, Raney's prudish approach to her sexuality versus Charles' readiness to experiment and his penchant for pornography, Charles' desire for privacy and Raney's open-door policy. Examples abound, but each time Raney is faced with a decision between listening to her heart or blindly following her raising, she ultimately chooses the path of her heart, and thus her marriage remains intact at novel's end. This in no way implies that Raney Bell Shepherd always acquiesces to her husband's viewpoints. Quite the contrary, Raney's path frequently conflicts with Charles', causing Raney to question whether or not her *husband's* heart is in the right place.

In Part Two of *Raney*, poignantly entitled "Civil War," Raney finally persuades Charles to take part in an event that is important to her and her family. The Golden Agers is a senior citizens club organized by Raney's Aunt Flossie, and each fall the seniors are treated to a day of bluegrass music and Civil War reenactments complete with authentic cannon fire. For Raney, the elderly are Listre's most valuable natural resource. She is taught by her mother and Flossie "to be good to old people." But "this is one of the areas of life Charles does not understand . . . . Charles thinks old people are all supposed to grace him with a long conversation on psychology" (104), and when they fail, as Mrs. Moss did, and embark instead on a lengthy story about "falling off the commode and having a hairline rib fracture," Charles dismisses them as senile and self-centered, "unable to comprehend anything beyond [their] own problems" (104-105). This disparaging attitude provokes Raney to state: "Charles. Sometimes I wonder about your

heart" (105). Such a statement leaves little option for Charles, who readily agrees, at this point, to assist with Golden Agers' Day.

Here, Raney also epitomizes Edgerton's second piece of advice to the graduating class of '98: "Listen to old people." Reminiscent of Smith's advice to the 1993 Hollins audience, Edgerton encourages his audience to collect family history and myth through conversations with the elderly that include specific questions, for "in so doing you are defining yourself." *Raney* appears as a testament to this advice not only in the main character's relationship with the widow Moss, who has taken Raney under her wing to teach her such useful skills as how to keep applesauce from turning brown in the jar, but also Raney's Uncle Nate, a disabled WWII veteran (105). When sober, Uncle Nate is Raney's favorite uncle largely because he is the keeper of family stories and a natural-born storyteller: She "loves his stories about when he was growing up with Mama and Aunt Flossie and Uncle Norris . . . and their Uncle Pugg" (12). Through Nate, Raney has learned much about her family's history & thus much about herself, so when her own efforts at reformation fail, she allows Nate's stories to serve as the vehicle through which to educate her husband Charles, hoping that he will redefine himself according to the standards of her background and community.

Perhaps the most divisive issue in Raney's marriage concerns race. A liberal-minded big city boy hailing significantly from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s hometown, Atlanta, Charles befriends a black man named Johnny Dobbs while in the Army. After Raney discovers that Johnny is planning a visit to her and Charles' home in Listre, she vows to herself: "If he *is* a nigger, he can't stay here. It won't work. The Ramada, maybe,

but not here" (32). Raney attempts to explain the racial climate of her community: "Charles. The army has been segregated [sic] since 1948, you said, but Listre still has the black Laundromat and the white Laundromat and nobody complaining – neither side" (62). Her words fall on deaf ears, however, as Charles simply corrects Raney's vocabulary and puts this confrontation off till another day: "You mean the army has been *integrated* since 1948 . . . . Don't worry about it. He's not coming any time soon as far as I know" (62). When the issue does arise again, it is exacerbated after Raney overhears Charles asking Johnny to be godfather to her child. Raney, flabbergasted, thinks to herself: "I don't know what a godfather is supposed to do, but if a black gets legally kin to my family, we'll have to move to Hawaii. Charles and me will just have to have a heart to heart talk about it. I'll have to explain about how it is" (237). However, Raney's "heart-to-heart" never takes place; instead the couple arrives at a compromise that seems to have been inspired by one of Uncle Nate's stories.

Spinning yarns around the Sunday dinner table that brings together Raney's family, Charles, and Charles' mother Millie, Nate shares a story about Uncle Springer & his black servant Monkey's humorous first encounter with a light bulb:

> Uncle Springer took Monkey to Raleigh one Christmas . . . . They got snowed in and there was a light bulb in the room where they spent the night in somebody's house. For some reason Monkey ended up staying with Uncle Springer in the same room. Anyway, Uncle Springer hadn't ever seen a light bulb and of course Monkey hadn't and they didn't know it had a durn switch on it to cut it off and so before they went to bed – I imagine Monkey slept on the floor – before they went to bed they put a chest of drawers up on another table and some chairs and so on and put the durn light bulb – course they didn't know it unscrewed either – they put the durn light bulb in the top drawer and closed it and then went to bed and got a good night's sleep. (83)

Though Raney and her family had heard this story a few times before, they allowed Nate to continue for the benefit of Charles and his mother. Essentially, Nate's story is one of racial sameness. That is, both men visit Raleigh for the same purpose – to sell quail – and neither the black hired hand nor the white uncle know how to, pardon the pun, unscrew a light bulb. Embedded within Nate's story, however, are a couple of racist asides designed to communicate the family's preference for racial separateness: Monkey sleeps on the floor, for example, in an inferior position to Uncle Springer, having wound up "for some reason" in the same room as Springer. This story represents a key moment in Charles' education in Hansen County race relations because, while Johnny ultimately does become godfather to Raney and Charles' baby, in the *Hansen County Pilot* birth announcement, readers discover that Charles has assimilated to Raney and Nate's culture of separateness: "Mr. Johnny Dobbs, from New Orleans, was named godfather and is visiting for a few days. He is staying at the Ramada Inn" (245).

In subsequent novels, Edgerton continues to reinforce his listen-to-old-people lesson. Ted Sears, Ballard University President, in *Killer Diller* (1991), boasts about how he "knows (grew up with the knowledge of) how to get along with elderly widows – when to visit, what to say, what to eat, how much, and how long to stay" (35). And six-and-a-half-year-old Stephen Toomey of *Where Trouble Sleeps* (1997) learns, like Raney, essential life skills from elderly members of his community, particularly old maid sisters Mae and Bea Blaine. From these elderly women, for instance, Stephen learned to chip nickel-sized pieces of ice from a larger block, to shoot chickens, and not to "ever play with yourself, you hear me, and since you don't have no brothers and sisters, you're

going to have to take care of your mama and daddy" (145). But this theme finds its most eloquent expression in the unlikely character of Wesley Benfield.

First introduced as the teen-aged protagonist of *Walking across Egypt* (1987), Wesley is doing time for auto theft at the Young Men's Rehabilitation Center. He represents the quintessential delinquent: born out of wedlock, abandoned by his biological parents, no upbringing to speak of, in short, condemned to a life of crime. But his placement in the Rehab Center instead of jail proper indicates that Wesley is still young enough to be reformed, and seventy-eight-year-old, church-going, grandma-in-waiting Mattie Rigsbee is inspired to assist him after her preacher gives a stirring sermon on the Christian obligation to aid "the least of these my brethren" (75). From their very first encounter in the YMRC yard, Mattie imparts some of her generation's mores to young Wesley and, though he has no real obligation to do so, Wesley hears what Mattie has to say:

> "I brought you a little something. I'm Mattie Rigsbee. . . . I can tell you smoke by your color." "Well, good for you." Wesley eyed the paper bag. "I don't smoke *now*. I ain't got no cigarettes. Ain't had none for two days." "You stop smoking and your color will improve." "Who gives a shit whether my color improves." Mattie stared at him. "I do. And listen, son, you shouldn't ever talk that way around a lady" . . . . "You brought me some cake and pie?" "I'm going to take it back if you don't apologize" . . . . Mattie was still standing. "Yeah, I'll take a piece of cake and pie. I apologize." (90-91)

Here, Wesley has already begun to redefine his conduct according to Mattie's instructions, and Mattie continues to guide and influence Wesley after he breaks out of the YMRC and shows up at her home, telling her that he is on leave and in need of a place to stay for a few days. Mattie agrees to let Wesley stay in her home; however, she

quickly sets forth some rules: "Wesley, say the blessing, son," (116) "Listen, let me tell you something: I got to get up and go to church tomorrow morning and if you want to stay here then you're going to have to go to church too," (123) and "Young man, there will be no cussing in this house" (129). Thus, in *Walking across Egypt*, Mattie begins the business of schooling Wesley in the etiquette of polite Southern society and in Christian religious practices, thus demonstrating the beneficial interaction between young and old that Edgerton had spoken of Wilmington, North Carolina in 1998. The most significant scenes illustrating Mattie's positive effects on Wesley, however, occur not in this novel, but rather in its sequel *Killer Diller* (1991).

Now a partially reformed twenty-four-year-old man, Wesley goes to church each Sunday, plays in a gospel group, and teaches masonry to a mentally-challenged youth, but thanks to his habit of "borrowing" cars, he resides in Ballard University's BOTA (Back On Track Again) House, a Baptist-operated halfway house for wayward young adults. Though Wesley clearly is not perfect, he has undeniably come a long way owing to Mattie Rigsbee's influence, and Wesley is the first to give her the credit for important aspects of his semi-reformation. Wesley tells us repeatedly, for instance, that he learned the art of the handshake from Mattie: "Mrs. Rigsbee taught him to look the person in the eye, reach out with his hand, use a firm grip" (15); "Wesley thinks again about Mattie Rigsbee, how she taught him to shake hands. He squeezes firmly, looks Dr. Fleming in the eye" (30). Mattie also brought Wesley into the fold and introduced him to the Bible: "Mrs. Rigsbee got him out of the rehabilitation center and then on the road to salvation," and "Mrs. Rigsbee, sitting on her faded green couch that she kept saying needed

covering, taught him how to use the concordance [to the Bible]" (45-46). From Mattie, too, he has learned about dental care: "Four crowns up top in front, and a partial plate on bottom . . . . Mrs. Rigsbee paid for it all. Decent teeth meant almost as much to her as Jesus" (78). Wesley's relationship with the elderly Mattie has proven fruitful in obvious ways, but Mattie is far from finished. She still reviews with him the need for polite address as when she says, "I thought I taught you to say 'ma'am'" (81).

Clyde Edgerton's belief in the potentially fertile interaction between young and old recorded in his 1998 Wilmington remarks is played out also in several scenes in which Wesley interacts with the residents of Shady Grove Nursing Home. As Mattie and Wesley go to visit Mattie's sister Pearl, herself a resident, readers discover that "When Wesley lived with Mrs. Rigsbee, she brought him out here to the nursing home before Pearl was ever over here and got him talking to these people, so he feels pretty much at home. He feels like he's doing good, visiting" (85). Familiar with most residents' stories, Wesley knows not to untie Miss Emma's wheelchair which is tied to a handrail because she "has twice wheeled her chair down Interstate 40," and he knows that walking canes will likely be thrown at him if he changes the channel in the TV Room (85). When, after seeing a camera flash, Mr. J.D. Smith faces the back corner, covers his head, and yells "Japs!" Wesley understands that this is the logical reaction of a war veteran who periodically suffers flashbacks (232). Consistently, Wesley listens patiently, without interrupting, to the elderly, especially to Mattie as she describes her toenail-cutting fiasco and complains about the exorbitant cost of corn pads, $1.44 on sale.

Wesley, a shining fictional example of what Edgerton hopes the graduates he is addressing will become, attempts to learn even more about his adopted grandmother. After the two discuss his future plans, he asks: "'What dreams did you have?'" But Mattie easily evades Wesley's open-ended question, saying "Oh, nothing. Eat that last piece of cornbread. I'll tell you some other time'" (167). After Mattie has a heart attack and is hospitalized, that other time seems to arrive. Having injured himself escaping from BOTA House after curfew, Wesley winds up in the hospital with Mattie who tells him: "I always wanted to play the violin. For a long time I wanted to, then I stopped wanting to. . . . I always wanted to play violin. And go to Carnegie Hall. That's what I dreamed until I was too old – one of the things" (204). Hearing something completely incongruent with the Mattie he knows causes Wesley to want to hear all of her stories: "All of a sudden he feels he needs to ask Mrs. Rigsbee a lot of questions. He's never really known a lot about what she thinks about besides Jesus and food. What she used to think about" (204). But Wesley's questions will have to be more specific than his first attempt if he is to provoke a story from Mattie.

Apparently a common pitfall of the younger generations, ambiguity is something Edgerton had warned those 1998 Wilmington graduates about:

> Don't say, "tell me some family stories." You've got to get more specific than that. Here's what that will get you: A man in California once told me about visiting his grandmother in Michigan. He hadn't seen her in thirty years, decided to surprise her, knocked on the door and said, "Hi, Grandma. I'm your grandson, David." "Come in," she said. They sat at a little table and talked for a minute. Then he said, "Tell me some family stories." She said, "Who'd you say you were?" He said, "I'm David, your grandson. You remember Betty, your daughter, don't you?" "Yes, I remember Betty." "Well, I'm her son, and that makes me your grandson." The grandmother leaned forward and said, "That's too deep for me."

This same story is repeated almost verbatim by Edgerton's character Carl Turnage in *Lunch at the Piccadilly* (2003), underscoring its importance as a theme that runs throughout Edgerton's work:

> Did you hear about the grandson who went to see his grandma and she didn't know who he was, and he said, "Grandma, I'm David, your daughter's son." She says, "Who?" He says, "You know your daughter, Betty, don't you?" And she says, "Yes." And he kind of points at himself and says, "Well, I'm David, her son, and that makes me your grandson." She looks at him a minute and says, "That's too deep for me." (192)

Like Wesley Benfield, Carl Turnage devoted a good deal of his time to listening to old people. His favorite aunt, Aunt Lil, is a resident at Rosehaven Convalescence Center where she is surrounded by many colorful characters. Lil never had any children, so the duty of looking after her falls to Carl, but from the very beginning it is obvious that Carl's is a labor of love. Besides keeping her blue bowl filled with midget Tootsie Rolls, he allows Lil to drive her '89 Olds although she is really not capable; takes her and her cumbersome walker to the Piccadilly Cafeteria regularly to enjoy the fried chicken; and placates her fears when she calls him from Rosehaven at three a.m. insisting that he pick her up from the jail in South Carolina where she imagines she's being detained. He stands to gain much monetarily upon Lil's death, as he is her sole beneficiary, but monetary gain is a secondary motivation for Carl, whose concern and kindness also prompt him to spend time with retired preacher L. Ray Flowers.

No blood relation to Carl, L. Ray Flowers is a charismatic man who, despite his outlandish ideas, charms everyone he meets. Carl hits it right off with L. Ray when, on the front porch at Rosehaven, they discover they share a love of country songs. This

conversation causes Carl to remember "his songwriting notebook full of half-written lyrics, only two or three complete songs," and inspires him to try his hand at songwriting again: "'I wrote a song – the words,' says Carl. He is in Aunt Lil's room at Rosehaven . . . . 'What kind of song?' 'It's a sort of country song – an idea Mr. Flowers had.' 'Well, let me hear it. . . .' 'I don't have any music yet. Maybe Mr. Flowers will write the music.' Carl thinks of this as a joke, then considers it seriously" (26, 46). Thus, L. Ray and Carl form a songwriting duo, one providing the lyrics while the other provides the music. L. Ray even teaches Carl to play the bass guitar: "Listen, I've got an electric bass in the shop out behind my Airstream . . . . I can show you a few simple patterns on bass and you'll be playing before you know it. I need some backup. And by golly, I think you're the man" (58). The two men wind up performing every Thursday night for the residents at Rosehaven, making Carl "feel he is inside a dream that has nibbled at him for ten years at least" (79).

When Aunt Lil's death leaves Carl with no one to care for, he adopts L. Ray, coming often to visit him after a stroke leaves his left side paralyzed and his speech impaired. Together the two men listen to a CD of their songs, and "L. Ray says, 'That worked out fine.' 'Yeah, it did, didn't it? I appreciate you getting me going on it.' 'I'm much obliged for . . . for everything'" (238-239). L. Ray gives Carl a confidence in himself that had been severely lacking before. Focusing now on his musical talents instead of his short stature or his too high voice, Carl gets direction in life. The impact is mutual because, while Carl gained self-esteem and purpose from L. Ray, he has also

provided L. Ray with what Edgerton had referred to in his 1998 commencement address as "a major need of old people today – someone to listen."

However successful Carl is at listening to old people, he fails miserably at Edgerton's third lesson: "Talk to children. Tell the stories you collect to your children. If you don't plan to have children, then . . . to your nieces and nephews. If all else fails, find a child without a family." Unmarried and without prospects, Carl neither has children of his own nor does he seek out a child without a family. In fact, when he does come face-to-face with the daughter of the only date he has throughout the entire novel, Carl exhibits an awkwardness in conversation unseen in his dealings with the elderly: "'And your name is Ruth?' 'Yes. . . .' 'That's a pretty name.' 'My mama has a boyfriend.' 'Oh, is that right?' 'Yes. And he's a policeman.' 'Oh. Is that right?' 'He's got a gun, too.' 'That's good to know.' What the . . . ? Was she joking?" (105-106). Here, the natural order of things as set forth in Edgerton's speech is disrupted; the child has collected and is telling the story while the adult simply listens, interjecting meaningless, repetitive questions periodically. Failing in this first encounter with a child, Carl will not interact with anyone under middle age later in the novel.

In *Killer Diller* (1991), Wesley is successful on both counts, blending his docile patience with listening to old people's stories and a natural knack for telling his own story to children. In a Ballard University experiment called Project Promise, Wesley is paired with a mentally challenged high school student named Vernon Jackson who wants to learn masonry. At sixteen, Vernon is exactly the age Wesley was when Mattie decided to undertake the daunting task of raising him, so in his many conversations with Vernon,

Wesley extends his teaching beyond bricklaying. For instance, Wesley admonishes Vernon when he fails to use wax paper to pick out doughnuts in the Food Lion: "'You're supposed to use those little sheets of paper. Right there.' 'For what?' 'To pick up the doughnut. You're not supposed to use your fingers.' 'My hands are clean.' 'Just use one of those papers, Vernon'" (62). He teaches Vernon to cut okra: "'Come here. Here, see how I've cut these up? Just little hunks about that big.' Vernon stands beside Wesley, watches, rocking. 'This old lady taught me,' says Wesley. 'I got to live with her for a few years. She gave me some great food, and told me about Jesus. Then . . . See? Like that" (64). And he even shows Vernon how to give a proper handshake: "Like this. You walk into a room, see, and you see somebody standing over there that you want to meet. You walk up like this, look them straight in the eye, stick out your hand and get a firm grip like this, see, and say, 'How do you do? I'm Vernon Jackson.' Pump it a couple of times, turn loose, and that way you get along better in the world" (92). Wesley's teaching culminates in the virtual adoption of Vernon at the end of the novel, mirroring again Wesley's experience with Mattie.

As a novel of "satirical undercurrents" (Clark 532), *Killer Diller* illustrates yet another connection to Edgerton's commencement message of 1998. Offering a humorous example from his own family, Edgerton explains to the UNC-W graduates that, as one of her first spoken questions, his daughter Catherine had inquired as to whether or not Mr. Rogers had a "thing," euphemistic language for "penis." From following his own advice and listening to this child, Edgerton seems to have developed a leitmotif in *Killer Diller*. In Wesley's first session with Vernon Jackson, Wesley instructs Vernon to scrape mortar

off some bricks: "'Sit right over here. No, don't pull that thing over here. You'll have to sit on the floor, on the canvas'" (41). Overhearing Wesley's instructions, Provost Ned Sears corrects him, saying "'That's an ottoman…' *Thing*, he thinks, is one of those words that usually has a better word to take its place" (41). When Vernon's father allows Wesley to drive his truck to get the groceries, Wesley excitedly tells Vernon: "This thing is fun to drive," to which Vernon responds, "It's a truck" (61). Time and again after these scenes, the word "thing" reappears throughout the novel as when Wesley describes to his girlfriend Phoebe a medical problem he once had: "'I had this operation one time.' 'Operation?' 'On my, ah, thing.' This is not exactly right. But if I just say 'thing' it'll be all right. We can talk about it. Maybe she'll talk about it. Who knows? 'Thing?' 'You know, my thing.' 'Wesley!'" (52-53). Like the author's daughter, Wesley assumes that if he uses euphemistic language, then he can breach a delicate subject.

With *Where Trouble Sleeps* (1997), Edgerton underscores in a different manner the need to speak regularly and attentively with children. In the character of Alease Toomey, Stephen's mother, Edgerton reiterates the importance of relaying family history and myth to children. A nightly ritual for mother and son is a bedtime Bible story from a book significantly titled *Aunt Margaret's Bible Stories*. From these stories, young Stephen has learned about Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, about Noah and the ridicule he suffered while building the Ark, and about Adam and Eve, of whom we are all descendants. But as he ponders the fates of Hansen County souls, Stephen reveals that he has perhaps learned as much from his mother's messages interjected into

Aunt Margaret's biblical narrative as he has from the stories themselves. Getting saved, thinks Stephen,

> had to do with visiting old people and going to church every time you were supposed to, cutting off the Blaine sisters' toenails, and things like that for old people. And not drinking beer and whiskey. And it had to do with not saying ugly words, not touching stinky, keeping your pants on, keeping quiet when you were supposed to, not running away from your mama, not playing with your doodie, eating what you were supposed to eat, drinking milk, and being quiet, and it definitely had to do with Moses, Jesus, Peter, Mary, Zacchaeus, Isaac, God, Joseph, Abraham, David, Adam, Ezekiel, Miriam, and not playing in the mud. (38)

Further, Stephen reveals that some carefully selected family history has often been woven into the Bible stories. Getting saved also, continues Stephen, "had to do with the story about Stephen's grandmother when she one time whipped his mama for cutting a piece of cloth on the Lord's Day. And Stephen, the one who got stoned for believing in God. It had to do with him. Somebody got named after him and then went to World War I, and Big Steve was named after that one, and then when Big Steve went to World War II, Stephen got named after him" (38). Alease has opened a line of communication that allows for the steady – in fact, nightly –transmission of Toomey family stories to her receptive young son, and she has thus helped ward off what Edgerton refers to in his UNC-W speech as "THE GREAT MEDIA TRAGEDY," that is "the substitution of someone else's stories for [one's own]. The substitution of Mr. Disney's stories and commercials for [one's] own family stories." As Smith had said five years earlier, our own stories are all we really have.

"Finally," Edgerton stated, "Lesson # 4. . . . Here it is: There is no occasion too joyful, too serious, solemn, sad, too boring or too bland – for the blues." Donning his

shades, Edgerton then begins to sing the "UNCW Blues," a song he apparently composed in honor of the trials and tribulations specific to this university's graduates. Thus, Edgerton's commencement address winds up with a musical performance. Music forms a central element in this author's life: "Edgerton plays a five-string banjo, and his then wife, Susan Ketchin, plays the guitar. Their Tar Water Band is making an album, *The Devil's Dream,* from Lee Smith's novel of the same name" (Powell 83). *Killer Diller* has been turned into a musical, and when Clyde Edgerton gives a reading, he brings along his banjo and his band, interspersing original and covered tunes with his literature.

With music being so influential as a creative outlet in his life, it should come as no surprise that music is also a recurrent theme in Edgerton's fiction. Raney and Charles, for example, are bluegrass musicians; Mattie Rigsbee plays old-fashioned hymns nightly on her piano; Holister Jackson listens to Son House's bottleneck as he repairs cars; Wesley and his BOTA House friends perform in a gospel group; and Carl and L. Ray play and compose gospel and country songs. And as one of L. Ray's sermons suggests, bluegrass, gospel, and country are musical genres that share many commonalities with the blues: "*Besides playing the blues at the First Breakfast, O God in us all, we're going to invoke the spirits of Ralph Stanley, Mother Maybelle, Ernest Tubb, Bob Wills, John Prine, and Hank Williams. We'll have Carter Family nights, and we will sing out of the Broadman Hymnal till our heads fall off. Just a Friend We Have in the Old Rugged Rock of Ages*" (65-66). The overlap between gospel and the blues is also evident in that Wesley's group "is a gospel band, the Noble Defenders of the Word, waiting to become a blues band" (23).

Like Edgerton, Wesley is a performer who uses his music to express himself. Throughout *Killer Diller*, Wesley is constantly composing blues songs, each one significant to what is taking place in his life at that time. At the beginning of the novel, Wesley struggles to reconcile his Christian beliefs on premarital sex with his natural urges. After he meets his girlfriend Phoebe at the Copy-Op, this struggle only intensifies, and Wesley sings: "*What do I do, Lord Jesus,/ with the women in my dreams?/ Some are dressed, some are not,/ and they come at me, it seems./ They come at me through soft satin doors./ Lord, what did you do with yours?/ Lord, what did you do with yours?"* (20-21). During his visit to Shady Grove, "Wesley sings the blues: '*Old people, old people, all over the earth./ If old people could turn new,/ Just think what they'd be worth,*'" restating Edgerton's own sentiments regarding the wealth of information contained within the elderly (88).

Further, in order to make amends with Phoebe after his sexual advances offend her, Wesley apologizes through song: "*I know you feel mad, I know you're feeling sad./ There ain't nothing I can do,/ but sit right here and get blue, too./ It'd be so nice, if you'd call me right now,/ and talk about the weather/ telling me whether/ you still love me like before – that you do./ Wish you were here, at my front door right now/ to ring my doorbell*" (115). He composes "Sour Sweetheart Blues" also as a result of these same tensions between him and Phoebe:

> '*I went down to the river, yesterday afternoon./ I went down to the river, yesterday afternoon./ And when I got down to the river . . . I went fishing./ And I sang this song:/ I got the sour sweetheart blues. I'm gonna jump in the river and drown./ I got the sour sweetheart blues. I'm gonna jump in the river and drown./ I think my woman loves me, then she shoots me down./ I took her to the circus,/ I took her to the fair,/ I took her down to*

> *the river for some loving -- / She wanted to go back to the fair./ I got the sour sweetheart blues, muddy water in my cup./ I wish my sweetheart . . . I wish she'd sweeten up.'* (124)

Each time Wesley encounters a perplexing quandary, a strong memory, a unique thought, he expresses it through song, proving that, as Edgerton asserted in North Carolina, the blues can accommodate all situations. More importantly, though, Wesley's heart is in the blues:

> The band's plans are to . . . expand to blues, maybe some rhythm and blues, change the band's name from the Noble Defenders of the Word to the Fat City Blues Band and head to Myrtle Beach or Key West – or somewhere like that – and a future that includes long nights of playing blues to hot, dancing crowds. (23-24)

And at the end of the novel, he does just that; he follows his heart to Myrtle Beach with his Fat City Blues Band and Phoebe and Vernon in tow.

Perhaps Clyde Edgerton did not purposefully pattern his performance before that 1998 graduating class after the themes that had appeared, or would appear, in his fictional works. However, as Dannye Powell pointed out in an interview with Edgerton, "a writer's values may end up in a story, even though that writer is not consciously trying to give any aboveboard messages to the reader" (85). Clearly, this is the case with those four values Edgerton attempted to instill in his Wilmington audience and with those works in which these values are manifest. Following one's heart, listening to old people, talking to children, and listening to the blues, due to the consistent and repetitive manner in which they appear throughout Edgerton's fiction and oratory, can certainly be construed as didactic messages apparent, if not intentionally placed, within Edgerton's work. And these didactic messages, like Lee Smith's explanation of the function of the

story, resonate with listening audiences because Edgerton and Smith rely less on stilted oratorical conventions or the repetition of abstractions than on innovative performance techniques and concrete advice about simple human acts of piety and respect.

NOTES

[1] Title quotation is taken from Clyde Edgerton's *Lunch at the Piccadilly* (130).

[2] Southerners speaking at Rice during these years include former Secretary of State James A. Baker in 1991, former President Jimmy Carter in 1993, former President of the American Red Cross Elizabeth Dole in 1994, and civil rights lawyer Morris Dees in 2001. Among non-Southern commencement speakers to speak at Rice between 1991 and 2004 are the first president of unified Germany Richard von Weizsächer in 1992, O.J. Simpson lawyer Alan Derschowitz in 1997, author Kurt Vonnegut in 1998, and comedian-actor Bill Cosby in 2002.

[3] In an August 1992 interview, Clyde Edgerton apparently makes reference to and disagrees with this same quotation from Reynolds Price: "Recently I heard someone say that our need for narrative is stronger than our need for love or shelter. I can't go that far. Without love people have no reason to tell the story. Love is to be there for you when you want to tell your story" ("Dusty's Flying Taxi").

Chapter Five

"You're an Educated Feller, ain't you?" Opposing Opinions on Education[1]

Full of pomp and circumstance, strutting and posturing, commencement festivities are academe's most prideful displays. Dressed with distinction and bedecked with colorful cords and hoods, students, university administrators, and faculty march onto center stage – an area symbolically cordoned off from the rest of the crowd by velvet roping – and assume their places of honor. Even before degrees have been conferred, most graduates have settled comfortably into their newfound superior status with a heady self-importance born of the event itself. After all, each aspect of the graduation ceremony is designed to separate and elevate degree-holders (the haves) from non-degree-holders (the have-nots). Perched like a dignitary on the platform, commencement speakers often observe and comment on the implications of this ancient ceremony as well as the university degree in their graduation speeches.

Commencement speakers hailing from the South – traditionally the region with the lowest SAT scores in the nation[2] – hold conflicting opinions on the advanced degree. Some vehemently oppose the implied superiority of degree holders, arguing that education and wisdom are, at best, two tenuously related entities. Others praise the efforts of universities, heralding them as vital bastions of human thought and discovery. The holder of a high school diploma and countless honorary degrees, writer-poet-activist Maya Angelou subscribes to the former opinion and proudly asserts in both her writings and her speeches that what wisdom she possesses originated with African-Americans – predominantly female – having little or no formal education. Conversely, in his works

and graduation talks, writer-poet-professor Fred Chappell passionately defends the value of the university degree, arguing for its positive impact on the civilized quest for truth, justice, and self.

Representative of her views, Maya Angelou's 1981 Wheaton College commencement speech begins conventionally enough, with Angelou thanking everyone and congratulating the graduates on "your persistence, and your hard work, your occasional good luck" (Wheaton Address). The body of her speech, however, departs abruptly from customary commencement practices. Instead of extolling the virtues of the college degree, she cautions the graduates not to rest on this laurel alone:

> Beyond the facts that you have memorized and the ideas with which you have wrestled – accepting some, rejecting others, misunderstanding most – what have you really acquired? A degree! A degree which enables you to pursue another degree. But have you ever really thought of the word 'degree'? It is a percentage of something. A degree. An M.A., a Ph.D. is a degree of something. It is upon <u>you</u> to complete the whole. You, <u>you</u> take life by the lapel. Sometimes you move it, sometimes you don't. But you hold on and complete the whole. (Wheaton Address)

Angelou implies here that formal academic education is poor preparation indeed for the world beyond academe's ivory towers:

> I would like to remind you of the real world which exists. It is full of honorable people, cruel people, cooperative employers and unkind bosses, friendly neighbors and neighborhood murderers, cruel colleagues and supportive fellow-workers. Now how do you for the most part, a group of well-to-do white girls, make your existence count in a world which is populated for the most part by people who do not resemble you? (Wheaton Address)

The university, in Angelou's opinion, fails to supply the answer to this question, and in so failing, does not teach the graduates to be productive citizens of the "real world."

Her idea of formal education as an extravagant and virtually dispensable entity evolved as early as grade school. Born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1928, Maya Angelou was raised for a number of years by her paternal grandmother, called "Momma," in Stamps, Arkansas, before rejoining her mother, Vivian Baxter, and moving around the country. At a time when public schools were legally segregated, Angelou entered first Lafayette County Training School in Arkansas and then Touissant L'Overture Grammar School in Missouri. Both schools had a negative impact on Angelou. In her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) she recalls memorizing, but not learning, the multiplication tables at Lafayette County Training School: "We learned the times tables without understanding their grand principle, simply because we had the capacity and no alternative" (*I Know* 10-11). The rote memorization of facts taught in school contrasts sharply with the practical math Angelou learned, and was praised for, in her grandmother's store:

> Weighing the half-pounds of flour, excluding the scoop, and depositing them dust-free into the thin paper sacks held a simple kind of adventure for me. I developed an eye for measuring how full a silver-looking ladle of flour, mash, meal, sugar, or corn had to be to push the scale indicator over to eight ounces or one pound. When I was absolutely accurate our appreciative customers used to admire: 'Sister Henderson sure got some smart grandchildrens.' (*I Know* 15)

Of the Missouri grammar school she similarly writes: "We [Angelou and brother Bailey] were struck by the ignorance of our schoolmates and the rudeness of our teachers . . . . all I remember hearing that I hadn't heard before was, 'Making thousands of egg-shaped oughts will improve penmanship'" (*I Know* 63). Worse still, the St. Louis teachers Angelou encountered "tended to act very siditty, and talked down to their

students from the lofty heights of education and whitefolks' enunciation" (*I Know* 64). From an early age, then, Angelou determined that schoolteachers were conceited with their own sense of superiority, a condition that did not lend itself to sharing knowledge with others, and that schools were largely ineffective, teaching inconsequential skills such as penmanship.

These early impressions are significantly reinforced after Angelou encounters Mrs. Bertha Flowers. A friend of Angelou's grandmother, Mrs. Flowers is "the aristocrat of Black Stamps" and represents "our side's answer to the richest white woman in town," so young Maya Angelou cringes with embarrassment when she listens to her grandmother's conversations with Mrs. Flowers (*I Know* 93). She remembers:

> When she passed on the road in front of the Store, she spoke to Momma in that soft yet carrying voice, 'Good day, Mrs. Henderson.' Momma responded with 'How you, Sister Flowers?' . . . . Why on earth did she insist on calling her Sister Flowers? Shame made me want to hide my face. Mrs. Flowers deserved better than to be called Sister. Then, Momma left out the verb. Why not ask, 'How *are* you, *Mrs.* Flowers?' . . . . Mrs. Flowers would drift off the road and down to the store and Momma would say to me, 'Sister, you go on and play.' As I left I would hear the beginning of an intimate conversation. Momma persistently using the wrong verb or none at all. (*I Know* 94)

At first young Angelou fails to see that Mrs. Flowers and Mrs. Henderson "were as alike as sisters, separated only by formal education" (*I Know* 94). But after a visit to Mrs. Flowers' home, Angelou learns that her grandmother's grammatical errors (lack of academic training) should not be misconstrued as a lack of intelligence (life wisdom). Mrs. Flowers warns that Angelou "must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy. That some people, unable to go to school, were more educated and even more intelligent than college professors" (*I Know* 99). Thus, in spite of

her claim that "persons have few teachable moments in their lives," Angelou is taught early on that true education has little to do with a diploma, especially for blacks who were so often denied access to academia (*Wouldn't Take Nothing for my Journey Now* 87).

Ironically, Angelou's own eighth grade commencement ceremony underscores Mrs. Flowers' message and helps to explain Angelou's unusual remarks at Wheaton in 1981. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou writes: "The children in Stamps trembled visibly with anticipation. Some adults were excited too, but to be certain the whole young population had come down with graduation epidemic. . . . But the graduating classes themselves were the nobility" (*I Know* 169). Graduating at a top place in her class, Angelou was filled with a rare sense of pride and accomplishment – until the commencement speaker, a white man from Texarkana, began his speech. According to Angelou's account,

> he told us of the wonderful changes we children in Stamps had in store. The Central School (naturally, the white school was Central) had already been granted improvements that would be in use in the fall. A well-known artist was coming from Little Rock to teach art to them. They were going to have the newest microscopes and chemistry equipment for their laboratory. . . . Nor were we to be ignored in the general betterment scheme he had in mind. He said that he had pointed out to people at a very high level that one of the first-line football tacklers at Arkansas Agricultural and Mechanical College had graduated from good old Lafayette County Training School. . . . He went on to say how he bragged that 'one of the best basketball players at Fisk sank his first ball right here at Lafayette County Training School.' (*I Know* 178-179)

Justifiably offended by the implication that black male students could achieve athletic but not academic fame, Angelou summarizes the impact of the speaker's message:

> The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren't even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owenses and Joe Louises. . . . The man's dead words fell like bricks around the auditorium and too many settled in my belly . . . . Graduation, the hush-hush magic time of frills and gifts and congratulations and diplomas, was finished for me before my name was called. The accomplishment was nothing. (*I Know* 179-180)

Though she goes on to graduate from high school and receive a scholarship for more advanced studies, Angelou has become disenchanted with the pursuit of higher education. Having learned that academia perpetuates racial and gender separateness, she never goes to college, never earns a degree. However, with impressive honors in stage, screen, and print, she has certainly – to paraphrase her rhetorical question at Wheaton – made her existence count in a world which is populated for the most part by people who do not resemble her.

In her 1981 talk, Angelou asserts that survival in the environs beyond Wheaton's isolating halls will require a kind of knowledge not taught in the university. Following her example, the graduates must learn to "use love. Love. By love I do not mean that indulgence, that sentimental indulgence, I mean that love which builds bridges, that love which is really a statement of <u>your</u> commitment to your species. <u>That</u> love" (Wheaton Address). She suggests that black American history is a good source for learning about the kind of love that allows even the downtrodden and denied to thrive. She compares the 600,000 surviving Native Americans to the more than thirty million black Americans, and "that is a conservative estimate. I have a friend who says there are more than thirty million black people in the Baptist Church and he's not even counting backsliders. So, I suggest that that survival can be credited directly to love. We have nursed a nation of

strangers, under the most bizarre circumstances. And we have survived" (Wheaton Address).[3]

Deprived of formal education and, in many cases, even basic literacy, black Americans grew wise through other means, acquiring the sort of wisdom that Angelou admires as "the whole" and not "a degree." Instead of exhibiting bitterness toward their oppressors, most blacks "were obliged to laugh when they weren't tickled and scratch when they didn't itch" (Wheaton Address). Referred to as "Aunt Jemimaing" and "Uncle Tomming," these gestures are pictured throughout Angelou's written work. In an essay entitled "They Came to Stay," for instance, Angelou describes the plight of the black female and society's tendency to ascribe to her "multiple personalities," not the least of which was the "Aunt Jemimas with grinning faces, plump laps, fat embracing arms and brown jaws pouched in laughter" (*Even the Stars* 43).[4] *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986) explains that "The Black child must learn early to allow laughter to fill his mouth or the million small cruelties he encounters will congeal and clog his throat" (150). And *Gather Together in My Name* (1974) depicts Angelou's encounter with cold Army medics as she recalls her "training – that is, 'Never let white folks know what you really think. If you're sad, laugh. If you're bleeding inside, dance'" (102). Later in the same novel, she ruminates on "the maids and doormen, factory workers and janitors who were able to leave their ghetto homes and rub against the cold-shouldered white world . . . . They smiled a dishonest acceptance at their mean servitude. . . . locked in the unending maze of having to laugh without humor and scratch without agitation" (196).

The author never denigrates such gestures, but rather praises them always as heroic evidence of survival, love, and commitment to one's species, precisely those characteristics that the Wheaton graduates had yet to acquire. To them, Angelou admits, "I don't think we've stopped often enough to regard that black man who said 'No sir, bub. You right. I'm stupid,' so he could make enough money so he could come home and feed me. Or that black woman who said 'No, m'am, Miss Ann. You didn't hurt me when you slapped me. No, m'am. I ain't tender-hearted,' so that she could make enough money so she could come home and feed me. That is love" (Wheaton Address). As a better illustration, Angelou proffers the character sketch of a black maid riding a New York City bus:

> I watched her for over nine months. When the bus stopped too abruptly she'd laugh. When it would pass someone, she'd laugh, When it would pick someone up ---- laugh ----. I watched that and then I thought, you know, if you don't know black features, you may think she's laughing. She is not laughing. Nothing is happening to her eyes. She is simply extending her lips and making a sound. She was utilizing that old survival apparatus. (Wheaton Address)

She then recites from "When I Think About Myself," the poem she wrote in honor of this character: "When I think about myself,/ I almost laugh myself to death . . . My life has been one great big joke./ A dance that walked, a song that spoke./ I laugh so hard, I nearly choke/ when I think about myself./ Sixty years in these folks' world,/ the child I work for calls me 'girl.'/ I say, 'Ha-ha! Yes, m'am' for working sake" (Wheaton Address).

Judging by her many appearances in Angelou's speeches, this figure is an important one for Angelou. The same figure appears, for example, in her Smith College

commencement address as well, given in May 1980 before another audience of predominantly white female graduates from privileged backgrounds. Declaring her thesis at Smith, Angelou says, "I'm going to speak to you about love and the courage to love, indeed, about courage itself. It is the most important of all the virtues because without courage you cannot be sure that you can practice any other virtue with consistency" ("Commencement Speech May 1980" 4).[5] And to illustrate, she gives voice to her New York City bus rider, prefacing her poem with historical background:

> Black people in this country were obliged for centuries to laugh when they weren't tickled and to scratch when they didn't itch. And those gestures have come down to us as Uncle Tomming and Aunt Jemimaing. I suggest to you that people live in direct relationship to the heroes and sheroes they have, in all ways and always and that those people who laughed and scratched and carried on were very successful or I would not have the privilege to have been asked to speak to you here today. ("Commencement Speech May 1980" 6).

Clearly contrasting the cold superfluity of the university education and the compassionate capability of the self-made individual, Angelou concludes her Smith speech by asking, "When will you commence? What will you do? It is the question that you must ask yourselves. What will you do about your lives? What will you really, really, really do?" ("Commencement Speech May 1980" 6).

Concluding her remarks at Wheaton, she offers an example from Wheaton's own past. "In 1864," she explains, "a group of women at Wheaton wrote an editorial on the Civil War. Ladies, the first of the 80's, I suggest you think of these words quite seriously. The courage and the incredible love, not love for blacks, but love for <u>right</u> which these words reveal" (Wheaton Address). The editorial that Angelou quotes from places blame for "this desolating war" not only on "the officers and upholders of the Confederacy," but

also on "you, sir, who voted for the Fugitive Slave bill" and "you, sir, a judge who sent back that trembling slave to be mangled by the whip of the overseer" (qtd. in Wheaton Address). Obviously moved by the audacity and compassion of the Wheaton women of 1864, Angelou encourages the '81 graduates to follow their predecessors' lead: "Ladies, this editorial was written in 1864 under tremendous pressure. You are living in a world and going out into a world that has much more pressure. And yet, you can do it. You must do it. You must take responsibility for the time you take up and the state you occupy. Seize it, this world, as yours. Yours to change. Yours to increase. Yours to improve. You are phenomenal," finishing with a recitation of her poem "Phenomenal Woman" (Wheaton Address).

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou states what seems to be her mantra regarding formal education: "The quality of strength lined with tenderness is an unbeatable combination, as are intelligence and necessity when unblunted by education" (219). Indeed, her autobiographical novels are filled with examples of her preference for individuals "unblunted by education." For instance, she admires Daddy Clidell, one of her mother's many suitors, "a simple man who had no inferiority complex about his lack of education and, even more amazing, no superiority complex because he had succeeded despite that lack" (*I Know* 220). *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986) depicts the African mistrust of Beentoos, "a derisive word used for a person who had studied abroad and returned to Ghana with European airs," and shows a defenseless Angelou as she is verbally assaulted by an African man named Sheikhali (52). Angrily, he states, "I know the desert. I find my way through sand that burns and sun that bites, and I am never

lost. I look at a cow. I feed a horse. I know them. I look at the moon and read the weather. You know books. Me, I know life. I have never been into one school. Not one. You read. I can write my name. So you know schools, but I know man, woman, cow, horse, desert, jungle, sun and moon. Who is smart, you or me?" (*All God's Children* 94).

Her third autobiography, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), includes an encounter between Angelou's brother Bailey, who dropped out of high school in the eleventh grade, and her fiancé Tosh who "studied literature at Reed College in Oregon" (25). Angelou notices with pride that Bailey holds his own in a conversation "about jazz musicians and the literary virtues of Philip Wylie and Aldous Huxley" (25). In *Even the Stars Look Lonesome,* she separates from her African husband even though "He possessed every bit of information about the known world, how many square miles were arable in the Sahel, why the French were involved in Algeria's Black Hand organization, how long King Chaka had occupied the Zulu throne, how long Sisyphus had been pushing the rock, even how long the train has been gone" because "he had no idea of how to make me happy" (*Even the Stars* 54). *The Heart of a Woman,* published the same year that she spoke at Wheaton, discusses Angelou's travels to Egypt, where she observes that education and love are too often at odds: "I met Egyptian women who had earned doctorates from European universities, and serious painters and talented actresses, but I found them too trained, too professionally fixed, to welcome the chummy contact of friendship" (239). In each instance, the self-made individual, educated in love and courage (the whole), outshines the university scholar, who has merely acquired trivial facts (a degree).

Angelou's written and verbal reproof of higher education is unacceptable to North Carolina native Fred Chappell. Speaking in 1998 to graduates at East Carolina University – an institution that opened in 1907 as a teacher training school and has since grown into a research university – and in 1999 at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNC-G), Fred Chappell counters Angelou's views. His remarks on those occasions demonstrate his interest in the defense of higher education, an institution that in Chappell's view had come under attack from a bevy of self-proclaimed self-made commencement speakers, Maya Angelou among them,[6] who "have stood on the hospitable platform and told audiences as large as ours today that a college education is not worth having" (East Carolina Address). Having been raised by two schoolteachers who encouraged intellectual growth and reading and having earned an M.A. degree from Duke University in 1964, Chappell takes understandable offense to what he perceives as a trend toward the denigration of education. The aim of both of Chappell's speeches is "to shock the establishment" into recognizing that higher education is not extravagant or dispensable, that education remains paramount to any civilized society (East Carolina Address). Likewise, Chappell seeks to cast higher education into a positive light in his fiction, particularly the novels published in the decades leading up to and beyond the 1998 and 1999 commencement talks. The Kirkman Tetralogy – a kunstlerroman chronicling the boyhood, youth, and middle age of Jess Kirkman – boasts multiple main characters who hold higher degrees, a disproportionate number in their Appalachian surroundings,[7] and who have survived in Angelou's real world, with love and courage as well as academic knowledge.

Although his existential first novels included sporadic references to higher education — Peter Leland of *Dagon* (1968) notably attends "the single large privately endowed university in the state," for instance – Chappell did not begin bringing educational issues to the forefront of his fiction until 1985, when *I Am One of You Forever*, the first book of the tetralogy, was published (32). Taking place between 1940-1942, this book introduces readers to Jess Kirkman, the tetralogy's narrator, and his colorful extended family as a parade of four eccentric uncles, and one aunt moves in and out of Jess's life. Though Chappell's episodes here are undeniably comic, they also convey a serious theme. Each one of these visitors brings to Jess a veiled message about the merits of education that prefigures Chappell's defense of the university at East Carolina in 1998 and at UNC-G in 1999.

In *I Am One of You Forever*, the first to arrive is Uncle Luden, a womanizer "from the unimaginable world beyond our mountains" (32). Bearing gifts for all, Luden brings Jess "a binocular contraption which showed a dozen or so inviting naked ladies inside," but the adults around Jess refuse to let him see it (32). As a result, Jess becomes frustrated with his own lack of education and thinks:

> When I was as old as Ember Mountain they would still be keeping the important things from me. When I was ninety-nine years old and sitting on the porch in a rocking chair combing my long white beard, some towhead youngun would come up and ask, "What's it mean, grampaw, what is the world about?" and I would lean over and dribble tobacco spit into a rusty tin can and say, "I don't know, little boy. The sons of bitches never would tell me." (33)

As Joe Robert declares later in the novel, “there’s different kinds of education,” and young Jess despairs of ever obtaining the kind of education necessary to function in the adult world (163).

The next in the processional of relatives, Uncle Gurton with his forty-year-old “fabled beard,” reinforces this despair (48). To Jess, Gurton seems to defy science by a “habit of absenting and distancing himself . . . . Snuffed out of the present world like a match flame. Translated into another and inevitable dimension of space. What? Where? When was he? He was an enigma of many variations” (52). Jess’s series of questions are reminiscent of the scientific method and provide explicit evidence of his quest for knowledge in the face of many enigmas. Inspiring such a quest, says Chappell at UNC-G in 1999, is the “traditional mission of the university: to tease, rack, exacerbate, cajole, threaten, and bribe students into being able to think for themselves” (UNC-G Address).

“Repeating words whispered to him by another voice issuing from somewhere beyond the high, fleecy clouds,” Uncle Zeno appears next as a blend of liberal arts disciplines (98). Sharing the name of a pre-Socratic philosopher and logician, Zeno entrances with his many stories which always begin with the words, “*That puts me in mind of* . . .” (98). As Jess explicates, “these six flat monosyllables . . . are the leisurely herald notes which signal that time has stopped. . . This is the power that beginnings have over us; we must find out what comes next and cannot pursue even the most urgent of our personal interests with any feeling of satisfaction until we do find out. The speaker of these words holds easy dominion” (98). Inextricably linked to Zeno’s stories are multiple references to *The Iliad* with Joe Robert likening Zeno to celebrated storyteller Homer.

Inspired by Zeno's "easy dominion," Joe Robert sets out to develop storytelling skills to rival the master, but as Jess remembers, Joe Robert falls a bit short:

> I could recall vividly my father's retelling of the *Iliad*. He found a magazine photograph of Betty Grable and propped it on the mantelpiece by the gilt pendulum clock and said that Miss Grable was Helen of Troy and had been stolen away by a lick-hair drugstore cowboy named Paris. Were we going to stand for that? Hell no. We were going to round up a posse and sail the wine-dark seas and rescue her. He flung himself down on the sagging sofa to represent Achilles loafing in his tent, all in a sulk over the beautiful captive maiden Briseis. . . . The account ended ten minutes later with my father dragging three times around the room a dusty sofa cushion which was the vanquished corpse of Hector. (103)

Though Joe Robert's live-action rendition of *The Iliad* is patently unique and quite humorous, Jess resorts to reading "the poem in a Victorian prose translation, and I found it less confusing than his redaction, its thrills ordered" (103).

Uncle Runkin, the final uncle to visit, exhibits a morbid fascination with death, constantly searching tombstones for the perfect epitaph and spending twenty-five years carefully crafting his own coffin – which he sleeps in nightly. As a result of Runkin's visit, Jess's outlook is profoundly impacted as he begins to see chores and education as superfluous in the face of certain mortality: "I'd never been much interested in coffins before, but prolonged exposure to Uncle Runkin had begun to change my outlook, and I thought it might not be such a bad thing to be dead, not have to get up on frosty mornings to milk crazy old cows, not having to learn multiplication or the capital of North Dakota" (130-131). Here, Jess demonstrates an attitude very similar to those recent commencement speakers that Chappell quotes in his 1999 UNC-G speech: "'You'll never in your life find any reason to have learned quadratic equations,' say the celebrated ladies and

gentlemen who address the departing seniors. 'Get ready for the real world in which the Treaty of Versailles, the location of Patagonia, the sonnets of Shakespeare, the philosophy of Aristotle, and the French language have no relevance'" (UNC-G Speech).

Soon, however, a nap in Runkin's coffin alters Jess's perspective again. In the coffin, Jess dreams of a disturbing encounter with Death himself: "I jerked and quivered from the shock of his touch, and yelled an awful yell, a soul-shaking screech. Death yelled too and leapt back away from me, and it was obvious that he also had been frightened. Death and I had met face to face and scared the pee out of each other" (132). Although the "pinched, intense face" with "sunken eyes burning dementedly" turns out to be Runkin himself, peering over Jess in his coffin, this episode seems designed to teach Jess an important lesson. As John Lang explains, "Despite the prominence that Chappell gives to the fact of death, he also makes it clear, through his portrait of Uncle Runkin in 'The Maker of One Coffin' (chapter 7), that becoming obsessed with death is misguided. While death is inevitable, it must not be allowed to eclipse life's many gifts, as Uncle Runkin permits it to do" (221). Undeniably, academic education is one of those life gifts that Lang refers to, and throughout the remaining books of the Kirkman Tetralogy, Jess actively pursues learning, ultimately teaching at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and publishing poetry under the nom de plume of "Fred Chappell."

The most overt encouragement toward learning Jess receives in *I Am One of You Forever* comes, however, from Aunt Samantha Barefoot, a famous fiddler and banjo player. Upon arrival, Aunt Sam "said it was grand that I [Jess] read so many books, someday I would be a scholar of high renown" (167). And after recounting her audience

before the Queen of England, Aunt Sam informs Jess that the Queen "takes a keen interest in scholars of high renown. You keep on reading your books" (173). Aunt Sam's character can be read as something akin to a conglomeration of the menial laborers Chappell encountered after his expulsion from Duke University.[8] "The people I worked with," explains Chappell to the 1999 UNC-G audience,

> were not college graduates, nor were they widely read. But most of them were wiser than the commencement speakers who don steamy academic robes and tell you that the attainment that is now yours is a worthless one. Each and every one of my fellow workers advised me to return. 'Go back to school,' they said . . . 'Education is the best thing you can have because <u>they</u> <u>can't</u> <u>take</u> <u>that</u> <u>away</u> <u>from</u> <u>you</u>. . . . In my goofball youth they saw the opportunities they had disregarded or that had been unavailable to them . . . . A deep discontentment gnawed at the roots of many a stalwart heart. They imagined that beyond the sturdy wooden gate of their daily existence lay a finer and easier life and that education was the silver key to open that gate. (UNC-G Address)

Not a college graduate herself, Aunt Sam shares the same perspective as Chappell's co-workers, and appearing as it does in the final numbered chapter of the book, the Aunt Sam episode resonates with readers and with a young Jess whose natural tendencies toward intellectual pursuits are further enriched by Sam's encouragement. In essence, Aunt Sam encourages Jess in the same way that Fred Chappell seeks to inspire the East Carolina and UNC-G graduates.

The tetralogy's second book, *Brighten the Corner Where You Are* (1990) continues and extrapolates the theme of education as it traces, again with Jess as narrator, a single day in the life of Jess's thirty-six-year-old father, Joe Robert Kirkman. In less than a twenty-four-hour period in May 1946, Joe Robert is outsmarted by the fabled devil-possum, falls out of a tall tree, saves a child from drowning, teaches a general

science class, coaxes a wayward goat down from the high school's roof, defends himself before the school board for teaching evolution, and is invited to "head up the Governor's Special Commission on Education" (189). And interwoven amidst these humorous occurrences are numerous references to higher education. For instance, Joe Robert fondly remembers his former physics professor at Acton College, and he laments a promising student's decision not to attend college, admitting to her: "I really had high hopes that you would be going to college. Woman's College, maybe, down to Greensboro, or the University of Tennessee. I could have written letters to help get you in" (196).[9] Also, since much of the novel's narration is concerned with Joe Robert's classroom techniques, Chappell's "focus on a teacher in this novel reflects his commitment both to education as a means of effecting change and to the didactic function of literature. If the writer's aims, in the classical Horatian formula, are both to delight and to instruct, the same holds true of Joe Robert's aims in the classroom. Many of the pleasures of this novel arise from Chappell's affectionate depiction of Joe Robert's classroom teaching" (239).

Symbolic of his message on the need for higher education, Chappell includes a scene in which Joe Robert teaches his class about Tiglath Pileser who "was the youngest scholar ever to attend Oxford University in England" (72). But what Joe Robert stresses most here is the pride that Tiglath Pileser takes in his scholarly attire: "You'll understand that he was very proud of his cap and gown and wore his traditional scholarly dress constantly, often not even disrobing before sleep" (72-73). These words parallel Chappell's imperative to the East Carolina graduates: "Be proud of your mortarboard! Wear it night and day for the rest of your life. Never take it off. For one of the things it

proclaims to one and all is that you have an awareness of the civilization you were born to and a gratitude toward it. The mortarboard, the robe, the sheepskin all declare: I am not a self-made person and am proud to say so" (East Carolina Address). Thus, his 1998 address rephrased his fictional message of eight years earlier.

A six-year break in the Kirkman story did not signify a change in theme. *More Shapes than One* (1991) presents thirteen tales that put forth protagonists with advanced degrees. In "The Snow that is Nothing in the Triangle," Herr Professor Feuerbach, a German mathematician, challenges his students by brandishing a sword and "threatening in all seriousness to behead those who could not solve the problem he would propose" (31). "Barcarole" traces "il gran maestro" Jacques Offenbach as he obsesses over an eerie lost melody (46). "Linnaeus Forgets" depicts renowned Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus who strives to identify and classify a mysterious plant that houses entire populations of animals and people in miniature. Defying known scientific classifications, the plant, as well as the life within it, symbolizes the essential need for lifelong education.

Arguably the most symbolic of the stories, "The Somewhere Doors" implicitly reveals Chappell's affinity for higher education. In this story, a modestly published science fiction writer named Arthur Strakl encounters a beautiful woman who informs him that he is to be granted two doors that "open to other worlds, worlds different from our own" (80). Arthur must decide whether he would prefer the door which leads to "the Garden Planet, the world brimful of pristine creation;" Or perhaps he would "like to inhabit the golden utopian world that philosophers and visionaries over the centuries had guessed at" and "immerse himself in the grandest productions of religious thought,

scientific ingenuity, governmental peace, and aesthetic achievement of which human beings were capable" (89). Arthur's second option obviously symbolizes the finest results that a university has to offer, while the first leads to edenic paradise. Ultimately, Arthur determines that both options have a flaw: "Utopia and paradise could not remember. They were eternal and unaging and had no history to come to nor any to leave behind. . . . He had already opened both Doors and visited both Somewheres. He was ready to fling open wide the third door, the entrance to the world in which he already lived. . . . much awaited him still" (97). In other words, both paradise and utopia would deprive him of a past, unthinkable for Southern writers like Chappell. And worse yet, choosing Utopia would grant him the *end product* of education, but it would deprive him of the *pursuit* of formal education, of the experiments for which the outcome is unknown and of the wisdom gleaned from a history of errors and interaction with others who also make mistakes. Recognizing that the notion of the self-made man is as much an illusion as the fanciful science fiction tales he writes, Arthur foreshadows his rejection of utopia early in the story as he significantly "flipped past the ads for self-education" in a magazine (72).

Chappell resumes the story of the Kirkmans in *Farewell, I'm Bound to Leave You* (1996), honored as the year's most distinguished novel by the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. This book opens with Jess's grandmother on her deathbed and retraces much of the impact of Annie Barbara Sorrells on her family and community. Throughout the book are references to education, especially in the section entitled "The Shooting Woman" which describes the meeting and courting of Jess's parents. Working as teachers at the same high school, Cora, Jess's mother, had taken a liking to Joe Robert, but he was

not “interested in anything at all except his dreary old science” (31). As a teacher of ninth and tenth grade English, history, and Spanish, Cora despaired of ever sparking Joe Robert’s interest. She proclaimed: “I’ve got no head for it. . . As soon as I look at them, the numbers and facts run together in a soup” (31). Annie Barbara reminded her daughter: “You’re a shining scholar. . . You took high honors at Carson-Newman College and the University of Tennessee. . . . You round us up some books of science to commence with and I’ll help you. I’ll quiz you every night on what you’ve read” (31).

The implication is that Cora’s graduation did not signify an end to her learning and that her university training sufficiently prepared her to tackle disciplines she never studied. Such preparation is a primary university goal, according to Chappell who tells his 1998 East Carolina audience that graduation “is often the point in their lives when graduating seniors congratulate themselves for having escaped the clutches of education at last. But of course it has been the job of the university to see to it that they never escape, that they have been prepared in ways that enable them to see in every aspect of their lives opportunities to learn, to observe, and to compare what is before them with what they know of the past” (East Carolina Address). Likewise, he warns his 1999 UNC-G audience: “if you suppose that in graduating from UNC-G you have said goodbye forever to education – well, that just ain’t the case. What the university has done – if we have performed our function – makes it possible for you to continue learning” (UNC-G Address).

“The Remembering Women,” the book’s concluding chapter, introduces Dr. Holme Barcroft, a Scotsman musicologist and folklorist who collects mountain songs and

tales. Recommended by the school superintendent, Annie Barbara serves as guide and scribe to Dr. Barcroft as he researches Appalachian folkways; she helps him so that "all the world could read and know us the way we lived in the coves and on the sides of the hazy hills. They would learn from his books that we were people like other people, wise and foolish, brave and frightened, saintly and unholy and ordinary. The only thing we mountain folk lacked was riches, and it may be that our poverty only displayed our other qualities in a sharper light" (197). As John Lang has pointed out, this is also an aim implicit in Chappell's books, but the figure of Dr. Holme Barcroft is important on other levels as well (255).

When he meets the Laffertys, for instance, Holme Barcroft is redundantly called "Dr. Barcroft," provoking him to say, "I do desire you to call me by my first name, Holme" and again "I do wish you would call me Holme, though, as all my friends do" (204). In spite of the Scots' request, Quigley Lafferty continues to refer to him by his academic title: "Not the richest bribe would ever get the name Holme out of Quigley's mouth; he took too fine a pleasure in calling his friend Dr. It was such a source of pride to him that he sucked at his pipe stem a little more sharply and rocked a little harder each time he spoke the title" (205). The pride that Lafferty takes in befriending a university-educated man parallels sentiments expressed in Chappell's graduation speeches. Speaking to a group composed mostly of undergraduates, Fred Chappell tells his East Carolina audience what the symbols of education signify:

> The robe, the mortarboard, and the sheepskin are intended to recognize the labors of students, their determination, their persistence, their struggles and eventual triumphs. It was not for the robe itself that our seniors went hollow-eyed from puzzling out Aristotle, groped through the labyrinthine

> arcanities of literature, became furious at computer programs, No-Dozed their way through calculus. It was not for the robe itself but for the privilege of declaring what the robe declares: I was the student, I suffered and endured, I exulted and laughed, snoozed and wept, in order to absorb into my personality some of the basic propositions and intellectual achievements of civilization. (East Carolina Address)

The hood, doctoral stripes, and title function in the same way, declare the same achievements, for Ph.D. recipients as do "the robe, the mortarboard, and the sheepskin" for undergraduates. Therefore, when Lafferty insists on using the doctor title, he is recognizing and showing respect for Holme Barcroft's accomplishments.

Barcroft should be equally proud of his academic achievements, but early in the novel, he denigrates those achievements, saying "I really am a doctor. . . but not a medical doctor. It's just some initials a university tacked onto my name" (9). Such an apathetic attitude is unacceptable both to Chappell and to Lafferty. Though he has not the means to see his many children through to advanced degrees, Lafferty is proud of what education his children have received, stating pointedly: "I'm afraid you'll find us an ignorant crowd, Dr. Barcroft. All we mostly know around here is what we learned from our elders or on our own. But everybody of age in the Lafferty family can read and write and cipher. I hope you'll set that down in your book" (205). Thus, Quigley Lafferty functions, like Aunt Sam of *I Am One of You Forever*, as a modest defender of formal education.

Look Back All the Green Valley (1999), the final book in the Kirkman tetralogy, is set in June 1979 and addresses the character of Joe Robert Kirkman posthumously. Jess's mother is near death, so Jess and his sister work to get their parents' affairs in order, including many of Joe Robert's old papers and experiments that Cora had left

undisturbed following her husband's death. Throughout the novel, Chappell reinforces his education theme. For instance, Jess speaks of his father's trust in "old-fashioned ideas of science, progress, the advancement of knowledge, the betterment of humankind through education and biological and cultural evolution" (26). Most importantly, however, this novel emphasizes the human need for remembering the past and for engaging one's ghosts. John Lang points out that

> The book's very title, taken from a folk song, underscores the importance of looking back, its image of a luxuriant valley reflecting life's plenitude and the invigorating effect of contemplating the past. Although the lyrics of this ballad stress the transitoriness of life ('Now our days are dwindling down'), Jess finds the song bracing. 'If it remedied no sorrows of the world,' he comments,' it brought them into the light and offered them an understanding to be found in nothing else but music' (267). Jess is uplifted, not downcast, by this backward glance. (269)

Lang continues: "Nor is the significance of the past, for either Chappell or his characters, simply a matter of the living remembering the dead" (269). In *Look Back All the Green Valley*, Jess recognizes that "The dead are not silent, not even shy; they are speaking to us continually, as voluble as October wind among the falling leaves" (101).

Jess's words here are a more poetic rendering of Chappell's words at East Carolina in May 1998. "A great deal of university education consists of conversation with ghosts," says Chappell.

> On an old psychological test, the Minnesota Multiphase Personality Inventory, as it was called, there was a question designed, I expect, to search out paranoid tendencies. 'Do dead people ever speak to you?' it asked. For a student the answer must be: 'Yes, all the time. Our campus library is the repository of important voices, most of them belonging to dead people. I go there to listen to what they have to say and to think about it. My teachers want to enable me to have conversations with these ghosts, so they assign papers and hand out examination questions. In this way I have held converse with Shakespeare and St. Paul, with Mme. Curie

> and the Wright brothers, with King George III and Martin Luther King. With those who in the past helped shape the world I live in today, I have held colloquy, listening and then talking back.' (East Carolina Address)

Throughout *Look Back All the Green Valley*, Jess Kirkman encounters his fair share of ghosts as he puts right his father's past and illegally exhumes his body so that it can rest properly next to Cora. During the nighttime disinterment, Jess and his burly male assistants believe they see "somebody sitting over there on that gravestone" (278). Jess identifies the apparition as his Uncle Zeno, who had appeared in *I Am One of You Forever* as an unlikely representative of liberal arts and sciences. In disbelief Jess's companions say, "Can't be Uncle Zeno. He'd be older than the hill we're digging into. He'd be older than rocks" (275). Unshaken, Jess responds: "Maybe he really is immortal . . . That's what my father thought. Maybe that's how he knew the story. . . . The story of the world . . . The story of you and me. All the stories that ever were or will be" (275). Here, Uncle Zeno has been transformed into a repository of knowledge not unlike the university library Chappell speaks of, and Jess has performed in microcosm for his family what the university does for the world: Evidently viewing the university as the most efficient means of preserving and resurrecting essential thoughts and perspectives from human history, Chappell asserts that "the university, more faithfully than any other institution, has preserved history in the face of frightful difficulty" (East Carolina Address).

Fred Chappell recognizes, like Maya Angelou, that there is a grand distinction between memorization of fact and true knowledge, but for him, and many others like him, universities are more than "mental gas stations, places where one goes to fill up the

tank of the mind with facts and ideas. Then, when the old brain is all full up, when not another equation can be squeezed into it, you drive away as an educated person" (East Carolina Address). For Chappell, the university shares more in common with "an auto repair shop whose mission it is to get the thing running efficiently, to strip away the useless doodads and to get some precision in the mechanisms" (East Carolina Address). Though Angelou's regard for the university leans more toward the gas station metaphor, she definitely does not despise the university – throughout her autobiographies she envisions her son Guy going off to college, and in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* he succeeds brilliantly at the University of Ghana.[10] And in her remarks to Wheaton graduates, she "congratulate[s] your professors, your lecturers, counselors, and teachers who in persisting to overcome their own ignorance have prepared themselves to separate you from yours" (Wheaton Address). However, Angelou offers considerably less credit to higher learning than many of her contemporaries, urging graduates to put their "siditty" education behind them and focus on the love and courage needed to conquer social ills, such as racism, sexism, and ageism. One cannot help but wonder, as Fred Chappell does in his UNC-G speech, how "those ladies and gentleman feel who have worked so hard to receive this education that the platform hotshots so cavalierly toss aside."

NOTES

[1] Chapter title quotation is taken from Fred Chappell's *I Am One of You Forever* (162).

[2] The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) published a report in 2003 that warned that "students in SREB states have not reached parity on test scores with others in the nation."

[3] Angelou revisits this quotation in *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* (1997): "Some people swear there are more than forty million black people in the Baptist Church. They're not even including other denominations or backsliders or black atheists in the world" (125).

[4] Other personalities ascribed to the black female in this essay include "leering buxom wenches with round heels, open thighs and insatiable sexual appetites" and "marauding matriarchs of stern demeanor, battering hands, unforgiving gazes and castrating behavior" (43).

[5] In another commencement speech given at Simmons College in 1987, Angelou repeats this thesis almost verbatim: "And courage is the most important of all the virtues, young women and men, because without courage, you cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. You cannot be consistently kind, or true, or fair, or generous, or honest, without courage. I wish I had said that first; actually, Aristotle said it" (qtd. in Peter Smith 137).

[6] Chappell specifically targets Maya Angelou and Art Buchwald as examples of commencement speakers who denigrate university education: "Instead of hearing speakers who vaunt in glorified terms the values of education, we have been confronted with those who tell us that higher education is pointless, extravagant, and useless. 'A

college education has no practical purpose,' say these speakers. 'It is superstrength of character that made me the grand individual I am.' Well, no one has had the gall actually to say that latter sentence, but Art Buchwald, Maya Angelou, and a whole flock of others have promoted its sentiment" (East Carolina Address).

[7] According to an article published by the Population Reference Bureau, "In every state except Alabama and South Carolina, the proportion of adults who are college graduates is lower in the Appalachian counties than in the rest of the state. . . . In every state except Alabama, New York, and Pennsylvania, the Appalachian counties have higher proportions of the adult population without a high-school diploma or GED. . . . In Maryland, North Carolina [Chappell's home state and the location of both of his commencement addresses] and Virginia, the Appalachian counties had more adults with less than high-school education than college graduates, while the reverse was true for the rest of the state" (Haaga 9-10).

[8] Chappell admits in his UNC-G speech that "I had been dismissed from Duke University for good and sufficient reason."

[9] The Woman's College at Greensboro is mentioned in Chappell's 1999 UNC-G address too:

> My wife Susan came first to UNC-G when it was still Woman's College of celestial memory. She entered as a commercial student into a one-year program that would certify her skills as a secretary. But during that year she attended art shows and classy films, ballet performances and concerts, lectures in every kind of subject, as well as poetry readings by Robert Frost, Randall Jarrell, and Robert Watson. Later, after the cataclysm of marriage to me and after our son bade a reluctant farewell to diapers, she returned here as a student and took a bachelor's degree. But she was, and still is, proud of her commercial certificate and remembers with warm

> fondness those first exposures to art and science and history that she enjoyed. (UNC-G Address)

[10] *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986) chronicles Guy's struggle to enter and his matriculation at the University of Ghana as well as Angelou's successful employment there.

Conclusion

In May 2001, Virginian William Styron confessed to Augustana College graduates that "Each year along about this time, a friend of mine . . . and I indulge ourselves in a little game. We call the game--name that speaker, it's based on the idea of collecting the names of commencement speakers on college campuses throughout the country . . . . For the past few years, I and my historian friend . . . have amassed an interesting roster of names. In the interest of accuracy," Styron concedes, "I must point out that many of the speakers are indeed quite distinguished--intellectual and cultural leaders whose presence on many campuses would be considered a worthy adornment. Some of the speakers, however, raise honest questions about the selection process that goes on in our educational institutions." Listing "Donald Trump, the Rev. Jerry Farwell, Steven Spielberg, the magicians Penn and Teller, Regis Philbin, Dr. Ruth, supermodel Naomi Campbell, the actor Johnny Depp, the actress Jennifer Lopez, the actor Hugh Grant, Mike Tyson, and an attorney named Greenberg who was Monica Lewinsky's lawyer," Styron explains that he instances these names in order to prove "a certain subtext, namely, the presence of the name of a writer on an annual list of speakers is such an oddity that it seems positively freakish" (Augustana Address). Indeed, "freakish" is not too strong a word when one adds to Styron's name-that-speaker list the 1996 orator at Long Island University's Southhampton College: Kermit the Frog, Doctor of Amphibious Letters.

As Styron points out in his Augustana speech, commencement speaker selection committees are increasingly looking more for showy images than for shrewd intellects.

Perhaps the selection committees themselves see the commencement address as a throwaway genre and figure that since the graduates will not remember the speech's content anyway, at least they will have something handsome to look at before they depart. Unfortunately, attitudes like these serve only to perpetuate the hackneyed clichés and stale conventions that render the addresses forgettable in the first place.

My aim in this dissertation has been to establish the commencement address as a unique, but typically ephemeral, form of ceremonial oratory, to enumerate the conventions that set it apart as a distinct genre, and to interrogate a sampling of commencement addresses delivered by Southern writers in order to suggest that such writers speaking between the World War II era and the millennium do not adhere to many traditional expectations and thus revivify a tired form of oratory. Throughout this work, I have tried to situate eight commencement addresses given by Southern writers, from disparate backgrounds and educational levels, within the context of the times in which they were delivered and the speakers' written works. Although there is some difficulty in making generalizations about the genre, I uncovered some intriguing similarities among my sampling of Southern-given commencement talks that suggest a willful departure from conventional platitudes and pieties.

As evidenced by those discussed here, for example, the Southern-given commencement address tends to trace themes already apparent within the writers' works, whether these themes are appropriate for new graduates or not. And all of the speeches discussed in this dissertation abstain from predicting the future, preferring to interpret the past as it really was and to illuminate the present as it really is. Cash and Faulkner both

eschew discussion of the future in favor of sharing the wisdom of the past with their audiences, while Berry and Campbell reflect upon the failures of the past so that they might inspire the young graduates to create a more perfect present. In his Centre College address, for instance, Wendell Berry asserts that "no one ever understands the ultimate cause or foresees the ultimate consequence of any act." Thus, he does not lead graduates into the futile exercise of pondering their future, or as Stephen Whited observes from the Kentuckian's written work, "Berry, eyes focused on the present life around him, seeks practical solutions through the accumulated experience of past actions and informed deliberation" (13). Although Lee Smith and Clyde Edgerton seek to motivate and entertain, respectively, they, too, convey their deep beliefs in the past as a storehouse of valuables unlocked through cross-generational interaction. And both Fred Chappell and Maya Angelou draw upon their mutually opposed past experiences to debate the merits of advanced education.

Further, all of these speakers attempt to fashion a fast friendship with their listeners as they subtly identify themselves as one of the audience's kind, more advanced in years but equal in many other, more important ways. W.J. Cash, William Faulkner, and Fred Chappell address graduates from the collective "we" perspective. Toward the end of his Pine Manor address, Faulkner, in fact, emphasizes the importance of correctly defining the concept of home by asserting that home is "not where *I* live or *it* lives, but where *we* live: a thousand then tens of thousands of little integers scattered and fixed firmer and more impregnable and more solid than rocks or citadels about the earth" (142). And Wendell Berry, having received an honorary doctorate, proudly counts

himself a member of Centre College's Class of 1978, while Lee Smith, herself an alumna of Hollins College, states that she is "speaking as one writer to another" (Hollins Speech).

Will D. Campbell crafts a most articulate statement of commonality with his audience. As he opens his 1999 speech at the University of Southern Mississippi, he says, "I have received awards in other times and places. But I have long known that unless and until one is recognized by his own people, he is not recognized at all. I am full-blooded piney woods. You are my people." While Clyde Edgerton does not verbalize his connection to his audience, he does share so many personal anecdotes about his wife, daughter, and other family members that he effects a warm, one-on-one conversation amid an auditorium of hundreds. And although Maya Angelou repeatedly makes a distinction between "we" – traditionally oppressed, but enduring African-Americans – and "you" – "a group of well-to-do white girls," she, too, indulges in the use of the all-encompassing "we," saying "Your parents, other adults, your teachers, the generation which preceded you is not proud – I include myself – *we* are not proud to hand you such an onerous task. *We* wish *we* had done more (italics mine)" (Wheaton Speech).

And finally the Southern writers taken up here are hopeful realists who never fully succumb to "blue-sky optimism" (Ross 11). Many of these Southern speakers, for example, go against the old axiom that commencement addresses must depict a rosy future so as not to squelch the enthusiasm and optimism of the graduates. Cash, Faulkner, and Berry, in particular, allude to a bleak future facing graduates. On 2 June 1941, W.J. Cash revealed his deep concern that totalitarian tyrants would attempt to ride roughshod over the U.S. in the same way that they had taken over England, France, and Belgium,

and in 1951 and 1953, William Faulkner warned against charismatic leaders who sought to convert freethinking, liberal human beings into sheep-like followers. Demonstrating a similar concern, Wendell Berry fears those tyrants who would implement a pushbutton existence. In his article on "'Futurology' and the Fruit of Industrialism," Thomas Strawman points out that, for Berry, "the personality type drawn to visions of vicarious, electronic control (the effects of which are always outside the control room) is ultimately totalitarian, the individual rendered a techno-tyrant, consuming tremendous energy and resources to manipulate people and markets and whole environments, often thousands of miles away" (Strawman 58-59).

Will D. Campbell focuses on the "bruised world" in which countries refuse to "sign a land mine treaty when 8,000 children die each year from land mines," in which "three thousand child soldiers" are armed mainly with handguns "for they are too little to shoulder big ones," and in which "two and a half million children die for lack of an ordinary vaccine" (USM Address). Perhaps the most optimistic of all of the speakers included here, even Lee Smith unequivocally asserts that "you will have encounters with monsters and demons who symbolize your limitations" before she reminds her audience that such encounters are a form of education too: "Whenever your life seems hardest, in other words, there is the chance to find deeper and greater powers within yourself" (Hollins Address). Clyde Edgerton warns that a major need of children today is not being met. The Great Electronic Media Tragedy, as he calls it, robs children of their imagination and of their own history, of being able to "cling to and love stories about her great grandparents, her grandparents, about herself, and about you and your spouse"

(UNC-W Address). In place of these family stories, which are "as real as buildings," children are given "sit coms about nothing – or less than nothing" (UNC-W Address). Fred Chappell acknowledges that "it is but a puny and measling commencement address that doesn't view something or other with alarm, and as always, there is a lengthy menu of ills and incipient ills to choose from" (UNC-G Address). To Wheaton graduates, Maya Angelou points out that "for the first time in fifty years, our government is publicly turning its back on the needy, the aged, the veterans of foreign wars, the young, the handicapped. We have suddenly, as it were, regressed into a dark age of uncaring, of might over right" (Wheaton Address).

It occurs to me also that Southern writers – infamous for escaping unpleasant situations through fictional yarns – will often step from behind the storied veil and frankly voice their true internal thoughts and concerns from the commencement dais as they do nowhere else, providing scholars with a rare glimpse at the vulnerable underbelly of the literary world. Michel Gresset and Patrick Samway remind us, for instance, that "William Faulkner never felt comfortable with literary critics and normally retreated into a very private part of himself when they started asking questions or, conversely, he said the most outlandish things to keep these same critics at a distance. Yet, when answering questions before student audiences, whether it was in Charlottesville or Tokyo, he honestly dealt with problems of creativity and interpretation" (3). Thus, with William Faulkner, the two commencement addresses he delivered may well be the only sources – besides perhaps his letters – in which Faulkner strips his language bare of the unlikely

biographical tales and philosophical jargon that he is so notorious for in interviews with literary critics.

In analyzing these several representative speeches, I have intended not only to demonstrate that commencement addresses given by southern writers in the latter half of the twentieth century serve as valuable – and largely untapped – primary sources that offer insight into an author's body of writing, but also to spark further scholarly investigation and discussion of the southern-given commencement speech.

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