

## Introduction

IN *The Lonely Voice*, Frank O'Connor develops a theory of the short story based on the concept of submerged population groups. These submerged populations may be ethnic, like Joyce's Dubliners or Babel's Jews; social-economic, like Maupassant's prostitutes or Turgenev's serfs; or even psychological, like Sherwood Anderson's grotesques or J. F. Powers' spoiled priests. The crucial factor is their marginality, their spiritual isolation from the dominant society. Out of this estrangement arises the storyteller's lonely voice, with its insistent moral claim that "These, too, are your brothers."

The best storytellers, according to O'Connor, are concerned with the theme of human loneliness. Moving beyond the obvious forms of social alienation, they universalize their theme by so depicting a submerged population that its circumstances come to represent the fate of modern man. Social marginality, in other words, functions as a metaphor: "Somewhere the tragedy ceases to be entirely one of justice and injustice, of society and its submerged population, and becomes a tragedy of human loneliness. At once the whole conception of the submerged population becomes enlarged and enriched."<sup>1</sup>

Some such process as O'Connor has described is surely at work in the short fiction of black Americans. From Charles Chesnutt's anguished slaves to Jean Toomer's deracinated intellectuals, from Langston Hughes' cooks and janitors and hoboes to Richard Wright's Mississippi sharecroppers, from

James Baldwin's storefront saints to James McPherson's troubled adolescents, black storytellers have designated various submerged populations and striven to give voice to their mute sufferings. And their best stories are precisely those in which social marginality acquires the force of myth.

In one respect, however, O'Connor's theory is flawed. He fails to discriminate sufficiently between *kinds* of submerged populations, stressing only their common feature: marginality. This leads to a serious distortion where ethnic populations are concerned. For marginality as such does not explain the remarkable vitality of Irish, Yiddish, or Afro-American short fiction. Rather we must look to the oral literatures created by these ethnic populations. Their jokes and proverbs, anecdotes and fables, legends and folktales are the cultural foundations on which their preeminence as storytellers rests.

O'Connor places, in short, too negative a value on ethnicity. Prostitutes and Irishmen may share a common marginality, but hookers do not possess a folk tradition that nourishes the art of storytelling. Dublin barflies, on the other hand, tell stories with the same natural grace as French Canadians play hockey. Fearing, perhaps, to be thought provincial, O'Connor has devised an ingenious theory that accords with the canons of literary modernism. But obfuscation is the chief result. For the simple truth remains that the Irish have a special gift for short fiction, nurtured by centuries of oral storytelling.

If O'Connor makes too little of his folk tradition, there are some who make too much. In the context of Afro-American writing, for example, critics of the nationalist school seek to foster the impression that black folklore is the primary source of black fiction. In point of fact, books by white authors are a far more important influence. These critics, eager to dissociate themselves from Western literary forms, have turned to black folklore as a cultural alternative. In folk forms they hope to discover the basis of a black esthetic. But they place a greater burden on their folk tradition than it can reasonably bear.

A folk tradition can enrich, but not supplant the written word. Black writers are not, after all, folk artists, nor can they repudiate their complex vision of the world. And insofar as they are *writers* as opposed to *raconteurs*, they become involved with Western literary forms. Cultural nationalists tend to minimize the difference between folk expression and a more self-conscious art. But Frank O'Connor is surely right to differentiate the public and communal art of the folktale from the private and individualistic art of the short story. A quantum leap occurs when the story enters print, and the storyteller moves from a supporting and assenting to a skeptical and critical audience.<sup>2</sup>

In any case, it is not so easy to secede from one's literary culture. The short story is an Occidental form; it was not invented by Asians, Africans, or Hopi Indians. If an author chooses to employ it, he becomes a part of the literary history of the West. To write short stories, moreover, it is necessary first to read a few, in order to acquire some notion of the possibilities inherent in the form. As it happens, most of the short fiction now in the world's libraries was written by white men. Serious short-story writers who are black must avail themselves of these models if they hope to become masters of the art.

"American Negro literature," according to Saunders Redding, "cannot be lopped off from the main body of American literary expression without doing grave harm to both. . . ." The history of the Afro-American short story speaks for itself in this regard. The short fiction of Charles Chesnutt cannot be understood apart from that of Joel Chandler Harris and George Washington Cable. Similarly with Paul Laurence Dunbar and Thomas Nelson Page; Jean Toomer and Waldo Frank; Eric Walrond and Lafcadio Hearn. Even in the case of LeRoi Jones, a book like *Tales* cannot be approached without reference to the fiction of the Beat Generation.

The Afro-American short story is a child of mixed ancestry. Two cultural heritages meet and blend in its pages: the one

Euro-American, literary, cosmopolitan; the other African-derived, oral in expressive mode, rooted in the folk community. But as a child may be said to "favor" one or the other of his parents, so the Afro-American short story has more in common with its white counterpart than with the black folktale. To alter the figure, Afro-American writing is a variation on a theme. The theme is American; the variation black.

So much for the theoretical assumptions of the present work. I shall strive to give ethnicity its due, and to avoid O'Connor's specious "universalism." At the same time, I shall insist on the indebtedness of black short-story writers to Western literary forms. In particular, I hope to demonstrate that the alternating rhythms of the Afro-American short story are derived from the employment of two traditional literary modes: pastoral and antipastoral. Some preliminary definitions will therefore be required, before proceeding to the main argument.

The pastoral tradition stems in poetry from the *Idyls* of Theocritus and the *Eclogues* of Virgil; in prose, from the *Daphnis and Chloe* of Longus. In English literature, pastoral becomes a dominant form in the Elizabethan age, where it may be found not only in poetry, but drama and prose fiction. Edmund Spenser's *The Shepherd's Calendar* (poetry), John Fletcher's *The Faithful Shepherdess* (verse drama), and Sir Philip Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (fiction) are the masterpieces of the form. In American letters, the pastoral mode has flourished more in prose than poetry, the major figures being Thoreau, Twain, Hemingway, and Robert Frost.

The major pastoral conventions, according to a recent critic, include "(1) people of a low socio-economic class, (2) living in simplicity and harmony, (3) against a background of rural nature. In the classical pattern, this subject emerges as (1) Corydon, Lycidas, and Amaryllis, (2) tending their flocks, weaving garlands, and singing songs, (3) out among the fields,

caves, and brooks of Arcady. In the Christian-Judaic pattern, it is Adam and Eve, spinning and gardening in Eden.”<sup>4</sup> The underlying assumption of the pastoral tradition is the superiority of simple, peasant life to that of the sophisticated, urbanized, or courtly upper class.

At first glance, the pastoral attitude would seem to be at fundamental odds with the black experience. Yet it is a fact that the pastoral impulse dominates the first half century or so of sustained black writing (roughly 1885 to 1935). Why this should be so is a complicated question that will be explored at length. Suffice it to observe for the moment that black American writing was a regional before it was an ethnic literature. Pastoral has always been the favored literary mode of the American South, whose agrarian values, classical ideals, and hierarchical social forms found in pastoral their natural vehicle.

The concept of antipastoral is perhaps better illustrated than defined.<sup>5</sup> Here are the opening stanzas of Christopher Marlowe's pastoral, "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love:"

Come live with me and be my love,  
And we will all the pleasures prove  
That hills and valleys, dale and field,  
And all the craggy mountains yield.

There will we sit upon the rocks  
And see the shepherds feed their flocks,  
By shallow rivers, to whose falls  
Melodious birds sing madrigals.

And here are the first two stanzas of Sir Walter Raleigh's antipastoral reply:

If all the world and love were young  
And truth in every shepherd's tongue,

These pretty pleasures might me move  
To live with thee and be thy love.

But time drives flocks from field to fold,  
When rivers rage and rocks grow cold;  
And Philomel becometh dumb;  
The rest complains of cares to come.

Or consider a similar pairing from the eighteenth century. Here are the opening lines of Oliver Goldsmith's pastoral, "The Deserted Village":

Sweet Auburn! loveliest village of the plain,  
Where health and plenty cheer'd the laboring swain,  
Where smiling spring its earliest visit paid,  
And parting summer's lingering blooms delay'd;  
Dear lovely bowers of innocence and ease,  
Seats of my youth, when every sport could please,  
How often have I loiter'd on thy green,  
Where humble happiness endear'd each scene!

And here are several lines from the opening section of George Crabbe's antipastoral, "The Village":

Yes, thus the Muses sing of happy swains,  
Because the Muses never knew their pains:  
They boast their peasants' pipes, but peasants now  
Resign their pipes and plod beside the plough.

\* \* \*

. . . I paint the Cot  
As Truth will paint it, and as Bards will not.

\* \* \*

Can poets soothe you, when you pine for bread,  
By winding myrtles round your ruined shed?<sup>6</sup>

Just as the epic mode swells until it bursts into mock-epic, so

the pastoral mode becomes more and more impossibly idyllic until it spills over into antipastoral. Thus we have genre and countergenre, the latter emerging as the traditional form exhausts itself. Antipastoral, it should be noted, has no autonomous existence. It is antithetical in nature, and always exists in tension with its opposite. Raleigh's poem is a satirical response to Marlowe's pastoral; Crabbe's is a "realistic" refutation of Goldsmith's overly idealized version of English peasant life.

Antipastoral, which is not a genre but a countergenre, may assume a variety of modes. We have already encountered two: satire in the case of Raleigh, and realism in that of Crabbe. To these must be added the picaresque, which Claudio Guillén designates as the chief alternative to pastoral.<sup>7</sup> But whatever its precise mode, the spirit of antipastoral is much the same. It reflects an ironic, rather than idyllic posture toward experience. Pastoral and antipastoral incorporate the rival claims of the ideal and the actual. Both claims have their place in literature, no less than life.

With the aid of these conceptual tools, the history of the Afro-American short story begins to manifest a recognizable design. Pastoralists like Paul Dunbar and Jean Toomer emerge in opposition to antipastoralists like Charles Chesnutt and Langston Hughes. Writers of the Harlem Renaissance, who for the most part adopt the pastoral mode, are set off against their successors of the Wright generation, who are inclined toward the picaresque. Pastoral or antipastoral never achieve exclusive dominion in the work of an individual or generation, but one or the other tendency is likely to gain the upper hand.

Pastoral and antipastoral are the "deep structures" of Afro-American short fiction. These literary forms spring from three primary sources, all intertwined, and all reflective of the black American's historical experience. First, his deep attachment to the Protestant tradition, and especially the Bible, whose pages are saturated, both in the Old and New

Testaments, with the rhetoric of pastoral. Second, his deep affection for the rural South, despite the terror and brutality which all too often were visited upon him within its precincts. And third, his deep anxiety concerning his future role in American society, which manifests itself on the emotional plane as a painful vacillation between hope and despair.

In her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*,<sup>4</sup> Maya Angelou describes a revival meeting in rural Arkansas. The preacher's text is Charity, but his not-too-secret theme is that "the mean whitefolks was going to get their come-uppance," if not in this world, surely in the next. "Charity," he intones, "is simple. . . . Charity is poor. . . . Charity is plain (107)." This is the rhetoric of Christian humility, but also of literary pastoral. "The Lord loved the poor and hated those cast high in the world. Hadn't He Himself said it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven (108)?" The last shall be first: such is the essence of the pastoral inversion.

Maya Angelou concludes her chapter with a passage which, in its illumination of the folk temperament, points implicitly to one major source of black literary pastoral: "They basked in the righteousness of the poor and the exclusiveness of the downtrodden. Let the whitefolks have their money and power and segregation and sarcasm and big houses and schools and lawns like carpets, and books, and mostly—mostly—let them have their whiteness. It was better to be meek and lowly, spat upon and abused for this little time than to spend eternity frying in the fires of hell (110-11)." This sentiment, in various secular metamorphoses, becomes the mainstay of much Afro-American short fiction.

To the extent of a black writer's disenchantment with his Protestant heritage, he is likely to incline toward antipastoral. Langston Hughes provides a case in point. Not without respect for the survival value of black religion, it is amply clear from the body of his work that he counts himself among the sinners rather than the saints of the black community. His

poems and plays, novels and stories, are frequently irreverent in tone, and without exception lacking in the otherworldly (or Platonic) strain that underlies the pastoral ideal. Satire of the high and mighty, and a distinct readiness to challenge their supremacy in this world, is the hallmark of Hughes' fiction.

The alternating rhythm of pastoral and antipastoral likewise has its source in the black American's conflicting feelings toward the rural South. On the one hand, he is deeply moved by the natural beauty of the region, and on the other, repelled by its moral ugliness where his own existence is concerned. In a book like *Cane*, and especially its famous centerpiece, "Song of the Son," Jean Toomer apostrophizes the Southland in the accents of pastoral elegy. Yet Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*, whose mocking epigraph is taken from the popular song, "Is it true what they say about Dixie?" betrays an antipastoral bias so pronounced as to amount to a permanent revulsion from the black man's Southern homeland.

Beyond the matter of regional loyalty or its opposite lies the black man's deep ambivalence toward his position in American society. The oscillating pattern of pastoral and antipastoral originates in part in the black American's agonizing vacillation between hope and despair. Pastoral gives voice to his deepest yearnings for racial harmony and reconciliation, while antipastoral expresses his recurrent disillusionment, frustration, and despair. Neither mood is more authentic than the other; both have been experienced at one time or another by most black Americans. It follows that neither literary form is intrinsically superior; both are capable of rendering a profound psychological truth.

William Dawson's *Negro Symphony* has a movement entitled "Hope in the Night." This phrase seems to capture the spirit of much Afro-American writing. If a black author stresses the element of *hope* (the promise of America), he is likely to employ the pastoral mode. If he stresses *night* (the desecration of the Dream), he will move instinctively toward antipastoral. In our own era of disillusion and despair, it is tempting to

endorse the latter mode. But before rejecting the pastoral tradition out of hand, we would do well to ponder what it means, even in the darkest night, to live devoid of hope.

We, here, are concerned with that early phase of Afro-American short fiction when hope was in the ascendancy and pastoral the predominant literary form. Either the vast majority of black Americans still lived in the rural South, or the Southern migrant, transplanted to the city pavements from the green fields of his youth, persisted in bestowing on the place of his nativity the affectionate epithet of "down home." It was a retrospective phase when Dunbar, writing at the turn of the century, looked back toward antebellum days, and when authors of the Harlem Renaissance, having congregated in the black metropolis, looked back with poignant yearning at the pastoral circumstances of their youth.

This penchant for idealizing the rural past is the very essence of the pastoral tradition. We are dealing here with two generations of black literary men who looked back on the rural South with much more fondness and affection than terror and revulsion. It was Richard Wright who pioneered the latter mode, and so we shall end this book short of *Uncle Tom's Children*, which marks the beginning of a new era in Afro-American cultural history. Henceforward urban styles of dress, manners, music, and literature would predominate. With the advent of Wright and his generation, black Arcadia may be said to have vanished. But while it persisted, it exercised a powerful hold on the black imagination.