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OF LOVE AND DUST: A RECONSIDERATION

by John Wideman

*Of Love and Dust* hovers at the edge of melodrama. The action of the novel is set in 1948 on a Louisiana plantation. There are a brutal Cajun overseer, Sidney Bonbon, and his black mistress, Pauline; the overseer’s frustrated, straw-blond wife, Louise; a handsome, ruthless young black man, Marcus, driven by hatred and revenge; a treacherous, fat, red-faced, white boss, Marshall Hebert, who wears a seersucker suit and drinks all day on his porch; a collection of ante-bellum aunts and uncles inhabiting the fringes of the plot. Under the “white bitch” of a Southern sun the predictable themes of sex and violence percolate. Miscegenation, the dark, murderous pasts of the prominent white folk, the music and misery of the exploited blacks, the fear, lust and torrid passions which unite black and white Southerners—all make their appearance in Ernest J. Gaines’ novel. Not only are the plot and characters of the novel familiar, Gaines’ story-telling technique seems strikingly similar to that of another Southern writer, William Faulkner.

Yet rereading this novel eleven years after its publication I am struck by the book’s power. I know Louise and Marcus ain’t gon make it, that this black/white “Romeo and Juliet,” as Gaines referred to the young couple in a later interview, are doomed. But during the last section of the novel I rooted for them, suffered with them and experienced a profound sense of loss and waste as their drama expired in dust and blood on the steps of Sidney Bonbon’s house. Perhaps part of what allows the novel to succeed is its flirtation with melodrama. The line between melodramatic cliché and mythic archetype is after all quite thin, and the best regional writers often slip (intentionally and unintentionally) into parody. *Of Love and Dust* (the title could easily be that of a parody of the Southern novel) accepts as given a familiar configuration of characters and plot. Then the novel goes about its proper and redeeming business of establishing a black perspective on the fiction of Southern life.

The narrator, Frank James Kelly, is the vehicle for establishing this perspective. Jim Kelly is both a realistic character within the
action and an omniscient storyteller. Gaines puts Kelly at the moral center of the black community. Kelly knows things: the proper speed to drive Red Hannah when three men are walking behind loading her trailer with corn; he respects older people (he can talk easily with church folk or the good-time, night crowd); he knows the ways of white folk; and he can play a guitar and sing blues. Kelly is tolerant, wise, compassionate, a student of history and survival. He represents the ethos of the black community, the best that has been thought and said by generations of Afro-Americans in the crucible of the South. Elders like Miss Julie Rand and Aunt Margaret know he’ll do the right thing; they compliment him on his manners, and they chide him with their eyes and silences when he says the wrong things. Ironically, Sidney Bonbon, the white overseer, exhibits just as much faith and dependence on the solidarity of “Geam’s” character. Bonbon confides in Jim: “At first he talked only about the machines on the plantation. But as we got to know each other, he told me about other things.” When Marcus arrives on the plantation, it’s to Jim that Bonbon brings Marcus for “seasoning.” Like the black overseers put in charge of training bozal Africans fresh off the slaving ships, like Fiddler’s tutoring of Kunte Kinte, Jim Kelly’s job is to tame Marcus, teach him to work and speak and internalize the system of values which orders black-white relationships and perpetuates the plantation system.

Marcus arrives in a cloud of dust; he is raw, there is blood on his hands, and his race is ambiguous: “It was too dark to tell if he was white or colored.” Jim’s task is to mold this unpromising material into a good nigra. From his vantage point at the moral center of the black community Jim observes and comments upon Marcus’ savagery. Marcus doesn’t thank Miss Julie Rand or anybody else. He shows no remorse over killing a fellow black man. He has no respect for age. He is impatient and selfish. And he seems to care only about getting high and chasing pussy. Marcus proves to be a more effective tutor than pupil. When Marcus complains about doing time on the plantation, Jim rubs his charge’s nose in the murder: “You should have thought about that before you killed that boy... you should have thought about that before you pulled that knife.” Marcus doesn’t run whimpering away from the evidence of his crime but insists upon its necessity. Gradually, Jim is converted. By the novel’s conclusion he has realized both that Marcus can’t be whipped into conformity and that Marcus’ resistance, whatever form it takes, is good. Jim testifies that Marcus was “the bravest man I had ever met.” He admits, “I felt more proud of Marcus now than I ever did. I wanted
to tell Louise how proud I was of her, too.” Like the Tubmans, Prossers, and Turners, Marcus refuses oppression; his act of rebellion is a beacon exposing the evil of one form of life and heralding the possibility of another.

As Jim changes his attitude towards Marcus, the revelations he experiences implicate not only him, but the entire community of which he is a representative. Black people had feared Marcus because they recognized in him a threat to stable order; they preferred enduring a known evil to challenging the established order and opening the door to chaos. The re-evaluation of himself and his condition which Jim experiences is a critique of the fears of the larger community, its resistance to change, its avoidance of self-examination. “All of them had heard what Marcus was supposed to do and all of them were afraid. It was the same fear that made me hate Marcus at first. It was fear for myself and all the rest. The fear was still in me, but I didn’t blame Marcus for it any more.”

Jim as narrator is both an individual and a chorus. Like the chorus of Greek tragedy he has the privilege of near omniscience, of the wisdom, experience and critical acuity of the entire community. He can float disembodied like the chorus into other characters’ minds, revealing their innermost thoughts and feelings. Just as Gaines granted Jim moral authority by making him reflect the mores of the black community, he gives to his narrator the power to tell a tale which incorporates the voices of that community. Gaines doesn’t want to sacrifice realism, or the intensity and immediacy of emotional focus provided by a narrator who participates in the action of the novel, so he plants in the narrative explanations to disguise Jim’s functional omniscience. “Aunt Ca’line told me” or “Bishop said” or “Sun Brown told me later.” But the citing of other narrators is rather mechanical, perhaps even counterproductive, since Jim is clearly more than a man. Jim’s disclaimer late in the book—“I can’t read minds”—sounds almost tongue in cheek, especially since it follows his reconstruction word for word of a conversation he hasn’t heard. His authority for the dialogue between Marcus and Marshall Hebert is the characters eyes which he can read from his vantage point atop Red Hannah. Not even this much justification is given for his capacity to report the streams of consciousness, interior monologue and extended conversations which sprinkle the narrative. And no explanation is needed. The rich, vital texture of the narrative is enough justification. Jim’s credibility as narrator is not really at issue as I read the novel. Jim is not real, he is a convention the reader must accept to enjoy the story. The reminders
that there are logical reasons for his insights clutter the text. In an interview Gaines cites a model for the composition of The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, and this typical Afro-American story-telling mode seems relevant also to Of Love and Dust:

When I first started writing the novel it was a short biography of Miss Jane Pittman. Then there were many people after her death who talked about her. After I had gone so far trying to tell it from that point of view, I changed it because I didn’t think the other characters could get to those intimate thoughts that I wanted... to show how these other people helped her tell the story. I’ve seen this kind of storytelling many times before. One person may be the main narrator but there were these other people around to help her along if she could not remember or if she got tired talking.2

In the same interview Gaines cites “the simplest terms” and “repetition” as characteristic of Miss Jane Pittman’s story-telling style and of his own writing. The use of numerous narrators to help Jim tell his story is a natural way to introduce multiple versions of the “same” event into Of Love and Dust. Repetition of scenes or events from various perspectives releases Gaines from dependence on a linear plot sequence. Time is not clock time, not a straight line from once upon to the end. Time is a medium in which the characters float, a river where no one can step into the same place twice, even though for some reason they keep trying. The only way out of the medium is perhaps to tell a story, but stories are always about being in the medium, in fact are an effort to plunge again where you’ve been once before, so they don’t release the teller or the audience, only confirm the ubiquity, the uncompromising flow of time.

Repetitions serve many purposes in Of Love and Dust. They slow and intensify the action. They reflect the cyclical, season-bound pace of a rural, agricultural society. Repetitions establish rhythms, the rhythms of the character’s speech, their movements, their sense of place, proportion and themselves. Repetition gives to certain events a ritualistic quality; they have been happening always and will continue to happen; they have been winnowed of superfluous sound and gesture; they have reached their ultimate, most satisfying, resonant expression. Pa Bully and Aunt Ca’line, arrayed on their front gallery, endure the mosquitoes; their chosen weapons (Pa Bully’s pipe smoke, Aunt Ca’line’s rag) sustain them against the onslaughts of the insects. The tableau occurs numerous times, signaling each time the old people’s passive participation in the courting of Pauline. They have always been there on the gallery; they have pared down their role to an efficient minimum of word and gesture.
It wasn’t too long after Pauline went to the big house that Aunt Ca’line started warning Pa Bully about his eyes and his tongue. She would never say, ‘Mind your own business’; she would never say, ‘Bring your eyes back here where they belong’ or ‘Stop up your ears.’ She would say only two words, ‘Mr. Grant’; and Pa Bully understood exactly what those two words meant.

They are witnesses; they understand their place when Bonbon comes down to the quarter; they understand it when Marcus comes. Their ritual for dealing with mosquitoes parallels the way they have dealt with the demands of the Bonbons, the sexual exploitation of the Paulines. The tableau they form is as inevitable as the events they witness.

Other tableaux marked by repetitions of words, phrases, images, and rhythms are abundant in the novel, unifying its episodes and commenting on the action. Bonbon on his horse trailing Marcus is, among other things, a statement about the monotony and brutality of field labor. The horse and rider are an epiphany manifesting the white man’s need to goad and sweat his niggers, the field hands’ resignation, fear and courage. The barking guard dog, the existential leap through the bedroom window, the noise of furniture being rearranged, the barricaded bedroom, the child Tite’s “Ma-ma kill rat” are elements repeated each time Marcus makes love to Louise in Bonbon’s house. Taken together, this constellation of signifiers makes a statement about the possibilities generated by the love-making of the black man and white woman. The whole constellation is a chord, the individual elements, notes. How the love-making is described, its inevitable constituents of imagery and sentence rhythms become as important as what is being described. The actual love-making has been given a shape and sequence, an aesthetic structure the reader anticipates and begins to understand on a non-verbal (perhaps musical) level. The reader recognizes the necessity of the pattern, its “rightness” and knows something is “wrong” when the pattern is disturbed. The reader becomes Aunt Margaret, the narrator of the love-making scenes. You have Tite on your lap. You are on the porch, rocking her to sleep and yourself to numbness, and you are assaulted by aural imagery both because you can’t see what is happening and don’t want to see. Your world is exploding—vicious barking, crashing furniture, the lied-to, dying child’s pitiful voice in your lap—that’s how you know what’s happening, that’s the form your understanding takes, that’s what this new thing is: noise, chaos, shattering, bouncing. The Master’s world falling to pieces around you.
A less dynamic form of repetition (also less dramatic since it is centered in a less fully drawn and involved character’s mind) is exemplified by the tableau which repeats itself at an early stage of Marcus’ courtship of Louise. Sun Brown is the narrator, and he recognizes something peculiar about what he witnesses, but doesn’t begin to guess its full import. Again, there are repeated images, words, and rhythms. The central tableau consists of Louise in white, holding Tite by the hand, frozen at the front gate (where Marcus stands after calling for Mr. Bonbon, whom he knows is gone); there is Mrs. Bonbon’s child-like fragility, her white dress, her dreamy look, the words she says, “Come, Judy,” as she turns towards the house to break the spell and end the tableau. All have their symbolic quality. But this time the reader must do his ordering of the configuration. There is more of a literary quality here. Another consciousness does not focus the events. The symbols are traditional. We don’t share a character’s powerful reaction to the tableau. Yet by repeating the tableau and emphasizing its traditional, symbolic elements, Gaines heightens and defines Louise. He empties her character of melodramatic associations. She is a ghost; she has been taken over by forces much larger that her individual personality. She is part of a ceremony, a child-bride, an innocent, an acolyte purified and prepared to undergo ritual transformation. The tableau is iconic: each element has its precise place and meaning. The repetitions fix the scene, reduce it to its basic constituents, and each repetition is a luminous projection of the meaning Gaines intends.

Part Two of the novel begins with Chapter 23, which opens, “Monday, twelve o’clock, Marcus started looking at Bonbon’s wife.” The next three chapters, 24, 25, 26, open with statements that are variations of the theme looking at Bonbon’s wife. The material in the chapters often digresses from this theme. For instance, Chapter 24 recounts a visit to the plantation by Miss Julie Rand, Marcus’ Nan-Nan, and describes a knock-down, drag-out fight. Yet eventually the digressions prove to be directly related to the theme stated by the opening lines of each chapter. All the incidents are essential to bringing Marcus and Louise together, but the reader may not learn why and how until the relevance of an incident is clarified by a second or third version of that incident seen through the eyes of a new narrator. The narrative method is less Faulknerian montage—the abutting or juxtaposing of varying even contradictory perspectives—than it is mosaic, the gradual revelation of a design through the accretion of discrete fragments. Since Frank James Kelly is at the center of the narrative, he acts as a kind of conductor orchestrating the various re-
ports of the witnesses he consults. He is the still center, the rock upon which the narrative is constructed, so the other narrators are not so much conflicting as they are complementary. A central consciousness judges, learns, and is modified by the action of the novel. Viewpoints accumulate but their effect is the gradual revelation of a coherent perspective. This synthesis contrasts markedly with what Bruce F. Kawin describes in Faulkner and Film as the state of suspension created by Faulkner’s montage, a state of suspension which does not necessarily seek or lead to synthesis but becomes “a revelatory, viable state of mind.”3 On a smaller scale the fight at Josie’s place down in the quarter exemplifies Gaines’ mosaic technique. The battle royal begins in Part One, Chapter 20, when Jim and his buddies arrive at Josie’s late with the beer she was expecting. Not only is the beer late, it’s warm. And Josie is warmer. Versions of the fight and the atmosphere of violence leading up to it continue through Chapter 23 in Part 2. People help Jim fill in the parts of the story he missed, and all the narrator’s accounts interlock and confirm each other. There are no overriding metaphysical questions. No cosmic reflections on whether or not there was a fight or who started it or whether there should be such acts of God as fights or if there must be fights aren’t they as much love as hate and whose business anyway if there’s a God . . . or not.

Eschewing Faulknerian montage and metaphysical rhetoric is consistent with Gaines’ description of his writing as characterized by the “simplest terms.” Again Jim Kelly performs a dual role for Gaines. Jim is both a down-home speaker of Southern rural black speech (“I wasn’t after feeling her ass”) and a narrator whose syntax, grammar and vocabulary are usually standard English. The dichotomy is not bothersome if accepted as a “given” of the novel, but at times one wishes that narrator and character meshed in terms of language as well as vision. In other characters, Gaines renders a variety of speech styles. His transcription of Negro dialect is perhaps most conventional in Murphy Bach-eron. “It ’pears to me lak you the young gent’man who started dis lil’ commotion.” The bad-ass, black punch-out artist with the Irish first name and French surname believes in honor munks gent’mens. Aunt Margaret is also a dialect speaker: “Both o’ y’all”; “y’all grown people.” Little Tite the daughter of Cajuns asks “Kess-coo-sey?” and wishes her maid “Bon Swa.” In a scene that reflects the complexity and interest of the language situation in the Bayou, Aunt Margaret, a speaker of black rural dialect, instructs the child of the white, Cajun-speaking Bonbon, “Go back in there and say: ‘Maa-cee boo-coo, Monshoo Godeau’;
then come on back out here.” The same “Monshoo” Godeau, a
cubfoot Cajun storekeeper, moralizes to Aunt Margaret about
Tite’s weakness. “Maybe he give his wife little bit more, that
black one down there little bit less, this one don’t come like that.”
Gaines’ ear for speech varieties is excellent, but he chooses not to
restrict his narrator’s voice to one speech community. The loss of
consistency and credibility and the opportunity for a tour de
force display of blackspeech have to be weighed against the flexi-
bility gained by Jim’s inconsistent speech.

In Chapter 30, after depositing Bonbon and Pauline at Vincent
De Long’s where they will spend the afternoon in one of De
Long’s rooms, Jim sits alone in a bar down the street and ponders
the nature of God and His ways towards man. Again simple
terms dominate. “Maybe He didn’t care how it went. He had
stopped caring long ago. He didn’t even shake his head any more
when He saw them doing something they didn’t have any
business doing. Just like He didn’t shake His head when He
made a bad move playing chess (by Himself); or when He
overlooked a play in solitaire. He just took it like it was part of
the game.” Jim’s personal, almost casual relationship with the
“Old Man” is at the core of his religious belief. Like the Deist
God who set things in motion then retreated to a far, far better
place to observe and silently pare his fingernails, the “Old Man”
has lost his awe, his majesty. In Marcus’ world there is no room
for even this rather unthreatening, distracted, old acquaintance
and Marcus’ ability to function freed of traditional notions of
God and morality makes it clear to Jim that for all intents and
purposes he, too, operates without a faith in Divine order, pur-
pose or intervention. By the novel’s end, Jim must leave the
plantation. The fact that he poses a threat to Marshall Hebert is
perhaps the least of the reasons why Jim has been weaned from
the old order and understands it as simply a perpetuation of the
slaveocracy. Marcus “stuck his boot in that door. That was the
house slavery built.” What bound Jim to the black community,
his sense of self, of God, of right and wrong, has been profoundly
altered. He flees through the wedge of light Marcus forced open.

“Billie Jean used to shake me a long time to get me up in the morning,
but now my Billie is gone and have to make it by myself. Where are you,
Billie Jean and what are you doing now, my little chicken? Wherever you
are, whatever you’re doing, I hope you’re making him happy as you used
to make me. It was good then, wasn’t it? It was up near Pointe Coupee,
and it was good then, wasn’t it? But my little chicken wanted New
Orleans—Pointe Coupee was too slow; and once she got in New Orleans
she wanted more than what daddy could give her. So baby found another
prince. Well, that’s the way it rolls; that’s the way it rolls.”
When Frank James Kelly sings his blues, his song comes from the heart of the black folk experience. His values, his feelings and his style of expressing them are tied to the traditions of Afro-American culture in the rural South. He resigns himself to the loss of Billie Jean, examines his love and pain and extracts consolation from the goodness that once was there, had to be there to make the sense of loss so hurtful. His capacity for resignation, for endurance is what he tries to teach to Marcus. These disciplines are Jim’s inheritance from generations of oppressed ancestors. But the boy already has endurance, toughness, resiliency. The crucial difference is that Marcus will endure only what he chooses to endure. He embodies other truths which are part of the blues Jim sings. The existential leap, the move on down the highway, the energy, independence, and indomitable will of the troubador, wanderer, bluesman whose life is in his own hands, who lives by his own rules and is willing to die before he’d violate their spirit. He is like another young black man with a Roman name, Cassius Marcellus Clay, who announced to the world that his coming was the dawning of a new day.

After the appearance of such new/old men the old world cannot remain the same. Because Jim Kelly was situated so solidly at the center of Afro-American tradition, ideally he will be a carrier, a preserver of that culture, and his presence in the new order will ensure that the wisdom of the ancestors, paid for in blood and sweat and dust and love, will not be lost.

NOTES

1 All page numbers in parentheses following quotes from Of Love and Dust refer to the Bantam paperback edition, 1969.