

# Jeffrey Goodman

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## The Romance of Modern Classicism: Remarks on the Life and Work of John Finlay, 1941-1991

During the last decade, eminent critics have praised John Finlay's collected poems, *Mind and Blood*, for their "fundamental importance," predicting for them a future "in anthologies, sympathetic studies, [and] a deserved place in American letters." According to William Bedford Clark, this is poetry "we cannot in good conscience ignore." John Finlay wrote as many enduring poems as any poet of his generation in America or England — poems that succeed in making classical methods modern, and modern subjects classical.

How did a farm boy from rural Enterprise, Alabama, become one of the most distinguished American poets and literary essayists of his generation? A preliminary answer is simple enough: years of hard work, sufficient opportunity, and literary genius.

### 1. Blood: Enterprise, Alabama (1941-1959)

Enterprise, Alabama, was incorporated in the 1890s as a lumber town. Cotton and peanut farming soon followed. This was home to John Finlay's father, Tom. Tom Finlay's family were hard-working business farmers with three- or four-hundred-acre tracts that made them "land rich" in local eyes. Finlay's paternal grandmother, known as "Ma," frequently hosted afternoon teas in her white, wooden farmhouse.

Jean Sorrell, Tom's future wife, belonged to the established gentry in Ozark, a somewhat older town 15 miles away. At the turn of the century, her grandfather was Ozark's town doctor. Her father, Martin Sorrell, was a lawyer from a prominent Birmingham family who had clerked locally for Hugo Black. Her mother, known as "Mama," was an elementary school teacher and school administrator. Her uncle Waldo had served a term in the Alabama legislature during World War I; and her brother Walker was a physician in Montgomery.

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John Finlay's family history on both sides was marked by tragedy, including drug-dependency, alcoholism, insanity, and violent death. For instance, Finlay's paternal grandfather died of a heart attack after beating a stubborn mule to death. His mother's father, the lawyer from Birmingham, died of insanity at Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa, leaving behind a wife and three small children in Ozark.

John Finlay never liked farming. Enterprise to him meant only the dull, hard life of farm chores, like milking cows or driving the tractor in the Alabama sun. Weekends in Ozark, however, meant his grandmother's library of classics and sweet hours in her leisurely and educated company. Annie Laurie Cullens, an old family friend, observed Finlay's bright mind and precocious interest in his grandmother's library. Miss Cullens was a newspaper poet with connections to Mencken's wife and the cultural set in Montgomery. She gave John books, and he sat at the kitchen table while she and Uncle Waldo debated the merits of Eisenhower vs. Stevenson, atheism vs. theism, or argued over the latest novels reviewed in the *Sunday Times*.

Back home in Enterprise, when Finlay drove the rusty tractor under the high July sun, he might steady a copy of Shakespeare on the seat. On the pokey yellow school bus, he read. He named the cows he brought home from pasture after Greek gods and goddesses. By the age of fifteen, he was reading Wordsworth's collected poems.

At Enterprise High School, Finlay's favorite classes were in the humanities. He avoided high school sports, but played bridge socially, and he took a leading role in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and other plays. He was vice-president of his senior class of forty-three, class orator, and voted "most scholarly."

One of Finlay's high school friends, Elaine Kerr, remembers him as a witty, thoughtful, and distinguished young man. "I always picture John strolling down the hall lost in thought," she recalls. "He was good-looking: tall, slender, fair. There was something about the perfect posture, the proud way he carried himself that made him look quite aristocratic. His conversation was often sophisticated beyond his years." However, "he could fit right into a crowd that had nothing more silly on its mind than having a good

time. He could tell racy stories in naughty, boyish delight one minute and quote from Shakespeare the next. He was already incredibly well-read: F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway. John could speak about them, and hosts of others, in great detail. He sometimes related stories about Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald as casually as if they were eccentric neighbors from next door."

In the summer of 1959, Finlay's friend Ceci Carter, Annie Laurie's niece from Montgomery and a gifted violinist, managed to escape Montgomery's summer heat for the prestigious Interlocken Arts Camp in the cool, wooded shade of Michigan. On July 7, Ceci wrote to John:

*Johnny, you'd be in heaven up here. It's the greatest— way out. The drama, the opera, dance, orchestra, art—just everything—oohh rapture! Guess what our orchestra is playing this week? Beethoven's Fifth! We're doing Tchaikovsky's fourth next week. Oh, Johnny, you can't imagine my thrill and fascination with this place. It's so lovely and so beautiful, all of it.*

Ceci was studying literature, too, taking a French class reading Voltaire's *Candide*. She found parts "gory and gruesome." The entire summer's program was devoted to the classics; the next scheduled play was *Antigone*. "I wish you'd go to Montgomery and work for [your uncle] Walker Byrd," the letter concluded, "instead of digging wells on the farm."

Beyond Enterprise, there was Ozark. Beyond Ozark, there was Montgomery. Beyond Montgomery, there was Interlocken, Michigan, the remainder of the United States, and a Europe that embodied the classical, artistic mind that the bright, young Southerner, at the age of eighteen, was already anxious to assimilate.

"I then moved outward to become myself," Finlay wrote in "The Wide Porch," the first poem in his first book. From a biographical perspective, he was saying: when, on any occasion, I moved outward from Enterprise, it symbolized a parallel growth in the poetic mind. When Finlay bade farewell to the farm community of Enterprise for the university town of Tuscaloosa in September

1959, he carried his provincial values with him, like Aeneas his household gods. Oddly, Finlay's provincial values had a great deal in common with classical values: his father's capacity for intense, sustained work; his mother's family and friends' culture of mind; and the Baptist and Methodist faith of his ancestors.

Did Finlay strictly observe these same values? Certainly not. At times, he was irresponsible and immature. He was a notorious procrastinator. He could be two- or even three-faced, if he had to be. In his own eyes, he was a sinner. Nevertheless, traditional values always sustained and strengthened him, especially in times of personal and psychological need. And a fourth value cannot be omitted. This was a plain sense of fun, an ability to seize and savor the pleasure of the moment. Observed against rural Alabama's natural beauty, on the one hand, and against farm life's tragic difficulties, on the other, both so closely observed in his poetry, these ideas formed the real substance of the counter-romanticism of Finlay's poetic imagination.

## 2. Mind: Tuscaloosa, 1959-1966

Finlay entered the University of Alabama in the fall of 1959 as well-armed intellectually as any provincial in the class. He was not unaware of this. Within his first weeks on campus, he did two things very typical of the rest of his life. First, he used his semester's allowance for room, board, and textbooks to buy books for his personal library. Then, at Annie Laurie's urging, he introduced himself to Hudson Strode, an English professor who was at the time the most famous man of letters in Alabama. Finlay eventually took Strode's literature and creative writing classes, and Strode and his wife practically adopted Finlay as a son. They frequently had him to their home for dinner, from which he returned with uproarious tales of marital squabbles, and included him in their travels across the South. On one trip to Mississippi, Strode introduced Finlay to John Crowe Ranson. "He looks like a Baptist preacher," Finlay remarked in his notebook. "But what a poet!"

One year Strode went so far as to secure Finlay a \$1000 scholarship from a wealthy banker friend. In return, Finlay attached



himself to the influential Strode, reportedly a vain and pompous man, via compliment and outright flattery, a method that he would apply to nearly every influential literary figure he sought after in years to come. Finlay had sensed early on that, without family or financial backing, he would succeed as a writer only by his own wits.

Another influence on Finlay at this time was August Mason, a poet and English professor who was one of the last of the Vanderbilt Agrarians. The Agrarians argued for a balance between the life of the soil and the life of the mind. Finlay found this, at least in theory, very compatible with his own beliefs. For twenty years, Mason had taught a university course in the art of *verse*, as distinct from the art of poetry. It was probably Mason who introduced Finlay in seminal ways to the works of the Agrarian poets, including Allen Tate, and to the modern classical poet Yvor Winters. Just as Strode and Mason had quickly replaced Annie Laurie and Uncle Waldo as literary models, soon Tate and Winters would replace Mason and Strode, as Finlay expanded his literary mind ever further outward from Enterprise.

During the Tuscaloosa years, Finlay's successes were considerable. As an undergraduate, he was allowed to join Strode's prestigious Advanced Fiction Writing class. In 1962, Finlay was named as one of four members of the university's G.E. Academic College Bowl team and was flown to New York for the competition. Appearing on television that Sunday, he impressively answered a number of questions in the team's near victory over three-time champion DePaul University. The quiz show's host, Allen Luden, asked him where home was. "And where are you from, Mr. Finlay?"

John Finlay, the peanut and dairy farmer's son from Bellwood Road, smiled blithely for the national television audience and told the truth. "Enterprise, Alabama, sir." That year, Bear Bryant's football team won the national championship. The following year, George Wallace would unsuccessfully block the campus door to integration.

Later that year, Finlay published a short story entitled "The Up-There" in the Fall 1962 issue of *Comment*, the university's new undergraduate literary magazine. The story is narrated by a black

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woman from the deep South whose son has recently been killed by a snakebite. She comes to realize the foolishness of her desire for vengeance, the weakness of humankind, and the mysterious will of God, the "Up-There". The story is quite touching, the concept mature, the writing altogether professional.

In the fall of 1964, Finlay joined the M.A. program in English with a full graduate assistantship, which required him to teach composition. His first two published poems appeared in *Comment* that season. Still worth reading for intrinsic merit and formal polish, their counter-romantic themes point to later achievements.

In 1965 Finlay became editor-in-chief of *Comment*, contributing to it new poems and a very advanced interview with novelist Eudora Welty, prefaced by a note on the "mystery" of things and the limits of literary biography. He also contributed considerable research to Strode's new three-volume biography of Jefferson Davis, while managing to win himself a \$1000 writing award from the National Endowment for the Humanities. On the negative side, he recalled playing around enough as an undergraduate to fail a number of courses, including Chaucer, taking five tuition-costly years to earn his B.A. Worse than this, though, he had majored in English and minored in Creative Writing, both his parents' nightmare.

There were at this time other events that shaped Finlay's personal life. Ten years before, when Finlay's family converted from the Methodist to the Baptist Church, he flatly refused to follow. Now, he chose to join the Episcopal Church and was confirmed on Easter Sunday, 1962. In 1964 he settled into its campus residence, Murray House, where he stayed for the next two years. At Murray House he often stayed up until three or four in the morning to play with a new poem, even though he had an eight o'clock class to teach. He might struggle fanatically to rework a single line, with hundreds of crumpled drafts scattered by his feet. Was this not what Gerard Manley Hopkins called, in a different context, the "habit of perfection"? The habit of perfection was to be the defining quality of all of Finlay's written work.

Finlay engaged at this time in very private homosexual behavior. According to a lover, he described himself as "comfortable with it." Yet exactly how comfortable he really was is hard to know. There is strong evidence that, at times, he was not comfortable at all. In that "don't ask, don't tell" era in the deep South, this was a secret tightly sealed from students, teachers, friends, and family. Persons who had known Finlay intimately for decades, who had studied, traveled, literary-talked, and shared a half-gallon of whiskey with him past three o'clock in the morning, never suspected.

In the Tuscaloosa years, Finlay's appearance and his behavior suggested a moderate, diffident person. The idea of a Southern gentleman probably never drifted very far from his mind. He had perfect Southern manners and a cultivated Southern accent "like a young Shelby Foote." He inevitably dressed in a tweed coat for class. When a woman entered the room, he stood, and sober or not, remained standing until she was seated. His writing revealed comparably civilized virtues: sensitivity to language, command and dexterity of thought, deep reading, and a quiet, mature tone.

Photographs taken in this period show Finlay wearing a puckish, enigmatic grin. In March 1967, Finlay visited with novelist Andrew Lytle at his home outside of Sewanee, Tennessee, and recorded this amusing physiognomic anecdote: "Later Mr. L looked over at me and said that my face was old-fashioned. It was the first time he had noticed it and that I should have died in 1863."

In 1966, Finlay was photographed with Allen Tate, one in his pantheon of literary heroes. In the mid-1960s, Allen Tate was the leading poet-critic among Southerners. In the photograph, each of the two men holds his hands neatly crossed and folded. Dressed eerily alike in tight suits and narrow ties, their large crew-cut heads attached to similarly thin bodies make them look like grandfather and grandson. Tate was a brilliant literary mind and an exceptional poet, and throughout his life Finlay deeply admired him. He shared at least one social weekend with him at Andrew Lytle's home in Monteagle, Tennessee. In answer to a flattering letter from Finlay, Tate responded as follows:

*February 18, 1966*

*Dear Mr. Finlay,*

*In the course of a year I get a number of letters from strangers about my poems; but never in any year since I began to appear in print (that's a long time ago) have I received a letter that pleased me as much as yours does. ... One's vanity is always with one. And my own rating of myself, I confess, is not low; but I have never before been told that my poems have become a part of anybody's life. I am moved and grateful.*

Finlay framed this letter. For the next twenty-five years, whenever he moved into new lodgings, the first thing he did was to hang Tate's letter prominently on the wall.

A poem entitled "Out in the Country Late at Night" offers early evidence of Finlay's artistic growth. It appeared in the winter '65 issue of *Comment*. Its geography is probably Enterprise, its subject the unromantic terror of moonlight. The poem gives a clue to exactly how far Finlay had now removed himself from farmlands of his birth and at the same time how closely affianced he yet remained.

The moon out in the country late at night  
Is light, and the cold pale fire of terror.

Possessing, not possessed, it perplexes  
Metaphor-making man to a silence.

It is no Diana killing farmers,  
Or chasing after the shy shepherd boy.

It is a light and thing of terror,  
Defying explication, cold and pure.

As when we catch an unexpected glance  
In the mirror and don't know who we are,

Or wake up near dawn in someone else's house  
To hear slow footsteps outside the door,

So then as now we are left in dark places  
Where what we know is what we don't, the light.

The moon out in the country late at night  
Is light, and the cold pale fire of terror.

Here the fifth and sixth couplets, especially, make evident that, wherever Finlay's Tuscaloosa years may have failed, they educated a poet who at twenty-five was admired in Alabama literary circles for his poetic gift, his lively critical judgment, and his positive energy.

### 3. Salt: Montevallo, 1966-1969

The middle period of Finlay's comic-tragic literary ascent occurred during the salty political years of the late sixties. He arrived at (then) Alabama College in Montevallo in the fall of 1966 as an instructor of freshman and sophomore English and gave up his appointment in the spring of 1969. During his four years in Montevallo, Finlay held a full-time job for the only sustained period in his life. The late sixties and early seventies were times of growing personal and political liberation for him, but they were also a time of ever-greater efforts at artistic discipline.

It was in Montevallo that Finlay revealed for the first time his eccentric lifestyle. A small mountain of cigarette butts piled up on the floor of his VW bug as he drove some 40,000 miles without changing the oil. Suddenly, the engine just died. The hardened residue of engine oil had so tightly impacted the cap that his father's most powerful farmhands, using torque wrenches, could not pry it loose. The car could not be repaired.

In contrast, or perhaps to keep things in balance, Finlay committed himself at this very moment to the severe, classical aesthetic of Yvor Winters, his most powerful and lasting literary influence.

"What I owe Yvor Winters. Nearly everything," he wrote in a notebook at the time. This sort of emerging dualism was the very important stuff of Finlay's poetry, its centrifugal growth tensed by the strength of the poet's afferent, artistic mind.

Now, Finlay's great theme of mind and blood is emergent in the tension between his passionate will and the discipline of reason, in the forces of the liberating sixties vis-à-vis Winters' poetic morality. Must the forces of romantic freedom and classical restraint be antagonists? Or might they be made complementary somehow? This happened to be the period of the Vietnam War protests, the Hippie Revolution, the freedom marches on Montgomery, Martin Luther King's and Robert Kennedy's assassinations. Though Finlay was a political liberal not untouched by these political and moral events, he left behind only a single poem about them, a poem on the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. While respecting the deep sacrifices of war efforts, Finlay was an anti-war poet. War was passionate will, without the discipline of reason.

In Montevallo, Finlay rented an apartment above Loretta and Bill Cobb's. Bill was a member of the English Department and a talented fiction writer whom Finlay had published in *Comment*. They became great friends. "He would appear at the door almost every evening at cocktail time to 'watch the news,'" Cobb wrote, "and he usually stayed for supper. He would stomp and rave about the news from Vietnam. He hated television, he said, and he refused to have a set, but many a night he would arrive back at our door in his pajamas and robe and announce that since we were watching anyway he might as well watch with us. Often we weren't, but that didn't deter him."

Cobb knew the complexity of Finlay's attitude toward teaching. "Though John mystified many of the dull freshman and sophomores he was forced to teach, those students who responded positively to him did so intensely. They adored him.... They would gather at his apartment and sit on the floor and listen to him talk about writing and poetry all night long. The Scotch would flow, and often John had trouble making his class the next morning. Once our department chair called me in and asked me if I thought John had a drinking problem. I told him no. I wanted to say that John had a teaching problem." His teaching "was only for those



who wanted to be taught, to whom he would give—to the point of exhaustion—everything he had.”

“Only one time in the years we were together,” Cobb remarked, “did John invite us to lunch, ‘to pay us back,’ he said. When we arrived, canned tomato soup was boiling volcanically on the stove, and as John poured soup at the table, he asked me to get us a beer from the refrigerator. His refrigerator contained only a six-pack of beer and a carton of cigarettes. Absolutely nothing else. We listened to music as we ate, an opera turned up to ear-splitting volume. The things he loved, John loved to excess.”

“He loved Kris Kristofferson’s version of ‘Me and My Bobby McGee.’ John would play it over and over again, singing—or shouting—along with it. [*Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose!*] ‘That’s the greatest poem in American literature!’ he would declaim, banging his fist on the table. ‘It’s so damn American!’”

By the fall of 1969, Finlay had become rather disillusioned with teaching freshman composition and sophomore survey courses. He put off grading papers, once staying up for two nights straight to mark five weeks’ worth of papers, plus final exams, in order to get his grades in at semester’s end. At times, he would dismiss class after ten minutes of instruction. A still wider dualism had split ambition from actuality, desire from discipline, the will to survive from the creative mind—a struggle overcome, according to Schoepenhauer, only by creative genius. Finlay could not spend the rest of his learned, poetic life among the redbrick buildings and Southern pine groves of Alabama College. Like Enterprise, Montevallo was “provincial.”

At the age of twenty-nine, Finlay decided to return to the simpler life of a student. This meant earning a Ph.D. in American literature, like many of Winters’ poetic disciples. When Finlay read an article by Donald E. Stanford called “Classicism and the Modern Poet” in the winter 1969 issue of the *Southern Review*, he decided to go to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. Stanford was co-editor of the prestigious journal, a professor in the LSU English department, and a fine, if minor poet—and he had actually been one of Yvor Winters’ student poets at Stanford University during the thirties. According to Stanford, modern classical poetry

rejected both romantic thought *and* modernism's pure aesthetic freedom. It should be objective, not subjective; clear and intelligible, not ambiguous or obscure. He never denied that poetry was aesthetic, certainly. But poetry was moral, too, in style as well as content. This poetic morality located itself, in language, in the relationship of motive to emotion, or technique to subject. We are accountable for what we say and how we say it. Art, loosely speaking, meant judgment. For Finlay, classicism was always simply "the sanity of self-restraint." Self-restraint was a target whose bull's eye he struck in art, and missed in life.

At this time classicism was the least popular of literary aesthetics. In the liberated sixties, at the free verse movement's height, American poetry had fallen to bohemians and urban hepcats. The Beats and New York poets had won academic respectability. A poet traveled with the cool, city hipsters, "the dudes, the studs, the alleycats," or dropped out to write anti-war or nature poems. In contrast, Winters' poetry embodied the classical culture of European civilization that he clung to. His strenuous moral effort to return the modern poet to the center of humanity ironically turned out to be politically incorrect. When he died in 1968 following a brilliant, public literary career of nearly fifty years, his poetry and poetic theory had been painted into a cultural corner from which it has too rarely emerged.

In November 1969, Finlay sent a letter to Stanford in Baton Rouge, announcing that he had decided to attend LSU in the fall, "if you all will have me." Stanford asked to see some of Finlay's poetry. On March 3, Stanford wrote, "I like both the poems you sent." Inside a year, the poems were taken by the *Southern Review*. It was Finlay's first national publication. One of his small-town literary friends wrote with insouciance, "It's nice to see your name with the big boys." It was nice. The few poems that Finlay had composed in Montevallo were deeper and more serious than his Tuscaloosa efforts. The real growth spurt, however, was still in the future.

4. Explorations: Baton Rouge, Corfu, Paris, Tuscaloosa, New Orleans, 1970-80

In the 1970s, Finlay had "one aim only: to become a good poet—period. He was solely and exclusively devoted to the art of poetry," Stanford wrote. Finlay had nothing of the drone's mentality. He understood clearly that if he was to make his poetry classical and modern, he could not permit himself the conservative mistake of either/or. The dilemma was exactly the one described by Walter Pater over a hundred years ago. In the modern world, "hard and fixed moralities are yielding to ... subtlety and complexity," Pater remarked. "What is lost in precision of form is gained in intricacy of expression." But how to overcome this dualism? How was Finlay to make his poetry not only hard and fixed, but also subtle and complex? Precise in form, *and* intricate in expression?

For him, the only possible artistic reply was to subordinate—not sacrifice—one to the other, the modern to the classical, for the sake of the greater good: the perfect poem. This was a traditional metrical poem in a contemporary voice. According to a list that Finlay compiled in Montevallo in 1969, "Notes For the Perfect Poem," the perfect poem was literal, yet symbolic; of the physical world, yet abstract; mature, muscular, whole, beautiful, intense, moral, critical, plain, truthful, and fully realized in language. His feeling for the aesthetic for its own sake, coupled with the Southern life of feeling, separated him a little from Winters' stocial, classical austerity. At the same time it connected him to his perfect modern poet, Edgar Bowers, Winters' most gifted protégé, whose poetry has so beautifully expressed the metaphysical tension between the sensuous, warm details of the South's Mediterranean climate and Southern Calvinism.

The time it took Finlay to achieve his literary goal is not surprising when we consider the goal itself: classical art in a modern voice. Classicism needs maturity and wisdom arrived at when knowledge joins experience, while modernity is the contemporary point-of-view of aware, urbane persons. Venturing during this decade beyond the limits of Alabama, Finlay consciously moved more deeply into the dark, mysterious gulf of the artist's mind.

In the fall 1970 and spring 1971, Finlay attended graduate courses at Louisiana State somewhat irregularly. In class, he was quiet. He wrote brilliant papers, which helped to offset the effect on his grades of his sparse attendance. In 1971, one year after having enrolled, Finlay “melodramatically” dropped out of the LSU Ph.D. program to spend a year on the Greek island of Corfu. His friend Sarah Moody, daughter of a wealthy Tuscaloosa family, was building a guest hotel there.

Corfu was purported to be the mythic island of Phaeacia where Odysseus visited King Alcinous. There he listened with high wonder while the rhapsode sang the hero’s past adventures. This no doubt attracted Finlay strongly. A propos, he began the brief persona poem “Odysseus” (in honor of Yvor Winters) by saying: “I could not know the meaning of that time/... Until I heard the voyage beat out in words.”

Half overrun with tourists, the olive-green island of Corfu rests in the Adriatic Sea in the northwest corner of Greece. On Corfu Finlay exercised the romantic dream of the expatriate artist. “Corfu continues to hold me,” he wrote to Stanford. “As the seasons change it becomes beautiful in different ways. I’m living in a small village at the extreme northern end of the island. The only way to get to town is by caique! Think of it! To get up before dawn and ride across the Mediterranean in a small Homeric boat! Right around my bay is the house that Laurence Durrell lived in. ...Over is the Esplanade where everyone has drinks in the afternoon—usually ouzo....The melons and the figs are coming in now and the Mediterranean sun and sea answer deep longings (St. Yvor, pray for me!).”

He lived a typical expatriate existence on Corfu. He wrote; he drank the local wine. He had sex on leisurely afternoons. “Later we rolled around, the tactile conspiracy,” as Finlay phrased it, describing an afternoon tryst with a female friend. With only money enough for a single night’s hotel in Athens, Finlay located a room at the base of the Acropolis. Standing outside it, he kept awake until dawn broke, staring steadily at the ancient forms, assimilating their beauty.

Finlay wrote some five of his seventy-five or so collected poems directly from his Greek experience (four of them experimental,

while he was out of Stanford's sight), and four or five other poems appear to derive indirectly from it. "How he loved the Greeks! Everything had to be about the Greeks," his mother has remarked. Yet Finlay's writing is never narrowly neo-classical genre work or vaguely antiquarian. Its imaginative originality and its urbane, contemporary diction freshen Greek themes with a modern point of view. The classical feels modern, the modern classical.

In December 1973, Finlay removed to Paris, where he may have worked briefly at CBS as a janitor. Although no extant poetry has drawn directly on the Paris months, there Finlay's desire for a classical, European sensibility was fulfilled. His Paris notebook is replete with luminous artistic observations of the city's classical and contemporary life. One day, Finlay found himself observing Impressionist paintings; next, deeply moved by ecclesiastical art, or by a deracinated American who, at twenty, looked forty. His French improved, nudging him closer to the modern French poets like Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Valery, whom he so loved and who so influenced his symbolist line. In his notebook, Finlay called Paris "my intellectual home." Paris, the apotheosis of the kitchen-table colloquies with Annie Laurie and Uncle Waldo of twenty years before!

The romantic bubble of the thirty-three-year-old expatriate artist broke in early 1974. Finlay telephoned his parents from icy Paris, announcing that he was fresh out of money and needed six hundred dollars to fly home. Money was tight, however, on Bellwood Road. On principle, Mr. Finlay refused his son's quixotic request. What was to be done? Mrs. Finlay's brother Walker, "fearing John would land in vagrants' prison," wired the money.

When he reached Enterprise, Finlay rested at home. He soon removed himself, however, to Tuscaloosa to work at Bryce Sanitarium, a home for the insane adjacent to the university campus. It impressed Finlay deeply. Although he was never able to keep a diary for any sustained time, his Bryce notebook nonetheless records in graphic, sharp detail the patients' macabre habits and foreign lives, evidently at once fascinating and repellent to Finlay. After several months there, his romance with madness ended. His poem "The Locked Wards" is a brutal, but not unsympathetic lyric about the solipsistic pain of these tortured minds.

Between the ages of thirty-one and thirty-three, Finlay had belatedly done his sixties thing. His European immersion in Corfu's sweet island life and Paris's antique urbanity had realized Ceci Carter's arts program at Interlocken to the nth power. Combined with graduate studies, his European travels completed his literary education. The great difference between minor Tuscaloosa or Montevallo poems and his later, major poems can likely be attributed to advanced knowledge gained from graduate work, and from literary friendships with LSU poets David Middleton and Lindon Stall, R.L. Barth, his first publisher, and the English poet, Dick Davis. This knowledge was complemented by Finlay's rendition of the European journey of Henry James' naïve and provincial American.

A poem entitled "The Bog Sacrifice" nicely illustrates Finlay's mature art. Written soon after his return from Europe, it is Finlay's first major success. Based on *The Bog People*, a popular study of northern European primitives that also inspired the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, it tells the tale of the exhumed, preserved body of an Iron Age boy sacrificed one spring to the chthonic goddess of the under earth. Its classical subject is the sacrifice of the boy to tribal needs, life to idea. The boy's experience is presented from the outside, objectively, yet fully felt inside, subjectively. Its modern voice freshens this classical concern as well as any poem that Finlay wrote. The poem is aesthetic *and* moral, repairing the nineteenth century's deep and vicious laceration between the two experiences.

#### The Bog Sacrifice

The iron and acid water of the bog,  
Rising and falling with the winter rains,  
Two thousand years, preserved him as he died,  
Pinned naked to the floor by wooden crooks.  
No fire had cut and cleaned the clotted soul.  
Runic stakes, washed white as salt, were laid  
Over his narrow breast, sunk in the peat.



The sacrificial rope they hanged him from,  
Of woven skins, still cut into his throat,  
Tight as when death came. His gentle face,  
Forced upward by the torsion of the noose,  
Bore with monstrous discipline his bane,  
As loose ends, like serpents, meandered down  
His naked flesh, pressed into his flesh.

A cap of wolfskin hived his shaven head.  
Descended from a line of conscript priests,  
He died in youth, still delicate and whole.  
When he was lifted from the pit, the earth  
Itself was sweating like an ancient beast,  
He looked as if alive. Faint cries of snipes  
Brought sunlight piercing to his closing eyes.

Before Christ reached this isolated north,  
A chthonic goddess, holding iron breasts,  
Each year in early spring exacted death.  
In winter when the winds blew keen off ice,  
Or summer with its rippling swarm of weeds,  
The bog seemed never raised above the sea,  
But underneath, out of whose depths she came.

The poem's sensuous, symbolic details ("hived his shaven head," "swarm of weeds") represent the norm of Finlay's post-symbolist style, characterizing roughly half of his mature poetry, the other half occurring in a plainer style.

After his three-year wandering hiatus, Finlay debated alternatives. He wrote a letter to Stanford admitting that, following his wanderlust, he was a sadder and saner man. He was easily readmitted into the Ph.D. program from which he had withdrawn in 1971. Excepting excursions to New Orleans, for the next six years he stayed mainly in Baton Rouge, completing requirements for the Ph.D., teaching composition and survey courses, reading widely and deeply, and writing.

In the last years of the 1970s, Finlay occupied himself mainly with writing his Ph.D. thesis on Winters' intellectual theism,

revealing there considerable and never before demonstrated philosophical and theological depth. He completed it in 1980. It had taken him ten years to earn his degree.

In the same months that he was writing about Winters, whose subject was "the morality of poetry," Finlay cruised the gay bars in New Orleans' French quarter.

He feels compressed, erotic brotherhood  
And for the hardest criminal. But these  
Are freakish states and disappear,

he wrote of an alter-ego, Sherlock Holmes, in the inventive, quite brilliant "The Case of Holmes." A second poem, "To a Victim of AIDS," was more graphic. Written in the mid-eighties when Finlay well knew that he had been infected with the HIV virus, the poem holds the "victim" fully morally responsible for his careless actions, and especially for his scorn of judgment. Ragged with guilt, Finlay wrote about this kind of erotic impulse in his Baton Rouge notebook, calling it there a demon of the blood so potent it thwarted the mind's every attempt to overcome it. His pattern was to visit the backrooms of gay bars and baths, then return to Baton Rouge where he prayed to God for forgiveness and the strength to stop. This pattern repeated itself night after desperate night. In the last years of his life, he believed resignedly that death from AIDS was God's punishment for his sin.

It is perhaps clearer now why so few people, including friends who had known Finlay for a lifetime, believed that he was gay. How could they have suspected? For example, at LSU Finlay fell passionately and publicly in love with a married woman that he'd known during the Tuscaloosa years. They lived together only a few weeks, but when the relationship ended, he was publicly crushed.

On Easter Sunday, 1980, Finlay converted from the Episcopal to the Roman Catholic Church, despite its hard-line doctrine on homosexual behavior. The decision apparently had something to do with his reading of Aquinas, the liberalizing of the Episcopal liturgy, and the perceived sublimity of the Catholic liturgy, along with its high forms of art and mysterious signs, not to mention the sacrament of confession, an aesthetic reflected in his poetry.

At the age of thirty-nine, John Finlay had published a handful of fine lyrics and a small number of minor reviews, and completed an excellent, but brief, Ph.D. thesis, but he had very little else to show the world. In a tight academic job market, he lacked prospects of a "good" teaching job, and he refused to teach freshman composition. Several months after completing his thesis, under the increasing strain of mental exhaustion, Finlay telephoned his mother in Enterprise, asking if he could "come home."

During this bad time, Finlay beveled into that terrible, tragic god that the French call *le guignon*, "bad luck." Not very long after his return to Enterprise, the earliest reports of the HIV virus appeared, and Finlay guessed rightly that he was infected. At the last, it seemed that Enterprise, not Paris, was really home.

Finlay still had the very things that he had always been able to fall back on: mind and blood. Although he lacked money and a regular sense of community, he had his literary friends and correspondents, a good idea for a book on modernism, and notes for new poems. However, his brilliant mind alone could not be enough. The good, generous support of his father Tom, mother Jean, and sisters Betty and Patricia sustained John Finlay for the last ten years of his life, while he wrote as never before.

#### 5. Mind and Blood: Enterprise, 1980-1990

The eighties were the decade of triumph and tragedy. Living and occasionally working on the family farm, in the next eight or nine years Finlay produced between eighty and ninety percent of his important work. In a critical and creative fury, he wrote a spate of profound essays and poems. According to Janet Lewis, the poems were wrought from "metaphysical thought, meta-physical nightmare, Greek thought, Christian, ...Pagan, images of the South, Southern families, a Southern boyhood, old people, ...dying people, ...the smell of salt, of fish, of rain, of pines and magnolias in the warm air, images of moonlight, and of waves falling on beaches of the Gulf or the Adriatic, Odysseus, Socrates, [and] Athena."

Finlay could not procrastinate now. He saw his first chapbook of fifteen poems, *The Wide Porch*, published in 1984. *Between the*

*Gulfs*, equally strong, appeared in 1986; and he finished a third, *The Salt of Exposure*, in 1988 with undiminished creative powers. These amount to fifty, or three-fourths, of his collected poems, *Mind and Blood*. Finlay, like a Voltaire of the deep South, also managed to spend two or three hours a day keeping up a friendly, technical correspondence with literary friends.

During this decade, Finlay published a number of significant literary reviews and completed *Hermetic Light*, six speculative essays on the Gnostic spirit in modern European and American literature, publishing four of them in major journals. In these essays, Finlay argued that like the world of the third-century Gnostics, the mind of the modern writer was a disturbing world from which the living God was absent. These essays followed his conversion to Catholicism in 1980, and criticized, from a neo-Thomistic view, modern, otherwise admired literary giants including Winters himself, Flaubert and Valery, the English Jesuits Newman and Hopkins, and finally Freud, Nietzsche, and Kafka. Models of classical prose style, these essays share something of the dense, distilled brevity of a lyric poem; the essence of a 200-page Ph.D. thesis, for instance, distilled into fifteen polished pages of tight argument.

His writing was beginning to win serious critical acclaim, first in friends' letters, then in reviews. With excellent publications in prestigious journals out of California, New York, England, and the South, Finlay really was one of the big boys now. He had successfully synthesized the European sensibility of his vast reading into the pastoral blood of his Alabama birth. His agile, creative mind was stronger than it had ever been. But he was dying. He felt it strongly.

In the fall of 1980, when Finlay returned to Enterprise, he appeared close to a nervous breakdown. Yet within months he had regained strength. He studied Plato, and taught himself Italian grammar, in order to read Dante in the original. In the small ranch house, he wrote like a nineteenth-century gentleman of the leisure class, while his farm family supported him. Typically, he wrote ten and twelve hours at a stretch, staying up all night, sleeping during the day. Except for occasional teaching stints at Enterprise Junior College, he wrote independent of worldly concerns, laboring like a monkish devout in an artistic, contemplative routine natural to

his gifts. He seldom had money, and sex was out of the question. In this state of ascetic privation, for the first time in his life he found a steady and consistent "intensity of engagement and the detachment of judgment" that he demanded of a perfect poet.

On the other hand, he wrote against abysmal, artistic loneliness in a very unaristocratic, pine-paneled back bedroom that was within whispering distance of the rest of his family. His father, Tom Finlay, who had built the house in the fifties with his own strong hands, was now crippled by arthritis. In 1983, he died of lung cancer.

In 1984, Finlay flew to Washington, D.C., to be best man at a friend's wedding. His mother saved him thirty dollars by angling his formal dress from the P.X. at nearby Fort Rucker. In the mid-eighties, complaining repeatedly of severe headaches, Finlay came down with a severe case of the shingles. "I often feel like burying my head in the dirt," he said. In 1985, while attending a writer's conference at Nicholls State in Thibodaux, Louisiana, he had a falling out with his close literary friend, David Middleton. Their friendship was silenced until 1989, when Middleton learned that Finlay had contracted AIDS and offered himself as Finlay's literary executor.

In these final years, Finlay conducted scholarly research for his essays at the junior college through inter-library loan. In the mornings, dressed in a pair of muddy blue jeans, he visited with the librarian, chain-smoking over coffee and talking with her about his essays on Nietzsche and the Enlightenment. At night, he occasionally paid an unannounced visit to Scott Smith, the English Department head. There, he drank whiskey until the half-gallon bottle had been drained, talking of the ancient Gnostics or reciting parts of Edgar Bowers' poem "The Stoic."

In 1988, Bowers and poet Dick Davis honored Finlay with an invitation to read his poetry at the University of Santa Barbara, California. On this occasion, he exhibited advanced stages of the HIV virus. He appeared pale and was dizzy and nauseated. He apologized for his condition, but never revealed the truth. He wore a pair of his nephew Lee's broken-down penny loafers, having asking for them after seeing Lee about to toss them in the trash. He wore this pair of shoes unselfconsciously for the rest of his life.

Finlay was not willing to see a doctor until late 1985 or '86. Increasingly less able to care for himself, during the last years of his life he was removed from the back bedroom to the living room where his mother, sister, or a family friend nursed him. The teenager who had called himself "skinny Finlay" was now a ghostly skeleton of the considerable man he had become. He remained witty, good-humored, and, to the world, unafraid of death. He joked with doctors and made the nurses laugh. A passion for the mind's life stimulated John Finlay even at death's door. Moreover, he clung with his whole mind and heart to his religious faith, taking consolation from regular, intimate talks with several priests to whom he had grown close. Finlay's last letters date from late 1989. By then he was blind and had lost muscular control of his hands. He dictated his last poems to his sisters, Betty and Patricia.

On February 17, 1991, John Finlay raised his head from his hospital bed one last time. Then, in a tone of voice that suggested a strange presence in the room, he uttered his last word. "Plato?" he patiently inquired. According to Patricia, who had witnessed it, it was as if he were asking "Are you here with me, Plato? Is that really you?" Over the years, Finlay had on more than one occasion professed his belief in the reality of ghosts.

To conclude: what are we to make of a high-school friend's remark that Finlay had no "structure"? A professional colleague concurs: no "inner structure." This was the same man who composed some of the most perfectly structured poems and essays of our time. Which was the real John Finlay? He was, no doubt, a complex man. Morally speaking, was he too bad, or (to quote a third friend, Bill Cobb) "too good for this world"?

But some part of the interior, surely, is the exterior life. "John lived the life of a poet," remarked the teenage daughter of a close friend at his death. A poet is first and foremost an artist; and an artist, as Joyce's Stephen Daedalus remarked, is "the antennae of the race." The fifties' social solidity and tight morality, the sixties' sexual and political revolt, the seventies' indulgences, and the eighties' reconciliations are all artistically revealed in John Finlay's poetry. As Allen Tate remarked, the poet is just like the rest of us, except in this: he is more intensely aware of reality and he can express it more absolutely.



As for Finlay's literary place: he was certainly not among the very highest rank of literary geniuses with Shakespeare, Dante, Baudelaire, or Racine. Nor does he stand in the very first rank of American poets. His poetry was just peaking when he died. Yet Finlay's poetry contains here and there lines and passages at that high level. Because he wrote five or six major poems and twenty or more others close to this level, he ranks certainly among the first five or six poets of the American South, and likewise of the post-World War II generation. At the same time, he was one of the most brilliant literary essayists of the last decades of his century. He has indeed earned a place in American letters.

The slight events of John Finlay's life are, therefore, worth knowing both for the events and for the light they cast on his written work, the poems especially:

By which our brains, recovering their youth,  
Will heat themselves in happiness once more.

Selected Poems by John Finlay

Audubon at Oakley

My Gallic cunning poured sweet wine into  
The calyxes of trumpet-vines and caught  
Small drunken birds a bullet blows apart.  
Others I shot, pined then drunken to a board  
To draw the fresh-killed life. Elusively,  
The *is* that quickens in the living eye  
Escaped the sweat of art, drying ink.  
I tore blind pages till I reached the one  
That pleased my avid mind. The wilderness  
There teems with birds I never saw before:  
White and wood ibises, the sparrow hawk,  
The red-cock woodpecker, and painted finch.  
I hunted them for days and nights until  
I throve in timelessness. One day stood out.  
I heard below all things the river sough;

The fall was blazing in the silent trees.  
I saw my book, taut wings of mockingbirds  
In combat with the snake knotted beneath  
The nest, its open mouth close to the eggs,  
Now held forever in the lean, hard line.  
And underneath, defining them, combined:  
The clean abstraction of their Latin names,  
The vulgate richness of this Saxon salt.

#### A Few Things in Themselves

Along the bay live-oaks and magnolias  
Gather massively the warm blackness  
As birds dart and cry in their hard leaves.

At their base the narrow strip of beach  
Is yellow and African in the late sun.  
We hold off and let the boat drift. ...

The string of fish in the bottom  
Lies in spilled oil, blood and bay-water.  
Their white underbellies gleam in the dusk.

A black watersnake is moving into  
The closed, muscle-like bloom of lilies,  
The darker swamp weeds along the shore.

Slowly we follow it, back to the dock.  
And walk in the early night through crickets,  
The low wind in the rusty screen.

#### A Room in Hell

In this tinted half-light  
The snake scar of error  
Is blurred; careful insight  
Intoxicates itself.

The surf of phantasies,  
Drenching deathless mind,  
Dissolves rigidities,  
The little we had been.

Outside, the soul's sleet  
Whispers the warp of ice.  
Further out, waves beat  
Themselves apart and cry.

Flaubert in Egypt

He was awaked, for no cause he knew,  
To face the brutal moonlight in the room,  
Burning the veinless marble of the floor,  
Flooding the nameless whore who slept on it.

As if he dreamed, he saw her open mouth,  
*The painted coins, strung around her throat,*  
Turned colorless as chalk in the strong light,  
The gleaming black skin of her milkless breasts.

He thought of the pearl-fishers diving down  
To layered tons of pressure on the skull,  
With only shells to answer for the pain –  
They surface, bleeding from the eyes and ears.

He dreamed the poem, freed of human act,  
A smooth blank thing that turns in nothingness.