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Paradise Lost: A Review of David Middleton's *Outside the Gates of Eden* Measure Press, 2023

In an interview published in *The Paris Review* in 1975, the late Texas novelist William Goyen, then teaching a creative writing course at a prestigious university up north, bemoaned the fact that his students had so weak a sense of place, that the landscapes they described in their stories were all uniform, without distinction, displaying the same frosted globe streetlight on the corner, the same fast food restaurant, the same gas station. Regionalism in American creative arts, Goyen seemed to suggest, had greatly diminished as people of different regions in the country assumed like minds and predilections and ignored those places and customs that had once nourished and sustained them and made them unique.

Nearly fifty years after that interview, Goyen's dire observations on regionalism are more relevant now than they were then. Regionalism *is* dead, or at least on life support, which is terrible news for literature. All the great writers were regionalists – Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Hardy, Balzac, Proust, Faulkner, *ad infinitum, ad gloriam*. They understood, and worked with the knowledge, that the universal can only be achieved by engagement with and depiction of the specific, the grounded, the familiar, with all the peculiarities retained by London, St. Petersburg, Wessex, Paris, Yoknapatawpha, etc.

(It must be admitted that in a 1982 interview with William Peden, Goyen cited as one of his late-career influences Samuel Beckett, that mandarin of placelessness in drama and fiction, but we'll ignore that bit of dichotomy for the sake of this review.)

To diagnose the causes of regionalism's present maladies would surely rob this review of its remaining space and then some. Besides, the causes are well-known, and to repeat them at length might deny this fine poet and his excellent new collection the praise they deserve. Technology, of course, is the main culprit, dating back to the early days of industrialism some two hundred years ago, up to our present age, where The Gadget (in all its forms) and its wily satrap the Internet, have altered the ways people communicate and helped to erase those borders that nurture language, literature, fine arts, culinary arts, and religious observation.

But before those regionalists among us fall irretrievably into despair, we should note that champions of place and tradition remain among us, fighting with gusto, even in our contemporary literature. Chief among them, of course,

is Wendell Berry, the poet-novelist-essayist who left his native Kentucky to write and teach California and New York, only to return home permanently to write and speak of man's stewardship of the land and against the encroachment of the machine not only in farming but in everyday life. The West Virginia novelists Denise Giardina and Jayne Anne Phillips write almost exclusively of their home state (with exceptions in Giardina's case) to great acclaim and Pulitzer Prize glory (for Phillips); Giardina, also an activist, even ran for governor out of concern for her state's coal-mining plight. Bill Kauffman of Batavia, New York, uses his journalism to implore readers to go back home and make that place better. And then there is David Middleton, poet, professor, and chronicler in verse of Thibodaux, Louisiana, and one of the country's finest formalist poets, unafraid of traditional form or rhyme.

His newest collection, *Outside the Gates of Eden* (2023) from the Measure Press, is no mere clarion call to go home, however; that would make it not much more than propaganda. It is a summation of a singularly sensitive, deeply-thoughtful artist's ruminations on place, yes, but also life, death, family, art, and God. Middleton sees what is good in our existence, what Eliot referred to as "the permanent things," slipping away, replaced by so much detritus. Again, to list causes for this diminution in values would require space greater than what I have here. Suffice it to say, that when Adam and Eve were cast out of Paradise and made aware of their nakedness, they took with them humankind's only chance for perfect happiness and command over nature. Now, merely mortal, man must struggle with his sinful nature in order to achieve some modicum of happiness, with nature always at his back, sometimes a friend, often times a foe.

Middleton opens his collection with a brilliant conceit. The first poem, "Night Watchman at the Zoo," shows what has happened to Paradise since Adam and Eve's exit from Eden. The animals, once ranging in harmony with man, are now caged up for his amusement and other commercial purposes. The watchman, standing in for Adam, intuitively senses the wrongness of this, the whole enterprise, how the "menageries" have been reduced to "[pure] spectacle, a conversation piece" by mercantilists and no longer opportunities for genuine wonder and contemplation. Materialism has replaced meditation, and we have now entered, perhaps permanently, what the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa has called "civilizacion del espectaculo," the civilization of entertainment, or what I would further dub "the society of the perpetually amused and pacified," in which even the vulgar is elevated for man's edification and entertainment. Middleton makes the point in "Test Patterns," in which something seemingly innocuous as television has gone from

Leave It to Beaver, The Andy Griffith Show

*Where fathers talked to sons of right and wrong
Or Gunsmoke where Matt shot an outlaw down,
Then said to Chester, "he was just no good."*

to

*... infomercials, soft porn, cable news -
No national anthem, sign off, sleep and peace.*

In "Toll Free," modern technology further corrupts and hampers basic human communication. The speaker, beset by bad cable TV reception, calling the company for help, is sent through a labyrinth of "cordless button-pushing," automated voices, endless transfers from one supervisor to another, all, in the end, to be left high and dry and, one assumes, with no better reception than when he first called. In "Goodbye, Dear," the same speaker laments the jettisoning of simple manners for the sake of quick efficiency, in this case care of electronic mail:

*How seldom now do you begin with Dear,
Both warm and formal (civil) but a mere
First name - "David" - like a Sir or Madam
Summons to a wayward child of Adam.
No salutation as in Saint Paul's Letters,
Your curt tone saying one should know his betters
As if you bid a servant or a beast,
And you in these emails not the least
Aware of such abruptness being rude -
Public, private address grown crass and crude -
And so in closing, I reply (hit Send)
Goodbye: And let this conversation end.*

Where does one find solace in the midst of so much confusion, of such separation from the basically human? For David Middleton, there are two sources of escape: memory and place, namely Thibodaux, Louisiana, the place he some forty years ago adopted as home and where for more than thirty years he taught and served as Poet-in-Residence at Nicholls State University. He writes of it as though he had been born and brought up there, displaying a heart-learned encyclopedic knowledge of its flora and fauna, its highways and byways, its "dazzling pageants of...skies." He does not neglect his native Shreveport, however. He writes, without sentimentality but much sensitivity, of traditional church services and county fairs, of relations facing the vagaries

of old age and death, of friends who, like the poet, dedicated their lives to remembrance and tradition. He writes inspired by the French painter Millet, father of the Barbizon school of art, whose portrayals of peasant life correspond with Middleton's own depictions of rural life as frameworks for tradition and serenity. He writes of Odysseus struggling to return to home and hearth. He writes of the late professor/biographer Mark Royden Winchell, a modern-day Copperhead, who left his Ohio birthplace to find a permanent home in the South Carolina upcountry. He writes of John Martin Finlay, a fellow poet dead young of AIDS, who sought a form of permanence in the great works of literature and philosophy.

David Middleton writes of a life that is still available to us if we only have the courage to throw off the manacles of binding technology and return to that which makes us human, makes us whole. His poems are essential in these troubled times. His new collection is the finest book of American poems this decade.

