THE CATHOLIC WORLD REPORT

The Spiritual Terrain of David Middleton

The remarkable poet from Louisiana has practiced his art as one who knows that it is all a gift. It is to be received, sustained, and cultivated. It cannot be deserved, because no one can deserve what is so freely given by our teachers, our ancestors, and our God.

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Three of the five collections of poetry from Dr. David Middleton who taught and served for 33 years at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana. (Images: Amazon.com)

About midway into his fifth and most recent book of poems, *Outside the Gates of Eden*, David Middleton prints an elegy for the late Louisiana naturalist Caroline Dormon. There, he speaks of his "early poems," in which he "was trying to say my way / Back home to that same place you never left."[i] Despite the implication that Middleton has wandered while Dorman has remained steadfast, by the standards of our restless age, the poet always kept close to home. Born and raised in Shreveport, in northern Louisiana, he moved south to attend graduate school at Louisiana State University, in Baton Rouge, before settling into a career of teaching at Nichols State University, in Thibodaux, an hour's drive southwest of New Orleans.

That distance of a few hours' drive, a few hundred miles, may not look like much on the map, but for Middleton, it was to mark the territorial limit of his poetic and spiritual imagination. Shreveport became the place of memory, traditional mores, childhood Sunday school, and maternal security. Baton Rouge and Thibodaux came to embody the places of intellectual and spiritual education into the western tradition in its classical and Christian dimensions, where learning could become not just something done, but a whole way of life.

That was not all. In "Epiphany in Lent," one of Middleton's most finely crafted poems, he writes of the parade and floats in Thibodaux, of the "smells of beer and barbecue— / Elements bodies bless at Mardi Gras."[ii] Here he finds "high feasts of flesh and blood."[iii] And these he contrasts with "My '50s Shreveport with its endless Lent / Of guilt and blue laws."[iv] Middleton does not himself fully partake of either the feast or the famine, standing between them as one apart, because he comes from "Both from the Protestant north and Catholic south, / Louisiana's European divide."[v] In his poetry he brings these regions of the soul together.

Middleton often writes of the Civil War and so also of the American North and South, but the regions that define his soul and his poetry are primarily those narrower bounds of North and South Louisiana. One aspect of Middleton's work explores and venerates rootedness in the land, piety to old ways, old time religion, and loved places, especially those of his North Louisiana family. Another aspect draws that local fidelity toward the universal, embracing a distinctly southern species of Christian-Platonism that feels at home with the classical inheritance and participates more or less comfortably in the sacramental "flesh and blood" of Louisiana's bayou Catholicism. In Catholic South Louisiana, that which is unusually, even eccentrically, particular also gives expression to the cosmic liturgy and drama of the Church. This drawing together of North and South, of piety to the material fatherland and Christian-Platonic pilgrimage to what Plotinus called our true fatherland, has helped Middleton become one of the contemporary American South's finest poets. His work's clear rootedness in place is joined with metaphysical and theological vision, one where piety before the hearth gods at home in Shreveport opens onto a more profound piety before the sacramental flesh of Christ made incarnate in the churches of South Louisiana.

Agrarians and Christian-Platonists

In all this, Middleton is exceptional but not unprecedented. Six decades before Middleton published his first book of poems, *The Burning Fields* (1991), "Twelve Southerners" had published, *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), a defense of "The South and Agrarian Tradition."[vi] The authors of that volume, mostly poets and novelists, defended the South as a place of community, tradition, and cultural unity that should resist the encroachments of the industrial North, whose aggressive ideology would reduce society to an economic machine.

John Crowe Ransom argued that southern culture was better conformed to both the conditions of nature and the sublimity of the divine. He proposed, "it is the character of a seasoned provincial life that it is realistic, or successfully adapted to its natural environment, and that as a consequence it is stable, or hereditable"—all this in contrast with the dissolvent forces of modern "mobile American life" which is "in a condition of eternal flux."[vii] Later in the same pages, he suggests that such conformity to nature is the necessary condition for a religious spirit: "I believe there is possible no deep sense of beauty, no heroism of conduct, and no sublimity of religion, which is not informed by the humble sense of man's precarious position in the universe."[viii] The South in its culture of poverty and defeat, so Ransom argued, had just such a humble sense.

In that same volume the poet Allen Tate offered a slightly different analysis. He held indeed that the South had a rich "feudal" culture, but that that culture had been vulnerable, first, to the sin of slavery, and, second, to defeat at the hands of the Union; this was so because it had failed to adopt a complementary "feudal" religion, by which Tate meant Catholicism.[ix] The South that Tate venerated—or rather, wished to venerate—was in this sense a work of the imagination: he wanted to defend a traditional society of the kind Ransom described, but one completed by the traditional religion of Christendom. To do so would reconnect the South with Europe in its culture and its historical faith.

Middleton, as we have already seen, did not have to imagine a South worthy of his reverence. He found it right in the terrain of Louisiana, where Protestant North and Catholic South were only as far from one

another as the trip from family home to state university. Middleton's whole career as a poet has been to explore that terrain, to remember and memorialize it, to defend its beauty even as, following in the tradition of Ransom and Tate, he also rebukes its great failing in the institution of slavery and also looks askance upon its slow adoption of "Yankee" industrial ways. This latter degradation was most visibly manifested in the rise of the Louisiana oil industry in the Gulf:

> Weak lordling of a pastoral citadel,
> Held by no estate, I let myself be paid,
> Leasing to those who sucked from every well
> Oil of the blackened creatures long decayed.[x]

In the 1970s, Middleton studied in the doctoral program at Louisiana State University under the poet and critic Donald Stanford, who was himself a former student of the great California writer Yvor Winters. Winters had formed Stanford as a classicist in prosody, a severe critic of literary modernism, and as a religiously and philosophically inclined scholar. As a graduate student, he met fellow poets Wyatt Prunty, Linden Stall, and John Finlay, all of whom Stanford called the "LSU formalists" for their continued practice of meter and rhyme during a decade in which nearly all published poems were composed in a loose free verse indebted to the Beat generation. The friendships from those days would endure. Stanford endorsed Middleton's first book, declaring it "formalist poetry at its best."[xi] So did Finlay, who proclaimed Middleton "one of the most important poets to come out of the South."[xii] By the time that book appeared, Finlay had died of AIDS, and Middleton came to serve as his literary executor, shepherding his unpublished work into several fine editions over the coming decades.

Middleton himself has published relatively few books: just five collections over a little more than three decades. From the beginning, he knew what he was about, however. Each of the books marks a chapter in the ongoing effort to "say" his way into the land of Louisiana, its material and ancestral terrain symbolized by the North, and its sacramental and intellectual terrain symbolized by the South. In each book, Middleton traverses the places of memory to question and venerate family and regional history, and in so doing he embraces the mantel of the southern agrarians with consistency and fidelity. But Middleton also—and with great power—sets those subjects and themes in the more cosmic terrain of God's providence and the moral drama of human life as the Christian-Platonist tradition understands it. This was clear from the very beginning. The first poem in his first book sets it forth in a clear *ars poetica* and apologia for the "provincial" poet and scholar:

> No question unresolved at the Sorbonne
> Is alien to a small-town southern lawn.
> Eyes bleared with reading Plato and Plotinus
> Grow sharp as I edge around the dunged hibiscus
> Whose sifted scents drift downward from the sun.
> As much as Eden, Kew, or Babylon,
> This tended place engages with a Mind
> Whose processes play over it as a blind

> Man traces a face he cannot guess,
> Detecting fleshless form within the flesh.
>
> Though natural life and death could be enough,
> Oxalis springing pink, wild mustard tufts,
> Summer's onionflowers, the autumn buttonweed,
> Yews greening as the winters sleeps in seed,
> These generated grains, the source's spores,
> Are counters to the Mind they place before:
> Mute origin of all, superlative degree,
> The cause of cause whose end these ends decree.
> O may a mind immured in bone and brain
> Find end as meet as this Your world contains.[xiii]

Middleton's work begins with this simultaneously humble and bold declaration. Humble in its insistence on remaining provincial and celebrating the "enough" of the florid "southern lawn," but bold in claiming that even here the questions of "the Sorbonne" are native and maybe even likely to receive a more profound answer. He is bold again in beginning this first of five books with the heroic couplet, that most classical and unfashionable of English poetic forms, even as his occasional loosening, as with the tetrameter in the penultimate line of the first stanza, or the false rhymes on spores/before and brain/contains, indicate that this is indeed modern poetry, aware that its otherwise rigorous measures are unusual in an age such as ours.

The poem begins with the contrast of the metropolitan and the provincial, the lecture theaters of the Sorbonne as a symbol of universal learning held up against the small-town southern front porch, where the "bleared" eyes of the scholar peruse the pages of Plato and, importantly, the great neo-Platonist, Plotinus. Plato had his doctrine of forms, where the concrete, finite, and evanescent individual participates in the universal form (*eidos*) that is its cause. For Plato, the form is more real than the particular, and this has led many—however incorrectly—to believe that Plato had contempt for the material and approved only that which was universal.

Plotinus's more systematic development of Plato has also, with more justice, been thought to hold the material particular as radically inferior to the eternal and universal forms. In truth, however, both Plato and Plotinus celebrate the appearance of particulars for their ability to disclose the universal. Plato defends myths as poetic images that can remind us in a single glance of truths that could only be explained with a multitude of words.[xiv] True knowledge is vision, for Plato, and the appearances of myth, when we perceive their interior meaning, more closely approximate knowledge than does the multiplication of words of philosophical dialectic, however superior dialectic may be in other respects. Following his master, Plotinus, writes of Egyptian hieroglyphics as exemplary of the way a single sign can summon to mind the full reality of a being.[xv]

The seemingly incidental reference to classical philosophers in fact hints of the metaphysics that the rest of Middleton's poem explores. The "tended places" of the front lawn and garden are full of

hieroglyphics of sorts: flowers and trees are the "flesh" appearance—hints or signs—of the invisible, universal, and eternal divine "Mind" that causes them to be. They are thus "counters," token markers of "the Mind they play before." The local participates in the universal, the temporal in the eternal, and makes the transcendent visible to the human mind. As G.K. Chesterton wrote many times, the person who attends most lovingly to a finite locale so as to discover them as symbols of an everlasting reality lives in a larger—more universal and more spiritually profound—world than does the placeless cosmopolitan who experiences many fleeting appearances but never moves beyond them. This is the spiritual terrain of Middleton's poetry.

The Burning Fields

In the poems that follow "Provincial Letter," we discover that Middleton's early inspiration was less Chesterton than the "mythical method" of the high modernists, T.S. Eliot and James Joyce. In "The Patriarch," a poem about Middleton's maternal grandfather, the South is imagined in the familiar tropes of the Lost Cause, where the Union army are figured as the invading Greeks and the Confederacy as a second Troy. This southern mythology has been used to justify the Confederacy as a noble failure and a heroic culture of defeat, but it also has served as a way of figuring the tragic quality of southern society as one dependent upon the "peculiar institution" and culpable for it.

Middleton recalls his grandfather as "Born between the Old South and the New" and tempted by "the elegiac life" that replays over and again the failure and the wound of the Civil War, such that he is haunted by "the ghost of Stonewall slumping in his blood."[xvi] When the grandfather fought in the Great War, he imagined the French field as that of the Battle of Petersburg, such that what were really "Yank" soldiers fighting the Germans are figured as the Army of Northern Virginia resisting a late and decisive Union charge. This layering of historical scene on historical scene so that the archetypal structure of myth shapes our understanding is what Eliot had meant by "the mythical method," when discussing Joyce's *Ulysses*, and what he had done himself in *The Waste Land*.

The myth of the Lost Cause has another dimension. The association of the South with Troy led the southern agrarians and others to associate southern culture with the Latinate culture of classical Rome. So it is with Middleton's grandfather:

> At night you read *The Georgics* and you dreamed
> Of that established land. But you were here,
> A Trojan ghost plowing through Priam's dust,
> The salted plots Aeneas left behind.[xvii]

If the grandfather has the historical imagination and the classical education necessary to view the southern tragedy in a more universal context, he also has a reverence for the South that confesses its moral failing:

> That was your South, a many-layered tract
> Of mind and soil, its tragic past made whole

> By providential guilt and true defeat.[xviii]

Among the consequences of that guilt and defeat is the economic decline of the South into a region of poverty, where old plantations give way to yards where "Lie oily guts of disassembled cars."[xix] Although Middleton here is composing an elegy for his grandfather, his other poems on the South show that he embraces the vision of the agrarians with its implied classicism, and indeed embodies it in his work with a clarity and sincerity that often outdoes the agrarians themselves. This we see in these late lines from "The Planters," one of several poems dedicated to the agrarians and one which outlines their aims:

> To fight along the old interior lines
> Of Christendom, crossing all departments
> (Pace, Jeff!), arts, letters, economics,
> Theology restored, recalling Stark Young
> Who said that of the South what matters most
> Is that to which the South itself belongs
> However distantly—the universe
> Of Dante, Aquinas, Aristotle,
> With Mary at the center of the Rose,
> The flowering womb of all things ever made.[xx]

Such lines follow Tate in justifying the South insofar as it approximates to the spiritual order of Latinate, Catholic Europe. For Tate, who portrayed the southerner more than once as a wandering Aeneas dismayed at modernity's degradations, this approximation was more dream than reality. For Middleton, as we noted, the terrain of the Catholic South of Louisiana makes the dream appear more plausible, especially since it was in that region where he himself studied and entered into the tradition of southern letters. The French Catholic city of New Orleans has an actual religious history to which the agrarians at Vanderbilt could only aspire by way of fashioning a myth.

The Burning Fields was a powerful debut. The opening pages, with their elegies for the southern tradition and commemorations of southern characters, from the "Last of the gentleman scholars of your day" to the "northern, liberal, Jew" H.J. Sachs, who came to teach in the South chiefly to "fight . . . the rubes," are confident in their appeal to the agrarian tradition as one still living and viable. That tradition can give form to life in a modern age that has otherwise, as Eliot once wrote, fallen into "protoplasm."[xxi] These poems would become the cornerstone of Middleton's future work.

Other poems in that first volume are of considerable interest but show Middleton drawing on influences and sources that become subtler or disappear altogether from his later volumes. The poetic sequence, "The Middle World" is dedicated to the great German political philosopher, Eric Voegelin, and draws upon his theory of human experience as taking place in the *metaxy*, that is to say within the "in between" of history and eternity—just the terrain Middleton had mapped in "Provincial Letter." Further poems take the classical world as subject apart from its connections to the South. Still other poems

draw on Arthurian legend. In a few of these, we see a concentrated, elliptical style very different from the extended blank verse periods typical of the poems quoted so far and of the later work. This is most likely the influence of the English poets David Jones and, especially, Geoffrey Hill, both of whose work displays a similar concern for the history of place and, since their place was England and Wales, often draw on Arthurian and classical sources. Hill's complex late-modernist poems, dense of texture and highly allusive, lead the early Middleton in some striking directions not to be repeated, as in these passages from "Four Poems from *Hesiod in Old Age*":

> Dreams edge upon the day. Night and past
> Expand to an eternal equinox.
> Excluding the provisional at last,
> Austere in Dorian tone, my syrinx
> Pipes no Delian fantasia's high pretense.[xxii]

And, from the second section of the poem:

> Omphalos; Boeotian fens; hoards; eolithic Ur;
> Ilium's cindered calm; pharaohs laved in myrrh;
> Wife-sisters in swathes of balm . . .[xxiii]

So also the poem "Emerson at Belson" draws Middleton's influences of Tate and Yvor Winters, with their conservative anti-romantic critique of American romanticism, together with Hill's habit of layering historical moments in a collage, as in his similarly titled poem, "Ovid in the Third Reich."

Yet another poem showing the influence of Jones and Hill, "Thomas Tallis to William Byrd," summarizes well what is at stake in the volume. The acids of modernity, to use the contemporary cliché, dissolve every traditional form: "I tell you, William, that the time will come / When Beauty in itself will be destroyed."[xxiv] That loss is twofold: the loss of tradition flattens time into the present moment and robs it of depth and foundation; but there is also a loss of form—of the definition, order, and qualitative dimension that give to our lives actuality, drama, and ordination to the Good. Middleton drew on this modernist critique of modernity and indeed on the formal techniques of modernism in the later pages of this first book, but it could not last.

Beyond the Chandeleurs

Middleton was not, the greater part of his work would show, a modernist. This became clear even with his second book, *Beyond the Chandeleurs*. The soil of Louisiana, defeated in history and depredated by the oil industry though it was, remained—even in the present—too rich a landscape for mere despair. His work digs furtively into the past and makes it present to the memory, but grateful recollection predominates rather than the sense of loss and alienation to be found in Eliot's poetry or in that of his agrarian disciple, Tate. In his future books, Middleton would avoid traces of modernist fragmentation and *ennui* and focus on the land which had shaped him. Rather than continuing to test Eliot's mythical method, he simply embraced the duty of preserving the myth of his native region.

In this, Middleton followed the example of one of the other agrarians he admired. Donald Davidson, one of the contributors to *I'll Take My Stand*, spent much of his career composing narrative verse rooted in the history of the South. His poetry was not fragmented, symbolically dense, or intellectually obscure, as was Tate's, but smoothly metered and direct in its narrative form. Middleton's poem, "At Franklin" quotes a letter of Davidson to Tate as an epigraph; it also takes up Davidson's agrarian critique of the modern age even as its chief aim is not so much to write valedictions for what has been lost as to play the part of "seekers who would bring to what they find / A loving objectivity of mind."[xxv] The poem then narrates the great battle and defeat of Confederate troops, before exploring what the purpose of such an exercise might be by way of references to Eliot's early poems and to Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead."[xxvi] Middleton thus moves beyond Eliot and Tate by considering their own project from a critical distance.

This maturation into a regional poet after the example of Davidson came with at least some cost. Modernist poetry, with its dense, elliptical language and panoptic historical imagination—at its best anyway—provided the art with drama and intensity. Leaving it behind left Middleton's voice more prosaic and leisurely in its unfolding. The loss of dramatic tension is marked, but so is the authority of his steady style, as in these closing lines from the first poem in his second collection, "Louisiana Passage: The Whippoorwill." Describing the flight and rest of that migratory bird, he concludes:

> And pausing there upon the last chenier,
> Made voiceless as they gaze beyond the Gulf
> Toward some most catholic South their flight implies,
> They listen with intent for one who calls
> Each creature in the language of its name,
> And when they hear they pass through silent skies
> Toward Adam and the earthly paradise.[xxvii]

The migratory bird returns with regular, uninterrupted, and cyclical pattern to the South; its obedience is a kind of listening to God. Providence, the Christian-Platonist tradition teaches, casts all things out into the circulations of created being (*exitus*), and then summons them to return to their creator (*reditus*).[xxviii] The birds figure this movement in their migrations and their journey, in turn, figures the return of all things to their original condition—they, and all things, move "Toward Adam and the earthly paradise." This at once natural and supernatural return to origins represents the kind of returns Middleton makes in his later poems.

One narrative poem recalls his joining the Sunday School class at his grandparents' church, during summer visits to Saline. Middleton recalls one lesson on the gospel passage where the apostles are frightened by Jesus walking on the water and where Peter, in a leap of faith, steps out of the boat to meet him:

> It took me over thirty years to know
> How soul's redeemed by wonder, lost in awe

> Before those depths through which I, too, must go[xxix]

His journey to northern Louisiana to read for a ladies book club—typically the butt of modernist satire—is treated respectfully, as poet and audience "join as one in praising what is made."[xxx] He writes once more in Christian-Platonic fashion of our "sense" of "a love whose overflowing glow / Still claims us when we gaze toward where it dwells / And matter seems no longer all we know."[xxxi] In a longer narrative poem, once more dedicated to the agrarians, "The Yeoman Farmers: North Louisiana, 1840-1914," he offers an elegy for the folkways of his people, from religion to cuisine, and laments that "In such a world but few of us still live," before envisioning the transformation and destruction of those ways in the Great War: "Till mustard gas, machine guns, tanks and planes / Blackened the trench-scarred farms of Catholic France."[xxxii]

This last note indicates that, though Middleton moved beyond the modernist sense of history's destruction, disorder, and disenchantment, the tragedy of southern history was still on his mind. "A Quiet Reply," in the voice of his mother, defends the traditional role of the "housewife and mother" against the transformations of home and workplace in the twentieth century. The next poem, "*Ancien Régime*" acknowledges that his Christian Platonic vision of the world, faithful though it is to the terrain of Louisiana, will appear reactionary to most. He strikes a note not of contrition but defiance:

> And though we have been told the time has come
> To know the earth unhallowed, merely here,
> It is a creed too bleak for Christendom
> In which a child drew kings and shepherds near:
>
> And so we hold these fields of sweetest dust
> Like Mary, who submitted to the Lord,
> The Father and the son, in utmost trust,
> Freely compelled by all her soul adored[xxxiii]

"Oak Alley," dedicated to southern agrarian scholar Lewis P. Simpson, revisits the tragic vision of the South as place of tradition and (somehow) Catholic Christendom, culpable for the regime of slavery, but also resistant of the modern "gnostic science" of politics that would level all things in the "New England" spirit of totalizing industrialism.[xxxiv] His use of "gnostic" here is another borrowing from Voegelin. Overall, his second collection of poems shows a maturity and mastery of voice and subject matter that will remain with the poet through his subsequent volumes.

The Habitual Peacefuless of Gruchy

In 2005, Middleton published a small book of poems, *the Habitual Peacefulness of Gruchy: Poems After Pictures of Jean-Francois Millet*.[xxxv] In one respect, the book would mark an important development in his work. In each of the book's sixty poems, Middleton takes an individual Millet painting as title and subject and then describes the painting in four blank-verse pentameter quatrains. He consistently

begins with the details found in the painting; his only license is to elaborate a temporal and narrative dimension of which the painting itself can only hint.

The resulting book was, to my mind, a false start. Middleton adheres too closely to the paintings for the poems to become wholly freestanding works. Individual lines are often evocative and show his usual skill, but the succession of so many poems following the same expository formula soon grows wearisome. In the penultimate poem, Middleton takes some small liberty and suggests what could have happened in these pages but did not. Millet painted the French countryside and its people with affection and perception; he did so, dependent on and struggling with the art market in Paris, but without compromising his integrity or affection. Middleton has done much the same with Louisiana. The kinship does not end there, and so he writes,

> And in these poems I've disappeared in you—
> Or is it that you've lost yourself in me?—
> Our shapes and phrases so alike composed,
> Your Channel in the Gulf, my South in Normandy.[xxxvi]

The answer to this question is too one-sided. Middelton's poems "lose" themselves in Millet. The poet's critical intelligence does not assert itself sufficiently to create the kind of dialectical engagement hinted at in these final two lines. All is not lost, however. In Middleton's most recent volume, he scatters nine new Millet poems, most of which expand the formal constraints and are more reflective, less purely descriptive. These poems show Middleton and Millet in more meaningful engagement and a nicely arranged handful of relatively spare descriptive poems add variety to and complement Middleton's other more elaborately reflective poems in the volume.

The Fiddler of Driskill Hill

Middleton's two best books are his two most recent. Although never an apprentice poet in his published work, the later books have a greater mastery of sentence rhythm, a greater variety of stanza, a firmer and more frequent use of rhyme, even as they display the same reverent, observant, but tragic Louisiana vision as the earlier work.

The Fiddler of Driskill Hill is named after the "highest point of elevation in Louisiana," and the volume as a whole conveys an affectionate but not untroubled surveying of the place that is Middleton's enduring theme. We enter into the Louisiana terrain with the tradition of Christmas Eve bonfires on the levy, where "by such light we glimpse what sense commends / In this strange state subsiding like our lives / From foothills of the Ozarks . . ."[xxxvii] Here and elsewhere, the analogies between the South and Troy reappear to convey Middleton's mythic vision of his native land. We encounter the young Middleton, in a third-person narrative in fourteener couplets, scooping "up a good handful of many-tinted stones / To hit the wires and set off twanging monotones."[xxxviii] This making of high-strung telephone wires to sing serves as a portent of his later practice of poetry:

> And so in time his lines like wires would thrill with carol, song,
> Eclogue, georgic, elegy, and anthem set along
> This wold's millennium-rhythms, iambic hills one hears
> Measured out in eons like the music of the spheres.[xxxix]

Here, Middleton finds congenial means of expressing the classical vision that stands under all his work. His poetry looks out over the land, but also is under its authority, is accountable to it, for art imitates the order of nature rather than inventing an order all its own. As the classical understanding of poetics understood things, his work re-expresses in the microcosmic form of the poem the macrocosm, the great world order as a whole. Louisiana landscape and history are, first, a kind of symbolic mediator standing between work and world, at once provincial figures of the world as a whole and of the divine mind that created it, while, second, they are also concrete instantiations that will be figured in Middleton's iambic lines.

Other poems in the volume turn from the beauty and tradition of the land to the passage of time and mortality. Early swimming lessons with Middleton's father becomes the fitting symbol of survival and death; today we learn to swim, but someday we shall finally descend "Breathlessly through death's unfathomed pool."[xl] Middleton writes of an aging mother's surrendering of her long-held homestead and, later, offers an elegy for the life of his father and a recollection of mother and son's late visit to the family plot to view the father's grave; further on, the mother's death is also memorialized. The lost years of the scholar's early life in Allen Hall, home of the English Department at Louisiana State, are recollected with affection for the joy and labor of learning. Another agrarian poet's years on that campus are also elegized: Robert Penn Warren, who once remarked (alas, not quite in the iambics of the rest of the poem), "After Louisiana nothing seemed real."[xli]

Several poems reckon with the tragedy of the South, both slavery and the Civil War, and also of the troubles of the New South now largely assimilated to the atomized and lonesome condition of the rest of modern America. "The Latchkey Child" laments what has become of the American family and its children left to the empty afternoon and their own devices. "Song of the Overseer" offers a critique of the rise of industrial agriculture, "Where factory and plantation are at one."[xlii] And "The Given World" provides an extended narrative meditation on the age of segregation and the reconciliation that belatedly is brought about between two families.

While Middleton's subjects are almost always of a historic scope and his verse lines are almost always impressive, some of his poems stand apart for their craft and beauty independent of their subject. I will quote just one. "The Breakers," a poem about Grand Isle, Louisiana, begins

> Late afternoons we walk upon the sand
> Where breakers make the world that we desire,
> This meeting-place of air and sea and land
> Washed from the bright prime element of fire.

After an extended description of the literal place, he turns inward upon the Christian-Platonic order it reveals:

> Old Maker, who still binds in tidal rhyme
> The rhythms of poiesis and this place,
> Your metrics measure heaven where in time
> Things burst in holy closures of your grace.[xliii]

"**The Dwelling Place"**

Middleton's poems generally tend to the blank-verse long forms of extended meditative elegy, of dramatic monologue, and of narrative. Several of his poems collected in volumes constitute short stories in verse. It is worth pausing here to take note of one poem that has not yet appeared in any of his books, but was published in the pages of *The Alabama Literary Review*. "The Dwelling Place" is a narrative poem of roughly three times the length of any of his other narrative work and shows his movement—begun long before—away from the influence of Tate and Hill and in the direction of Davidson, to whom this poem is dedicated and whose own pastoral narrative ("The Woodlands, 1956-60") it in several ways imitates.[xliv]

The story it tells is of the place itself. In other respects, one is unlikely to think of James Mitchner or W.S. Merwin in connection with Middleton's work, but here there is a striking similarity of scope and narration and even form. Middleton's blank verse always indulged in long sentences, a single grammatic unit sometimes extending over twenty lines. As the poet and prosody scholar Timothy Steele has observed, poets who forego the constraints of rhyme and write in blank verse are likely to fall into the habit of extensive, even excessive, elaboration and ornamentation.[xlv]

Middleton's subdued register is never bombastic, but is surely elaborate. "The Dwelling Place," however, tests the limits of the form; it consists of one long sentence, each of the poem's eight parts pausing only to the extent of a colon. In that long forward movement, slow and deep as a river, he retells the history of Louisiana from its unrecorded natural history to the present. It is a chronicle from the beginning of the land to the present day whose main character is the place itself. Middleton himself describes it as a blending of the pastoral, the country house poem, and the epic catalogue. Its encyclopedic quality lends itself to selective quotation of pithy expressions, such as the passing scenes of the "Porch swings that raised their parlance to the stars" or "Gentlemen sipping bourbon on the porch."[xlvi] After he laments the rise of "agribusiness" in the new South, the poem reaches its conclusion and envoy, which begins,

> And now as my own dreaming nears an end
> And rocking slows to stillness on the porch
> I lay my fiddle down in quiet hope
> That one day we might fully know again
> God's hospitalities, sojourning zones,
> Old houses like my fire place, starry hearths,

> The candles and the anthems and the choirs,
> The song of was and is and yet to be—
> Elegant delegations of a love
> From Mind to minds undisinherited[xlvii]

The modern age and the modernist art that gave it expression have more than once been described described as a "disinherited mind."[xlviii] Modern persons are thought to live within the consequence of an atomized and presentist culture, a culture with neither organic unity nor a depth of continuous tradition. Just has Middleton has remained rooted in place in a "placeless" age, so his classically-informed poetry is an attempt to remain "undisinherited" in such an age. He is able to do so because the Christian-Platonist "Mind" of God holds all things in being and memory even when the age itself seems forgetful and disintegrating.

Outside the Gates of Eden

Fiddler includes a dramatic monologue spoken by a college janitor (and is dedicated to the janitors at Nichols State University). *Outside the Gates of Eden* opens with a monologue by a "Night Watchman at the Zoo," where the steel bars of cage and fence remind him of the radical separation of this fallen world, where thieves would come to steal the animals, from our first home in this world:

> . . . I, like Adam, waking from his sleep,
> Return to watch the night out once again
> While dreaming children clutch their gift shop toys,
> Loved animals they hug and kiss by name
> So far from Michael's sword and that first sin
> Which drove us out of Eden to a place
> Where closing gates lock shut as sunset flames.[xlix]

From the beginning, Middleton's depiction of Louisiana showed both its traces of Eden and its barred gates. This latest of collections revisits that terrain, sometimes in the form of elegy. But three newer notes appear in this volume. First, as I mentioned above, his best poems on Millet's paintings actually appear scattered throughout this volume, rather than in the earlier collection dedicated to the work of the painter. Here we really do see the poet working the analogy between the two artists and their respective loved provinces. Second, both *Fiddler* and *Gates* contain a greater number of short-lined, tightly-rhymed poems and nicely complement his preferred verse forms of blank verse and elegiac quatrain. In "October Oaks Revisited," for instance, he recalls in half meter the same trees as "October Oaks," in his first collection:

> Now twenty years have gone.
> The oaks have gone as well,
> Their sawdust on the lawn
> Where trunk by trunk they fell

> Long after my first verse
> That praised them in their prime
> Though even then the curse
> Of star-dust claimed the rhyme[l]

Third, Middleton shows more frequently a bemused, sometimes satirical, humor, as he considers the various incidental features of the modern age: the demise of test patterns on television, at the close of the broadcast day; the fall of the letter and the rise of email; the "annual checkup" to monitor high cholesterol; and even the late night "Groping toward a piss."[li] These are light subjects wittily handled. His refusal of the regime of desecration, iconoclasm, and historical erasure that has overtaken our country in the last several years, receives a sharper treatment, as in "Lee in Darkness," on the removal of the memorial to Robert E. Lee in Richmond. Middleton's defense of Lee is based in part on apocryphal legend, but his observation on the present is unsparingly literal:

> But, Lee, "a public nuisance," is removed
> By politicians, men in vests and masks,
> From civic space to city warehouse hauled,
> Consigned for now to darkness not his own.[lii]

The opposite of this presentist rage for destruction is the humility and discipline of the poet and scholar that shaped Middleton and which he has sought to pass on in his teaching and his poems:

> He works with grace, intent and yet serene,
> Not twisting sense to serve a will to power
> That pays off in the academic bower
> But saying what the words most likely mean.[liii]

What has long intrigued me about Middleton's work as a poet is how humble it is regarding its own authority. The poems make their agrarian indictments of modernity. They look with reverence on the South's past, even as they confess its sins and know the resultant condition has proven tragic. They relish the possibility of verse to speak clearly and in an elevated but natural diction in iambic measures, even during a period when the majority of practicing poets could not scan a line of verse. And yet, just as Middleton treasured his childhood in North Louisiana, studied with gratitude in Baton Rouge, and assumed his place—which he has never left—to teach and write in Thibodeaux, he has practiced his art as one who knows that it is all a gift. It is to be received, sustained, and cultivated. It cannot be deserved, because no one can deserve what is so freely given by our teachers, our ancestors, and our God.

One incidental sign of that humility is how little known his work is outside of Louisiana. Middleton has simply practiced the craft and left the discovery of his work to others. Now, as that work approaches its end, it is time to discover the major poet who has lived among us, surveying the natural and spiritual terrain of the cosmos within the sacramental, flowering figure of Louisiana.

Endnotes:

[i] David Middleton, *Outside the Gates of Eden* (Savannah, GA: Measure Press, 2023), 38.

[ii] David Middleton, *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 64.

[iii] Middleton, *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill*, 64.

[iv] Middleton, *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill*, 64.

[v] Middleton, *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill*, 64.

[vi] Twelve Southerners (John Crowe Ransom, *et al*.), *I'll Take My Stand* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1977).

[vii] Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand*, 5.

[viii] Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand*, 10.

[ix] Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand*, 166.

[x] David Middleton, *The Burning Fields* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 13.

[xi] Middleton, *The Burning Fields*, jacket copy.

[xii] Middleton, *The Burning Fields*, jacket copy.

[xiii] Middleton, *The Burning Fields*, 1.

[xiv] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 229e and 246a.

[xv] Plotinus, *Enneads* V.8.

[xvi] Middleton, *The Burning Fields*, 5.

[xvii] Middleton, *The Burning Fields*, 6.

[xviii] Middleton, *The Burning Fields*, 6.

[xix] Middleton, *The Burning Fields*, 7.

[xx] Middleton, *The Burning Fields*, 11.

[xxi] Middleton, *The Burning Fields*, 22-23; T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose* (), 174.

[xxii] Middleton, *The Burning Fields*, 39.

[xxiii] Middleton, *The Burning Fields*, 39.

[xxiv] Middleton, *The Burning Fields*, 57.

[xxv] David Middleton, *Beyond the Chandeleurs*, 53.

[xxvi] David Middleton, *Beyond the Chandeleurs*, 57.

[xxvii] David Middleton, *Beyond the Chandeleurs* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 1.

[xxviii] See, Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* Commemorative Edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 43-46.

[xxix] David Middleton, *Beyond the Chandeleurs*, 3.

[xxx] David Middleton, *Beyond the Chandeleurs*, 6.

[xxxi] David Middleton, *Beyond the Chandeleurs*, 20.

[xxxii] David Middleton, *Beyond the Chandeleurs*, 45, 46.

[xxxiii] David Middleton, *Beyond the Chandeleurs*, 13.

[xxxiv] David Middleton, *Beyond the Chandeleurs*, 48.

[xxxv] David Middleton, *The Habitual Peacefulness of Gruchy*, (Baton Rouge, Lousiana State University Press, 2005).

[xxxvi] Middleton, *The Habitual Peacefulness of Gruchy*, 63.

[xxxvii] David Middleton, *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 1.

[xxxviii] Middleton, *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill*, 10.

[xxxix] Middleton, *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill*, 10.

[xl] Middleton, *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill*, 11. The verse line is acephalic.

[xli] Middleton, *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill*, 19.

[xlii] Middleton, *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill*, 56.

[xliii] Middleton, *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill*, 7.

[xliv] See Author's Note (131) to "The Dwelling Place," *Alabama Literary Review* 3 (2021), 116-133.

[xlv] Timothy Steele, *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1999), 183.

[xlvi] Middleton, "The Dwelling Place," 121, 124.

[xlvii] Middleton, "The Dwelling Place," 129.

[xlviii] E.g., Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind* Heller (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1975).

[xlix] Middleton, *Outside the Gates of Eden*, 3.

[l] Middleton, *Outside the Gates of Eden*, 29.

[li] Middleton, *Outside the Gates of Eden*, 28.

[lii] Middleton, *Outside the Gates of Eden*, 47.

[liii] Middleton, *Outside the Gates of Eden*, 79.

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