

Editor's Introduction

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This issue reminds me of an old truism: there are many Souths. As an historian I am particularly attuned to questions of change over time, to the play of circumstance, to the tension between contingency and what one may call deep time. For the South, not only is there the variety of chronology, and I am thinking here of the differences between the colonial, antebellum, New, and Sunbelt souths, but also of geography – tidewater, piedmont, black-belt, mountain, as well as swamp and prairie souths; and of course race and ethnicity and religion and gender. Or of the plantation versus yeoman-farmer versus main street South; or, in contemporary politics (this being a political season), the red, blue and purple souths.

And yet “the South” coheres in our collective imagination. Themes of violence and redemption, of place and honor, of family and the landscape, all persevere. In this issue we present essays that touch on these many souths.

We are particularly pleased to present a conversation with one of the greatest living southern writers, Ernest J. Gaines. As Anne Gray Brown writes, Mr. Gaines is like “your favorite uncle.” And here he talks about his work, often in retrospect, as well as his sense of place rooted in the old plantation in Point Coupee, Louisiana, where he was born and where he once again lives among his African American ancestors. And in his current age, though robust and vivid, Mr. Gaines seems particularly drawn to the cemetery, and to his memories, as is fitting. But he is still laughing and telling stories and questioning and searching for answers, as one would hope.

Randy J. Sparks examines how nineteenth-century evangelicals, particularly southern Methodists, appreciated how to (in John Wesley’s words) “die well.” The meaning of death was the assurance of salvation, of a better life than this vale of tears and woe, and being reunited with their loved ones in the hereafter. Evangelicalism has deep roots in the South, of course, though one may note that the nineteenth-century variety was quite different than the often-malicious version of today. The three succeeding essays then explore, respectively, the poet Alice Dunbar-Nelson, the antebellum writer Caroline Howard Gilman, and how to “read” trees in southern literature. We also include a short-story,

“The Long Road South,” set on a train heading south around the turn of the twentieth century.

Burton R. Pollin, the Poe scholar, offers a fascinating example of what the *Quarterly*'s associate editor terms “research in action”; a bibliographic essay on the poet Joyce Kilmer's championing of Edgar Allan Poe at a moment in time (in the early twentieth century) when Poe was rather out of fashion. Robert Snyder's review essay on “the last unpublished blues archive” reminds how even archetypal southern music, The Blues, too went out of fashion, for a time. And we conclude with Part XVIII of Judith Bonner's annual bibliography of the visual arts and architecture for which we are, once again, grateful.

As this is our Fall issue, we leave you, dear reader, with a poem for that peculiar rite of Fall in the South as elsewhere, the county and state fair. Rita Dove's “Dusting” (1986), from her *Thomas and Beulah*, offers an autumnal revel in a private memory, a quiet struggle to keep from forgetting as the days inevitably shorten; to preserve something precious and yet not fully named or perhaps continually in need of re-naming, as we seek to make sense of things, of our people and places, of our many pasts in the present. (And it employs a metaphor of a tree!):

Every day a wilderness – no
 shade in sight. Beulah
 patient among the knickknacks,
 the solarium a rage
 of light, a grainstorm
 as her gray cloth brings
 dark wood to life.

Under her hand scrolls
 and crests gleam
 darker still. What
 was his name, that
 silly boy at the fair with
 the rifle booth? And his kiss and
 the clear bowl with one bright
 fish, rippling
 wound!

Not Michael –
something finer. Each dust
stroke a deep breath and
the canary in bloom.
Wavery memory: home
from a dance, the front door
blown open and the parlor
in snow, she rushed
the bowl to the stove, watched
as the locket of ice
dissolved and he
swam free.

That was years before
Father gave her up
with her name, years before
her name grew to mean
Promise, then
Desert-in-Peace.
Long before the shadow and
sun's accomplice, the tree.

Maurice.