

**Anna Head Spence**

**“Dense Poems & Socratic Light”: The Poetry of John Martin Finlay and “With Constant Light”: The Collected Essays & Reviews with Selections from the Diaries & Other Prose of John Martin Finlay**

John Martin Finlay (1941-1991), Southern poet and essayist and a native of the Wiregrass Region of Alabama, remains unknown to many Americans, Southerners, and even Alabamians, despite his extensive body of work. “*Dense Poems & Socratic Light*” and “*With Constant Light*,” edited by David Middleton and John P. Doucet and published by Wiseblood Books (2020), seek to elevate Finlay’s contribution to the literary mind of the twentieth-century South. Together, these volumes offer a complex understanding of Finlay’s works, highlighting the tensions expressed in both his poetry and his critical essays. However, this compilation also includes a variety of additional literary, scholarly, and personal writings as well as contextual material that illuminates his lifelong intellectual and literary influences. As the reader delves into these comprehensive editions, Finlay’s position as a notable Southern poet-critic emerges amidst the broad scope of works presented.

Finlay’s verse, originally collected in a volume titled *Mind and Blood* (1992), serves as the basis for the current volume of poetry. A number of Finlay’s poems, though not all, address traditional Southern literary themes, including nature, home, family, death, rural life, and regional history; additionally, his poetry reveals the divisions he perceived in many facets of life. For Finlay, even the most seemingly innocuous transition, such as the natural geographical differences between South Alabama and North Florida, could provide a source of tension, as is exhibited in “The Road to the Gulf,” which contrasts the “green deep river’s bank” and “pastures still unmowed” of South Alabama with the landscape of the Florida Panhandle:

The closer to the Gulf we came the more  
The flattened earth recalled itself as shore.

Another poem that illustrates Finlay's bifurcated view of nature is "A Few Things for Themselves," which points to the distinction between "blooms of lilies" and "darker swamp weeds along the shore" in its portrayal of a location that was most likely a North Florida fish camp. Moreover, this poem emphasizes the divide between nature and man as the speaker recalls the "white underbellies" of the fish lying in "spilled oil, blood, and bay-water." Although two components of the dark mixture, fish blood and bay-water, are natural, the spilled oil is introduced to the natural world by man. These divisions, both within nature and between nature and man, similarly appear in another of Finlay's poems, "Audubon at Oakley." In the poem, Finlay renders an image of combat between mockingbirds and a snake that is attempting to invade a nest; however, he also depicts the speaker of the poem, naturalist and painter John James Audubon, as a predatory force:

Others I shot, pinned them to a board  
To draw the fresh-killed life.

Finally, directly addressing the issue of man versus nature is Finlay's poem "Salt from the Winter Sea." Here, Finlay recounts a story passed down to him by his great-grandmother about annual salt-gathering expeditions made by local men to the Gulf of Mexico. Despite the fact that these men traversed to the gulf yearly, Finlay is clear that they were nonetheless inlanders facing a daunting task:

They worked the surf like primitives afraid  
Of gulfs, who never sought the sea herself,  
Who lived inland and knew the solid earth.

Thus, in each of these poems about the natural world, Finlay carefully explores an underlying disunity, a concept that informs his other themes as well.

In his treatment of home and family, Finlay focuses on both external and internal sources of tension. For example, his poem "The Wide Porch" (which refers, in a concrete sense, to the home of his maternal grandmother) also draws attention to the divide between what Finlay biographer Jeffrey Goodman refers to as the "provincial values" of his childhood and the values of the wider world (e.g., university life, the broader South, and Europe): "I then moved outward to become myself."

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Another poem connected to the South of his childhood is “The Black Earth”; here, Finlay evokes his youth in Alabama:

Like prehistoric time the past floods up —  
Fields rising in moonlight from solid oak,  
Swamps where lidlessly the snake slid down  
Gutted banks, pine-quiet, into the light.

However, this poem also speaks to the strain between a son and his father, “A wasted man who strained his cruel life.” Finlay was acutely aware of the distance between himself and his own father and worried about the poem’s “psychological disclosure”; nevertheless, the difficulties remained unresolved:

But still, a naked thing, I heard his voice  
At once both curse and cry, condemning me.

Hence, this poem, along with “The Wide Porch,” illustrates the tensions that Finlay associated with home and family life in the rural South.

Along with the aforementioned Southern themes, Finlay’s poetry also examines the intersection of death, rural life, and Southern history. Death, while universal, broadly figures in many Southern works, from the Southern Gothic to the dead mule, identified by Jerry Leath Mills as a darkly humorous marker of Southernness in twentieth-century Southern literature. Of specific interest to Finlay was the dualism to be found in the nature of death, and he deals with this subject in a number of his poems, including “The Dead and The Season” and “The Blood of Shiloh.” As elucidated in David Middleton’s preface to *Mind and Blood* (1992), Finlay “spent his early youth coming to know firsthand the mystery, the beauty, and the hardship of agricultural life,” an influence exhibited in “The Dead and The Season.” In this poem, Finlay treats both death and new life as part of an agricultural existence: by juxtaposing his uncle’s death, which resulted from a collision between his tractor and another vehicle, with the birth of a calf, he poignantly depicts the cycle of rural life. Further, in “The Blood of Shiloh,” Finlay portrays both literal and figurative death as he reflects on Southern history; the speaker describes her father and brother, who respond to the Civil War quite differently, and the inner struggle of her father, who continually relives the horrors of the war, ultimately succumbing to his own

mental state; her mother, who chooses survival over self during the war (“For life she killed the woman in her soul”); and herself, the “doting daughter” who wishes for her father’s death so that he can escape his pain. A slightly different version of this poem appears in *The American Tragedies* (1987), a six-poem sequence which, as Middleton explains, explores conflict in “American history, particularly Southern history” and might have indicated “a new phase and direction in Finlay’s poetry”; regrettably, Finlay’s death prevented this development.

In addition to his role as a Southern poet, Finlay also produced a complete collection of critical essays titled *Flaubert in Egypt and Other Essays*. Here, Finlay aligns himself with fellow Southerner Allen Tate, which he acknowledges in his preface. Published in 1994 as *Hermetic Light: Essays on the Gnostic Spirit in Modern Literature and Thought* and included in the present volume under its original title, this compendium seeks to provide evidence of a spiritual divide in the minds and works of Gustave Flaubert, Cardinal John Henry Newman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Paul Valéry, Yvor Winters, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Franz Kafka. Following the example of Tate’s lecture “Mere Literature and the Lost Traveller” (1979), Finlay’s essays are concerned with “the Gnostic spirit of modern literature”: in the introduction, he articulates his view that these writers were unified by “the idea of an ontological alienation of God from both the natural and human world.” While the works contained in *Flaubert in Egypt and Other Essays* may be appreciated separately, the reader is able to grasp Finlay’s treatise on the Gnostic spirit in modernism more fully by following the pieces as a continuous narrative. As suggested by the title of the collection, “Flaubert in Egypt” is the cornerstone essay, and each subsequent essay examines a split between “the divine and the natural” in modernist thought.

It is worth mentioning that the editors connect *Flaubert in Egypt and Other Essays* to Finlay’s predominant influences and to his own development as a scholar, writer, and critic. Apart from Allen Tate, Yvor Winters was the most influential literary figure in Finlay’s life, and Finlay undertook graduate studies at Louisiana State University (LSU) for the explicit purpose of studying under poet-critic Donald E. Stanford, a former student of Winters. Of further interest is Finlay’s communication with both Stanford and American and Southern literary scholar Lewis P. Simpson during his process of writing the Flaubert essays. Stanford and Simpson

had revived *The Southern Review* five years prior to Finlay's entering the doctoral program, and, according to Middleton, Finlay found both in Stanford and *The Southern Review* "an almost ideal combination of Wintersian poetics and the Southern literary tradition." Early in his writing process (October 1981), Finlay corresponded with Stanford, declaring his intention to write "a book on the gods of modernity"; in the same month, he sent a copy of the first essay to Simpson. Later, after completing the final essay (1987), Finlay lamented to Simpson that he felt as if he had been "on some journey to hell" and expressed his desire to turn his attention to other writers; however, in the essay, "The Dark Rooms of John Finlay" (1991), Simpson states that this sentiment referred not only to the struggle of finishing the last essay, but to "the whole job of writing he had imposed on himself."

Besides Finlay's completed essay collection and numerous poems, these volumes contain a variety of other critical, literary, scholarly, and personal materials. Before his death, he had begun a second book of essays that investigate the duality of the spirit in the writings of ancient Greek philosophers rather than those of the modernists. Other works included in these volumes offer insight into Finlay's literary interests, including several book reviews and an essay on English poet Elizabeth Daryush. Returning to Finlay's markedly Southern works, one surprise in his miscellaneous writings is his only known short story, "The Up-There," which explores both the nature of grief and the consequences of a Southern woman's determination to "play God" after the death of her son. One wonders why Finlay didn't write more fiction. Several other writings broaden the reader's perspective on Finlay's concerns as a scholar and poet, and in particular, as a Southern scholar and poet: the preface to an interview with Eudora Welty, his letter of application for a Rinehart grant to write a long poem on the "Southern phase" of John James Audubon's career, preparatory questions for an interview with Georgia native and Bollingen Prize winner Edgar Bowers that was arranged but ultimately did not take place, comments on a dust jacket for David Middleton's volume of poetry, *The Burning Fields* (1991), and the surviving portion of Finlay's introductory remarks for Allen Tate at the University of Alabama in the mid-1960s. However, within this collection of assorted writings, it is perhaps his letters and diary entries that readers will find most enlightening. These musings, which range in location from Corfu to Paris to the Deep South, capture some of Finlay's most poignant descriptions and innermost thoughts. Specifically, his delineations of rural Southern

life are notable for their rich sensory detail, from his depiction of the “grotesque” combine that “shook, grumbled, [ground], roared” while rattlesnakes “desperately jumped out of the oats... as they struck at the terrifying machine,” to his account of milking the family cow, “Red,” and his remembrance of “the weight of the milk pail between [his] knees,” with the “thick foam of her milk falling sluggishly in the early morning light over its brim.” Taken together, while these varied writings may not constitute complete works as his collections do, they provide the reader with both context for his complete works and a clearer picture of his versatility as writer.

Other than Finlay’s letters and diary entries, valuable biographical information is also available in the editors’ extensive annotations, which provide additional contextual material, including pertinent information on the numerous poets and writers to whom Finlay alludes as well as a wealth of relevant geographical, historical, and cultural information. Perhaps what is most interesting for those readers who are acquainted with Wiregrass Alabama and the Florida Panhandle, his home and his “half-home,” is the description of his native South provided in the notes, including particular landmarks, which allows the local reader to tie Finlay’s experiences more concretely to familiar places and times. As recorded in a journal entry from 1966, Finlay once remarked to Robert Penn Warren regarding the works of Allen Tate, “I sometimes think that in order to understand Tate’s work, you have to know something about his personal life.” According to Finlay’s diary entry, Warren responded, “I think you are right, Mr. Finlay.” Through the inclusion of Finlay’s letters and diary entries and the meticulously researched annotations, the reader develops an awareness of the life surrounding Finlay’s work. These critical editions present a comprehensive view of Finlay’s contribution to Southern literature. They accentuate the tensions found in his poems and essays and amplify his voice, which, on many occasions, is distinctly Southern. These volumes are also a window into the life that shaped his work, including his rural life in South Alabama and the stimulating intellectual environment he found at LSU. Ultimately, the considerable scope of these volumes, in combination with their focus on Finlay’s role as a Southern poet-critic of merit, will allow the value of his work to become known to a new generation of readers and provide a fuller understanding of his works to those readers who have met him before.