JANE PITTMAN AND
ORAL TRADITION

by Barry Beckhman

Ernest Gaines has achieved a triumph of style in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. This is not to argue that the thematic concern must be considered of less importance than stylistic concern, or that there is not a correspondence between style and theme which furthers Gaines’s artistic purpose in this folk autobiography. Rather, the line to be pursued here is that by examining Gaines’s exploration of and manipulation of oral storytelling techniques—basically a stylistic concern which nonetheless is rooted in thematic explication—we are led to a larger appreciation of Ernest Gaines’s accomplishment.

Further, his working out of the oral stylistics, a natural development in his fiction since his first novel, *Catherine Carmier* (1964), reaches its fullest expression in this autobiographical tale of a 110-year-old woman reliving her life story for the benefit of a young tape-recording historian. Gaines has always been acutely appreciative of black Southern speech patterns, and has used these patterns as integral parts in all of his fictions. But in Miss Jane’s autobiography, his appreciation for and grasp of Southern speech patterns is extended; he goes beyond the mere cherishing of that specialness of Southern dialectal pronunciation, syntax, and diction to incorporate qualities of voice and oral storytelling which have placed *The Autobiography of Miss Jane* in that rare category of American novels which talk to the reader.

Gaines’s sure grasp of the elements of Louisiana bayou country dialect is not simply a natural extension of his familiarity with folk speech peculiar to that geographic area. The quality of voice which is the stylistic hallmark of Miss Jane Pittman’s autobiography surely has a relationship to that vernacular propensity recurring throughout American literature since Mark Twain refined the verbal art of the Literary Comedians into *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The common speech of the folk has long fascinated the American novelist, and Ellison, Malamud, Faulkner, Hemingway and Philip Roth come to mind as successful modern practitioners who have sought to express the true ring
and tenor of our native language. Gaines clearly falls into this tradition, and it would be difficult to find a novel written by an American since the last war which so successfully and continually sustains the quality of voice.

I would like to suggest too that Gaines’s cherishing of the oral tradition brings to mind the premium that his ethnic counterpart, the black African novelist, places on the primacy of the word. Reflecting a cultural tradition which sustains the transmission by voice of a voluminous body of legends, proverbs, songs, and stories as well as events demanding verbal facility, the African novelist—more naturally than the black American novelist—has long drawn from this oral tradition in ordering his fictional world. The warmth and immediacy, tone and rhythm, which spills out from the narrators of Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, Amos Tutuola’s The Palm Wine-Drinkard and Gabriel Okara’s The Voice, are matched by Gaines’s centenarian narrator. Gaines is not consciously working out of the African tradition, but his novel sustains an oral literary tradition whose roots may be more African than American, more Tutuola than Twain. Gaines’s novel may direct other black American novelists to usable cultural influences which have already been appropriated eagerly by black American poets.

What these poets have been fascinated with is the pure quality, the exciting properties, of the voice. And what is Gaines’s novel but a chat: an episodic, lyrical, informal verbal chronicle of an exslave’s confrontation with the gratuitous transgression of a people’s humanity. It is important to approach this novel as an oral testimony and to view this testimony as a folk autobiography embodying craftsmanship of the oral storyteller.

What are the techniques, the elements, of this craft? Readily observable is Miss Jane Pittman’s use of the pronunciation, grammar and syntax which form the basis of the black Southern dialect of the Louisiana bayou. Miss Jane Pittman, aided by friends who embellish and emend her core narration, relates the central events of her life from age eleven when she is freed from slavery until one hundred years later when she joins a civil rights demonstration at the local courthouse. Her voice is ever a reminder of the special qualities of speech representative of the South. Gaines has used these forms before in his two other novels and in the collection of short fiction, Bloodline (1968), and here he is simply continuing a technique pretty much mastered. For example, Miss Jane, in her talking to the history teacher who records her narration over the space of nine months, will offer these odd-sounding yet refreshingly different pronunciations:
Gaines’s purpose is not only to preserve authenticity of speech, but also to cherish the special quality, the fresh attractive novelty, of Southern black folk speech.

In several instances, nonstandard pronunciation is given added value. When young Jane and her little friend Ned, whose mother has been killed by white outlaws, confront the government investigator, malapropism is combined with nonstandard pronunciation, so Jane’s approximation of the investigator’s term for the Freedman’s Bureau comes out as Freedom Beero. And when the kindly gentleman asks Ned why the youngster is holding a flint and piece of iron, Ned answers, “Fiyer.” This flat, terse answer heightens the symbolism of Ned’s protective pieces (indeed, he will conk another youngster, Claiborne, on the forehead with the rock when the youngster tries to take the rock away from him), and amplifies the meaning of “for you.” The pieces are, for Ned whose mother has been killed in a massacre, a sole, tangible means of self-protection, and the “for you” is not just simply for the investigator, but for any “you” who tries to manhandle him.

Other properties of black folk speech which have benefited Gaines in his earlier works re-appear in this folk autobiography. “Gived” as the past tense of the verb to give, the omission of the possessive form (“That’s my girl name back there in Ohio.”), the deletion of definite articles (“... Unc Isom didn’t have power to put bad mark on you no more...”), the absence of verbs (“This all y’all?”), the practice of redundancy (“The driver he never got in the celebration him”), the improper agreement of subject and verb (“... we was ready to move on”) and a generalized use of tense (“I knowed she was crying”) are other patterns of black folk speech which Gaines employs.

In presenting a character whose voice must sustain the entire narrative, however, Gaines is faced for the first time with maintaining the tradition of the oral storyteller for the length of the tale. A consequence of this narrative burden is that he must as author select judiciously the techniques that his narrator, Miss Jane, relies upon to keep the listener’s attention. Audiences have
a tendency to lose interest after awhile, to suffer lapses in concentration, even to nod sleepily when episodes falter into a commonplace of action. Clearly Gaines cannot persist in using only the varieties of pronunciation and grammar as a means of advancing the narrative if he wishes to assure listener loyalty. A series of conscientiously selected malapropisms and redundancies will not by themselves sustain listener interest in a long narrative. Here is a test of craft for Gaines, and he handles it successfully, extending his own control of narrative art.

Like the poet whose ear is sensitive to the intrinsic rhythm and timbre of certain non-poetic, “found” prose such as letters, speeches, documents, signs and the like, Gaines possesses an ear (and transfers that sensitivity to his narrator, Jane) for oral utterances which may be said to vibrate with an inherently appealing verbal quality. The quality may be rhythmic and/or aural, and is best described as a pleasant orality—it sounds good. By infusing the narrative with instances of these pleasing moments of orality, Gaines achieves one of his finest examples of narrative control: Miss Jane maintains both listener interest and a feel of immediacy.

One example occurs in that early scene, where under a thicket of sycamore trees, the newly freed slaves engage in a spontaneous and rhythmic ceremony of renaming themselves.

This one would say, “My new name Cam Lincoln.” That one would say, “My new name Ace Freeman.” Another one, “My new name Sherman S. Sherman.” “What that S for?” “My title.” Another one would say, “My new name Job.” “Job what?” “Just Job.”

Miss Jane Pittman, directed by author Gaines, understands the special, appealing verbal quality—the pleasant orality—of this recitation, and depends upon it to maintain listener interest as well as to advance her story by focusing on a crucial historic event—i.e., the “renaming ceremony” of freed slaves. (The example may take the form of a delightful allusion for the young historian-listener who may recall that Booker T. Washington appropriated his last name under the pressure of standing in a classroom and realizing that he would need a full name when called upon.)6 Gaines no doubt sees the recitation as a lyricism of verbal expression in its orderly, official, rhythmic nature.

Gaines’s knack for pleasant orality surfaces again when Miss Jane’s description of Ned’s and her meeting with the kindly white man, Job, who looks at his map when he discovers Miss Jane and little Ned are seeking Ohio:
“Yep. Ohio—38, 43 lat; 80, 84 longi. Iowa, let’s see—where you at there, Iowa?—here you is you little rascal. Trying to hide from me and I ain’t done you nothing, huh? Iowa—40, 44 lat; 90, 96 longi . . .” (p. 48).

Years later in the narrative, Jane has married Joe Pittman and seen him killed trying to retrieve a runaway stallion. Ned, grown to revolutionary manhood, also has been killed by a hired white assassin, Albert Cluveau, because of Ned’s challenge to white domination. The sheriff, of course, fully aware that Cluveau had been hired to shoot Ned, interrogates Bam and Alcee, two black witnesses to the killing.

He asked them if they was sure it was Mr. Cluveau. They said yes they was sure. He asked them if it was a cane field or a corn field. they had al ready told him it was a cane field, so they said cane again. He told them with can so high that time of year (July) how could they see a man? They said Mr. Cluveau came out of the cane on the headland. He said he thought they told him Mr. Cluveau shot Ned from the cane field. (p 118).

In this instance, Jane wants to preserve the verbal quality of the sheriff’s trickery. Paradoxically, the sheriff’s is an unpleasant rather than a pleasant orality, and, by reciting his interrogation to the young historian, Jane achieves a certain psychic satisfaction, a certain release of tension, gained by repeating the deliberately confusing inquiry.

As Miss Jane Pittman eases into the narrative flow, she still, Gaines realizes, has the ever difficult task of holding the listener’s attention. Related to his appreciation of the appealing verbal quality of particular episodes is his emphasis on verbal wit and crisp, trenchant rejoinders. For the listener, these verbal elements are like miniature comic moments which punctuate the narrative proper as they connect and highlight certain episodes. For Miss Jane, these elements often represent certain moments when the sociocultural power base between black slaves and white master reaches an uncommon parity: the only way the black Southerner can assert her womanhood short of rebellion may be through the word. And often this practice of signifying or verbally abusing another is also necessary to preserve one’s humanity against the hostility of other blacks.

An illustration of this latter stance presents itself in an early chapter, immediately after Jane and her comrades in slavery have been freed. The slave driver, already described by Jane as “a great big old black, round, oily-faced nigger,” responds to her request to point her North by declaring that she has been nothing but trouble since she came into the field. “If I ain’t nothing but trouble, you ain’t nothing but Nothing,” Jane replies. Searching for a Mister Brown, a corporal whose home is in Ohio, Jane encounters two “colored” soldiers, asks plainly if they know a sol-
dier called Mr. Brown. One’s response riles Jane to reply, “Old enough to know I don’t care to know you.” Later, when told it will take Ned and her thirty years to reach Ohio by foot, she says, “Well, we better head out.”

In fact, her rejoinders become a verbal leitmotif—so much so that her smartness and her smallness are characteristics used by many to refer either to her readiness to do verbal battle or her unflinching independence. “You asking me?” Robert Samson, owner of the plantation on which Miss Jane has spent most of her life, asks when she mentions moving out of the big house. “I didn’t know I was still running Samson.” When she first arrives at the plantation, Paul Samson, father of Robert, asks, “You kinda spare, ain’t you? How do I know you can carry your load?” When the cook, Aunt Hattie dies, Paul Samson again confronts Jane, this time asking her to move into the big house to cook. He asks her what she knows about cooking. She says that she’s been doing it for sixty years. He says that he means for white people. Her reply: “I ain’t poisoned none yet.” This unbending stance of independence prompts Nicodemus, who offers Jane and Ned cornbread and meat just after the killing of Ned’s mother, to call Jane “little dried-up.”

It is a tribute to Gaines’s sense of fairness and to his conception of Miss Jane’s character that he does not allow her to win every battle, for the reality of her Southern black situation simply would not allow Jane to beat out the Samsons and Cluveaus and local sheriffs. As a matter of fact, she can’t win against her own all the time, and an incident designed splendidly to support that contention occurs when the boy who writes letters for Jane and the others in her later years refuses to embellish their correspondence. Jane asks him to say something about her garden. His youthful reply mirrors the same smartecky independence of spirit that has characterized her:

“Say what about it? Say it out there? I can say that if you want me to. You want me to say, ‘My garden still here?’” (p. 205).

Independent yet desirous of attention, Miss Smarty is humble enough to realize that any storyteller in the traditional sense of the word must sustain the listener’s interest. Accordingly, Miss Jane, through the directorial efforts of Ernest Gaines, cannot be certain that only three aspects of the oral tradition—black Southern pronunciation and grammar, pleasant orality and verbal wit—will suffice. She must lean finally on a technique that embodies some sleight-of-voice and which requires mental dexterity as well as what may be termed an incidental directness. It is a larger technique of the art of narration or the art of ordering epi-
sodes into a coherent testimony, and this technique makes use of a number of narrative elements like the story within a story, episodic tension and the aside to the listener. (I have used the term *incidental directness* to define the nature of the aside. It seems to me that, despite its incidental quality or its sense of material for the listener, it still has a directness in that the storyteller addresses the listener personally.) In utilizing these several aspects of narrative art, Gaines manifests his acknowledged mastery of the oral tradition.

Before treating fully the account of Tee Bob, the son of the plantation owner, and his aborted romancing of the Creole Mary Agnes LeFabre, Miss Jane stirs the listener’s interest by creating narrative tension. First she introduces Mary Agnes by giving her a brief family history (no doubt based on oral transmission); then she addresses the listener directly (“I want to tell you a little story just to show you how these people look at things, and this story is true”) before relating an episode which is not the central scene but instead concerns what may be called a foil scene or a short subject before the feature film. Then, after describing an embarrassing visit by two men to Creole Place, Miss Jane proceeds to tell about Tee Bob and Mary Agnes. She has courted the listener, brought him into her private theater, kindled his interest and then satisfied him with an episode of romantic disaster.

Similar elements of narrative art appear uniformly throughout the narrative. In perhaps the longest aside of the story, Miss Jane ensures tension by interrupting her story of how Jimmy Aaron (the new “leader”) got religion to recall how Mack Jenkins got religion. In another example, Jane tells us first that Ned is killed, and then she narrates an event that occurred before his death—his sermon at the river. She wants to set off his sermon—a verbal event—from the narrative proper in order to give it the isolated moment of reflection she thinks it deserves. In the same sense, her revealing early in the narrative that her mother has been beaten to death by an overseer is presented as a story within a story, for actually she is telling the historian how she and Ned met a white woman and Nicodemus.

“And you can see I’m no giant,” she says in a perfect example of that incidental directness, the aside, of which there are many. But the historian knows better. She is a giant: a woman of enormous pride, of unflappable independence, of sincere humility: and thanks to Ernest Gaines for a character who extends the oral tradition in the American novel to a level that will be most difficult to surpass.
NOTES


2 In order of publication, these African works are Tutuola (London: Faber, 1952), Achebe (London: Heinemann, 1958) and Okara (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964).

