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Book Review: *Possum, and Other Receits for the Recovery of "Southern" Being*

Benjamin G. Lockerd Jr.
*Grand Valley State University*

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only way he could terminate the book, since the action points toward no natural conclusion.

While Wolfe failed at making the transition from real-life action to fictional plot, he has succeeded at making the other transitions — from reports of real people to fictional characterization, from personal narration to fictional point-of-view, from self-conscious language to style which undergirds the rest of the fiction. And most of all from the personal statement of non-fiction to the representation of reality — and moral position — of the best fiction. Though he hasn't said it in public, Wolfe's novel suggests he has decided that fiction may be truer than real life — the basic belief of all good novelists.

Ron Dwelle


If a powerful computer endowed with artificial intelligence programming could interface with Marion Montgomery and enter everything from his mind into its memory, could it write this book? Montgomery's association of the recipe for cooking possum with the Latin *possum*, representing for him the ability or potency of the individual person, seems arbitrary enough that the computer might arrive at it. But the machine would be unable to see a way of fleshing out this strange connection to make of it a compelling discourse. Why? Because the computer has no heart, which is, as Montgomery claims, the source of vision, as opposed to the brain's reason. I would add that the computer has no body. It cannot see how to flesh out ideas because it has no eyes and no flesh. In fact, in spite of our anthropomorphic terminology, it cannot "interface" with a person because it has no face, and its information storage is nothing like our memory because it has never experienced anything.

This book, originally given as the Lamar Memorial Lectures at Mercer University, is not about artificial intelligence in computers. But it is about artificial intelligence in human beings, the kind of thinking (designated metaphorically as "Northern") that is divorced from a sense of place, of particular reality. Montgomery follows St. Thomas Aquinas in dividing the mind into *ratio* and *intellectus*. *Ratio* is pure reason, which attempts to reduce nature and human nature to abstractions, and finally to number, so that both may be controlled and even redesigned. *Intellectus* is the intuitive or visionary side of the mind, the heart. Montgomery follows T. S. Eliot in arguing that a "dissociation of sensibility" took place in the latter part of the Renaissance, divorcing thought and feeling. The Western world, in this view, has increasingly adopted Ockham's nominalism, asserting more and more firmly that the relation between human language and reality is entirely arbitrary.

Another thinker Montgomery often calls upon is Eric Voegelin, who termed this intellectual malady "the new gnosticism." As the theistic gnosticism of the early Christian era divorced spirit and flesh, the modern atheistic gnosticism privileges abstract, critical thinking over intuitive, analogical insight. Surprisingly, our increasing reliance on pure abstraction results not only in reduced awareness of the world around us but also in abject materialism. No paradox here: the purest
abstraction translates reality into numbers, not names; and matter appears to be reducible to number, while spirit can hardly even be named. Along these lines, I thought I had detected an inconsistency when Montgomery proclaimed gnostic dualism to be "as ancient as Adam's being required to name the creatures in an old Garden" (p. 24), but he later revises this evaluation in advancing his belief that names are not, finally, arbitrary (pp. 33, 87).

The most direct influence on Montgomery's thinking comes evidently from the Vanderbilt Fugitives. The alternate term for them, "Agrarians," emphasizes the notion that writers must be rooted in the land at some particular place. Montgomery sees himself following those earlier Southern poets in being a "prophetic poet" who describes, not the future, but the evils of the present which may pollute the future. If at the beginning of the book this title sounds grandiose, it seems to have been earned by the end. Montgomery does flesh out his ideas so as to make the reader see the danger into which we fall when, in trying to think critically and dispassionately, we silence our intuitions and ignore our visions.

Montgomery is no doubt called a conservative. He may be quite willing to accept the label, since all prophets seek to conserve (or revive) an endangered sense of communal values. Still, it should be noted that his views are no more amenable to capitalist materialism than they are to the Marxist variety; both ideologies love numbers, not people. He points out that the Agrarians were criticized from left and right, and he evidently expects as much himself. All the same, he is certain to make more enemies among the many liberals who believe that they love humanity but who tend to define that term as a growing population of highly intelligent animals who must be better managed if the species is to survive. Above all, Montgomery marks himself as a non-liberal when he turns to theology and poetry rather than the social sciences for enlightenment concerning the human condition (p. 127). In practicing the old liberal arts instead of the new liberal sciences, he alienates himself from most contemporary liberalism.

Possum embodies the integration of heart and head it champions. It also integrates a variety of disciplines, ranging from theology and philosophy through literary criticism to history and social criticism. The book gives a profound review of our intellectual tradition and engages the enduring questions in their present manifestations. Old readers of Montgomery may find little that is entirely new to them but will be gladdened by the novel applications and connections; new readers of his will discover a writer who treats the important questions with rigor, vitality, and a respect for the mystery and complexity of existence.

What more could one desire? Perhaps some mention of C. S. Lewis, whose Abolition of Man similarly warns against the tendency of "men without chests" to aim at controlling not only nature but also human nature. On the need for rootedness, he might have turned not to Saint Thomas but to Saint Francis, a poet whose mysticism was expressed in love of the created world around him, and who commanded his brothers always to return to the Portiuncula, the "little portion" of earth where his mission began.

I would also like to see Montgomery apply his critique to the deconstructionist school of literary criticism. Perhaps he alludes to the deconstructionists' redactio ad absurdum of nominalism when he explains that the prime objective of his book is to "acquire that principle of which the destruction of mind is the sheath." 

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objective of the new gnosticism is to acquire and use power over being. From that principle it follows as a first necessity the deconstruction of reality, the separation of mind into an autonomy independent of reality. (p. 108)

Quite possibly he has spoken on this subject in review articles which I have not read, but this book would seem to offer a secure vantage point from which to see what post-structuralists are about. It would be most interesting to watch those critics chew on the Southern recipe for possum.

Montgomery for some reason stops short of talking about the body. The Fathers who combated the ancient gnosticism spoke of the sanctity of the body itself. Origen insisted that our glorified body would not be different in essence from our present body. Tertullian proclaimed that "The flesh is the hinge of salvation." Augustine raised as the prime mystery what T. S. Eliot also came to recognize as such: "The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation." The Apostles' Creed expresses this teaching, confronting dualism with belief in "the resurrection of the body." More recently, theologians have again begun to insist on the integrity of mind and body in face of the new gnosticism. If Montgomery insists only on head and heart as integral to our essence, he will himself remain partially susceptible to modern gnosticism. Intellectus is partly located in the brain (wholly so, some rationalists suggest): those feelings in the chest which are bound up with imagination and intuition perhaps connect the one-dimensional, serial function of the brain with the three-dimensionality of the body, without which there would be no metaphor, no vision. All this may be implied in Possum, but it is never stated. Pressing the question down to the level of the flesh would also force fuller consideration of certain moral issues. For example, I wonder whether Montgomery would consider contraception to be another manifestation of the modern dualism.

Finally, as refreshing as it is to find someone speaking of "community" instead of "society," one might wish for a more complete exposition of the nature of community than is given in Montgomery's suggestive "Afterword." What does bind those persons together? While we may agree that Faulkner's Miss Emily binds a community more surely than Nashville's replica of the Parthenon, we desire a healthier community than hers. When Montgomery asserts that the community must be dependent upon the prophetic poet (p. 129), I wonder if he may not finally be burdening himself with a kind of authority that is more properly placed elsewhere. The prophet awakens the conscience of a community, but whose office is it to unite and direct the community and maintain its continuity?

In short, I would like to see Montgomery press some of these ideas a step further. Still, I rejoice to have read a book that reveals the heartlessness of much modern intellectualism as brilliantly as this one does. Montgomery can be called a reactionary only if by that one means an angry prophet. He rejects, not computers, but the temptation to remake ourselves in the image of the machine we have made. He quotes an unnamed academic leader as saying that the goal of the academy is the "reprogramming of nature." Montgomery cries out that neither nature nor human nature is unmysterious and mechanical enough to be treated that way: "except by fundamental destruction, existence is not to be reduced out of time to the control of gnostis incarnate, the computer" (p. 109).

Benjamin G. Lockerd, Jr.