

**David Middleton**

**The Dwelling Place**

North Louisiana, 20—  
saying the grace of names

for the farmers of north Louisiana  
who plowed by horse and star and Pegasus

and

remembering Donald Davidson (1893-1968)  
author of “Woodlands, 1956-1960”

*I have not changed any of my views on Agrarianism since  
the appearance of I'll Take My Stand [1930]. . . . I never  
thought of Agrarianism as a restoration of anything in the  
Old South; I saw it as something to be created, as I think it  
will be in the long run as the result of a profound change .  
. . in the moral and religious outlook of western man.*

— Allen Tate, 1952

1

Late autumn twilight leaves these fields and hills,  
Rays paling where the gathered summer corn  
Ripened on stalks that crack when dry winds rise  
Toward Justice long suspended and ensphered,  
Her faint stars gleaming down toward candle flames  
Whose trembling gently marks the stilling air  
Finding in time its way along the porch  
Where I in age rock back and forth alone,  
Pondering these old commons of the gods,  
Breathing in deep the verses of the rows  
Well-turned by hoe and coulter, foot on foot  
In rhythms that a memory-keeper knows,  
Harvests of word and heart cut to the root —

Sole dwellers in the past of house and land,  
Familiar spirits of this cadenced place —  
And I, an elder son who has no heirs,  
My father, mother gone, in settled graves,  
My wife and child, my brothers, sisters too,  
My fiddle and its fiddlestick high hung  
On hooks like willow limbs of Babylon  
Yet taken down to raise a story up,  
A music blent with chronicle and psalm  
For one who left her constant farmers last,  
Her fairness, just and lovely, ghostly grown,  
Her purple tassels raveling on the breeze,  
Star-Maiden of the scales of gold and corn  
On whom I call to appraise an age debased  
And give true weight and measure to my song:

2

And so I dream where memory cannot go  
Of shallow tides that washed the fossil-bones,  
The mastodon and elephant and whale,  
Extinct for eons in these inland beds,  
The sand and silt and clay rolling in wolds  
Uplifted from the prehistoric sea  
With gypsum, limestone, sulfur, and the marls,  
Tectonic plates down-warping, tilted, worn,  
Streams shaping hollow, mountain, bluff, and bend,  
Kisatchie, Nacogdoches buckled up,  
Steep ridges ironstone holds on sloping peaks,  
Their backbone crests molded by wind and rain,  
The great ice sheet retreating toward the lakes,  
Meltwater in the Late Wisconsin Age  
That made the Mississippi, glazed with light,  
The flyway of the heron and the crane  
And other birds that died without a name,  
Its thawed banks bringing northern flowers south,  
The snowdrop and the crocus and the rose,  
Seed, root, and bloom taking the king's highway,  
Keeping the holy days as each day was —  
Things undivided, cleaving, other, one,  
Their speechless be uttered in time's prime tongue —

David Middleton

Old father of the waters going slow  
On progress through his realm of flake and hail  
With sun-bowed blossoms glacial in their pace  
From Louisiana's flooding delta plain  
Toward marshes and a sparkling star-grained shore  
Where breakers leave the driftwood and the shell,  
Dark waters of the flounder, crab, and gar,  
The stingray, shark, and jellyfish, each thing  
A harsh gulf holds, gives up, then takes away,  
Its dunes of sea oats heading salty-sweet:

3

And there, from Asia, walking on a bridge  
Of rock and ice to a land no man had seen,  
Indians, who for twenty centuries  
Ate mayhaws, grapes, pawpaws, chestnuts, pecans,  
And honey sticky on the limbs and tongue,  
Made golden in the hollow trunks of gum  
All sweetening the meadows where they fell  
Between wild streams and fields that tamed the corn,  
The prickly squash vines fruiting near the roots  
Of beans twining up stalks toward tassel-light,  
Together called Three Sisters by the tribes,  
A kindred whole, the soul's first metaphors,  
Enwoven in their world ten thousand years,  
Come from the Sun who fathered all there was,  
Even the Father of Waters in his bed,  
The deer and bear they honored as they killed,  
Their foreheads daubed with dead and living blood,  
Their tattooed images the signs of clans —  
The Wildcat and the Panther, Wind and Bird —  
Full brothers of the eagle and the wolf,  
Vast grasslands where the long-horned bison grazed,  
The saber-tooth and mammoth, born and gone,  
The maiden woods that shaded pool and creek,  
Persimmon, blackberry, walnut — bass and bream,  
Great mounds of dirt, grit, skeleton and shell,  
The funerary urns on which they cut  
A double-headed vulture, shoveler duck,  
Middens of trash and ashes, graves and waste,

The raids for scalping, plunder, slaughter, rape,  
Their neighbors kept and left, the slaves and slain,  
The beehive house of wattled grass and mud,  
Packed earthen steps of flat-topped pyramids  
Where priests and healers, one in name and bond,  
Tended in that dark room the tribal flame  
And pine-hearts, dipped, took home the sun's own tongue  
For warmth and meat stone-boiled in deerskin pots,  
Adopted as their blood-kin by the gods,  
Roaming the great domains of near and far,  
The Hunter-Gatherers of glade and range  
Who found a ground that never had been lost,  
All dancing to a brink that linked them all,  
Bright likenesses in constellated night,  
Fire-temples of the village and the sky:  
And though they did not mark as we have done  
The houses of the zodiac or days  
Made sacred by the stable, cross, and tomb,  
They sensed the measured essence of the land,  
The weather of the heavens and the air,  
Of animal and plant — bird, beast, and seed —  
Lakes burning with the waters of the stars,  
High cycling rites they thought would never end:  
The winter Bear, Cold Meal, and Chestnut Moons —  
Snow twinkling on ground corn, the baked coiled clay,  
The sloshing pans they raised from sandy creeks,  
Their salt grains leached to whiten in the sun,  
The springtime's Walnut, Deer, Strawberry Moons —  
Chill hoeing for the "little corn" and beans,  
The honey and the onion gathered wild,  
The robin's mating-call, the migrant skies,  
The catfish and the crappie and the perch —  
The Small and Great Corn Moons when summer comes  
And leaves and in between the warmer nights  
Of Watermelon, Fish, Mulberry Moons —  
The peach and pumpkin, squash and sassafras,  
The turtle and the gros bec and raccoon,  
The time for basket-weaving, building homes —  
The cooling moons at last that autumn brings —  
The Turkey Moon and then the Buffalo,  
Dry days of torching brush to widen fields,  
Elderberry mellowing, chinquapin,  
Tracking the bucks for antlers, flesh, and hide

David Middleton

When hungry, roused, they butt, fighting for does,  
The clacking racks they thrashed with, even locked,  
The purple huckleberry's winter fruit,  
Then Bear, Cold Meal, and Chestnut Moons again,  
The air that turned to ice their tears and breath  
Like stars falling in glitter from their spheres,  
The whole of things each household kept and shared,  
The common fare of birth and life and death:

4

And then three hundred years ago there came  
Out of the coastal South's depleted fields  
Long salted by the Atlantic's windblown foam  
Wagons of yeoman farmers — Irish, Scots,  
Welsh, English — freehold kindred! — to a land  
They cleared of virgin cypress, longleaf pine,  
Their cabins made of notched logs, timbers squared,  
Of local oak and native hickory,  
Their acres staked by grave- and boundary-stones,  
Corn golden grown without the old corn gods,  
Cradles and chairs both rocking by the hearth,  
The only book they needed their King James  
In this far place they sought to flee a king,  
The family tree whose branches bloom and fruit  
Between the Testaments, their matter blessed  
And ringing true, those stories timeless, new,  
The marriages and births, baptisms, deaths,  
Ur-stems of every sur- and given name,  
Preserved as well by untaught chroniclers  
Who kept the weathered ledgers, journals, notes,  
Tied letters, clipped obituaries, curls,  
Printed or cursive words, each deep-inked page,  
Crude portraits framed by genealogies,  
The tall tales handed down by mouth and ear,  
The Highland tunes transposed to these low hills,  
Legends for wide-eyed hearers by the fire,  
Their cedar chests' quilts, ribbons — keepsake worlds,  
A black slate's chalky numbers, ABCs,  
The facts of gossip mixed with gossip's lore,  
Plain histories of the meadow and the lane:

And when in time they tore their cabins down  
They put up manors worthy of the land,  
Farmhouses made for living, not for show,  
The boulder-stones dug up, bricks shaped from clay  
Shoveled from steep red walls of river bluff,  
No foreign architect with fine designs,  
Just neighbors and themselves, with knowing guess,  
The feel of right and rightness in the thing,  
Of heft and touch and balance, grain and cut,  
No etched designs or compass, leveling plumb,  
Old-school their only rule, the rule of thumb,  
Like pinching this and that in recipes,  
No granite from Carrara or New York,  
No balcony or widow's walk or dome,  
Parlor, gazebo, secret garden, maze  
But kitchen, bedroom, living room, and hearth  
Near which they dined, a long-benched table planed,  
Porch swings that raised their parlance toward the stars,  
A southern drawl so slow it almost paused  
Before a stillness gracious and sedate  
Even when pests and weather made them fail:  
And there for years they showed, undispossessed,  
Set hospitalities of sweat and blood,  
Earned gifts that virtue's manners yet demand,  
Pouring out water cold and pure from wells,  
Buckets pulled up, spilling from hidden springs,  
Abundance on the table's high-piled plates  
For travelers unnumbered and unnamed  
No porter looked down on or turned away,  
No walled *hortus inclusus*, gated, barred,  
But unlocked doors that opened to a knock,  
The ample board that fed them if they stayed —  
Tomatoes picked, potatoes dug that day,  
Cream-mantled milk drawn mornings, ready cows  
That only death could sunder from a dream,  
The sudden nothingness beneath their sleep,  
Late autumn slaughtering, the pail and blade,  
Cobs hollowed for a pipe stem's smoking-bowl,  
Churned butter chilled, then melting gold on gold  
In window-light come tawny from the corn,  
Bacon from hogs coaxed forth toward slop and knife,  
The bass that sometimes struck a baitless hook,

David Middleton

Baked pies scenting the kitchen's windowsills,  
Cool orchard-winds blown in to curl and go  
Returning apple sweetness to the trees,  
A table fit for governor or mayor,  
Field hands, kinfolk, wayfarers where a prayer  
Would grace the fixings, leavings of each meal,  
Salt pork and greens, pot licker, dipping bread,  
The ladled gravy, mashed potatoes, peas —  
Lady and purple hull — the honeyed ham,  
And children taught their "Yes, Sir," "Please," and "Ma'am,"  
Then, next day, farewells said, the turning back  
To living roots they thought would never die —  
And will not die until they die in me —  
My father casting seeds before the dawn,  
Plowing the earth the way his father plowed,  
My mother tending garden, orchard, hens,  
Whose new brown eggs lay wet and warm in straw,  
Her fingers deft, adept to pull and loop,  
Sewing with flax and cotton, carded, dyed  
With petals, berries — cultivated, wild,  
No ornamental myrtle-beds or planes  
But marigolds and dogwoods bred and read  
For beauty's use, the book of leaf and bloom,  
Home remedies of mint and sassafras,  
By store-bought goods then setting little store  
Except for what they could not make or raise —  
Pens, paper, needles, coffee, sugar, ink  
And panes to let the sun alone come in,  
The light divine of Indians, Genesis —  
Both sons and daughters helping when they knew —  
Through hand-me-downs of craft and thrift and love  
Binding mind and bone — the manners of the land,  
All bearing in themselves the fruits they bore  
From meadow, row, and pasture to a place  
Where rank and worth were one when fathers carved  
And served grandparents, mothers — children last —  
Blessing the simple feast with simple words  
They spoke once more in verses shaped and phrased  
By Tyndale, Cranmer, Coverdale and all  
Who heightened and tightened England's common tongue  
In Holy Writ for ages and the age,  
Words learned by word of mouth and well-turned page

In house and church and school and court of law,  
Heard best in pinewood chapels made of pine  
By yeomen who still spoke as Shakespeare spake,  
The Thames and Avon flowing in the Red,  
Who, like the Caddo, built by river-creeks  
In scattered hamlets, farmsteads set apart,  
Provisioned by their labor, stock and ground,  
Until past mere subsistence far enough  
To grow a market-village for their crops  
With cobbler, blacksmith, wheelwright — skills and wares  
That matched their own — by barter, bill, and coin  
Exchanging handicraft and shaking hands,  
Their word made good by all they were and made:  
And as they rode their wagons home again,  
Wheels clacking in dry ruts or stuck in mud,  
They sensed what only sense can wholly know,  
Saying the grace of names each season brings —  
Day-flowers blue and moist in April shade,  
Pink morning glories winding toward the sun  
On green June limbs of locust, elm, and gum,  
September's feather bells spread white in pines,  
December's mistletoe in bare pecans,  
Red holly fruit the cedar waxwings love —  
All speaking for themselves, the Maker's way,  
Things Englished that the Indians once named  
In languages now lost as Adam's tongue  
When being gleamed and God's first song was sung:

5

But all too soon along old hunting trails  
That widened into lanes, then wider roads  
(Indians left to wander pathless woods  
Of small pox, whiskey, syphilis, and tears)  
Appeared what seemed another kind of man  
Until he rose within ourselves as well,  
Who bought up narrow arpents still untilled  
In floodplains that the natural levees fed,  
Alluvions overflowing, soil so rich  
Their pride's Corinthian splendor laid a base,  
Their capitals' acanthus-leaves and scrolls



David Middleton

Like offerings raised, the columns of the gods  
Guarding great lawns whose graveled alleyways  
Grew oaks to cool the ladies when they strolled,  
Gentlemen sipping bourbon on the porch  
While slaves dragged burlap bags of cotton bolls  
Their masters sold abroad for bags of gold,  
Estates that rose above the estate of man,  
A world in which no yeoman could have lived,  
Far from a hearthside mantel's flintlock, clock,  
Framed samplers made of home-dyed cloth and threads  
With numbers, letters, woven from the earth,  
The barn dance and the fiddler, bow aglow,  
The hock-cart gold in golden harvest moons:  
Instead, the planters built a kingdom kept,  
But only for a time, by chattel slaves,  
From modest, meet proportion, due degree:  
The long halls, ceilings, galleries bedecked  
With glittering chandeliers and painted stars,  
Zodiacs, busts and statues, portraiture —  
Maecenas, Martial, Caesar, Cicero,  
Bright Pegasus and Lyra and Orion,  
The Heavenly Shepherd — and those maidens loathe  
To sing the songs of Zion in Babylon,  
David with his harp, dodging Saul's quick spear,  
Moses' stone tablets shattered at the calf,  
Shy Amos tending sheep and sycamores,  
Preaching against the kingdom of the north,  
Christ bowed to write his lost words on the ground,  
The wife of Pilate turning toward the truth,  
Or else commissions from that place and time,  
The family patriarchs in formal dress,  
Black waistcoat, black cravat, white ruffled shirt,  
Hoop-skirted ladies poised atop the stairs,  
Their sons at ease in military dress  
Of West Point, VMI, The Citadel  
With sash and saber, hand on hilt for war,  
And near the walls on which these portraits hung  
The daughters skilled in needlepoint and keys,  
A gamboling lamb of Eden on its leash  
And hymns whose verses judged them as they played,  
"Awake, Jerusalem, Awake," "O Word,  
That Goest Forth on High," "Our Bondage Here  
It Shall End By and By," "Repent, the Voice

Celestial Cries," "That Awful Day Will Surely Come," "The Lord Who Truly Knows the Heart," "This Is the Field, the World Below," "Watchman, Tell Us of the Night," and as night took the day And parlor-light one final hymn was sung, "There Is a Happy Land Not Far Away," The ladies unsuspecting, in a daze, All dreaming of a planter's eldest son, Dancing at spring cotillions to the strings Of violin quartets while in the fields The aching strains of slave songs lingered still — "Roll, Jordan, Roll," "Follow the Drinking Gourd," "Wrestle on, Jacob," "Hunting for the Lord," "Jordan's Mills," "Jesus on the Waterside," "I Want to Go Home," "The Sabbath Hath No End," "The Old Ship of Zion," "Satan's Camps A-Fire," And "All My Father's Children" — without cease, Faint undertones of calling and response: And there, sedate in pride's entitlements, Liqueurs and not pot licker to their taste, Wines, French, expensive, in a fine-cut glass, Not jars of moonshine snuck from hidden stills, Long mornings and the longer afternoons Comfortable in their study's easy chair, The feathered cushion, scroll-arms, padded back, The fathers soothed by punkah, pipe, and port With drowsy browsing eyes through bookcase panes Saw gilded, marbled, leather-bound fine tomes, In Latin, Greek — Horace and Hesiod, Theocritus and Virgil — pastoral dreams Of first estates they never understood In eclogue, georgic, elegy, and ode, The uncut pages splotched with rust and mold:

6

But then a nightmare woke them from their sleep  
When blue troops bled through butternut and gray  
To torch those mansions where from flute and flue  
Of pillar, chimney, black flags billowed white  
In winds that strewed their soot across our fields,

David Middleton

Stark columns pointing darkly toward the stars,  
Whirled ashes of the crackling zodiacs,  
The walls' and ceilings' blazing paint and frames,  
The patriarchs aflame, the statues, busts  
All shattered by the ax and rifle butt,  
Charred volumes curling wordless in the gusts  
(Simms' library at Woodlands drifting east  
As dust toward Alexandria and the sea)  
While quartermasters took off all our stock  
Marauders had not slaughtered, whiskey-fired,  
Who razed farmhouses too and raised the dead  
To steal a wedding ring or pearls unstrung,  
Our kin long shrouded then in sleep and light —  
Parishes we'd name Lincoln, even Grant! —  
Though for a time struck clocks would strike us dumb,  
The present, past, and future closing doors  
That only opened when we turned away,  
This aftermath effected by the Cause,  
Our Stoic code Aurelius and a cross,  
Our memories seared with history and myth  
Beyond the good and evil of the war —  
Antietam's Bloody Lane, the Devil's Den,  
Armistead, hat-on-sword, leading the colors up  
That slope where thousands fell upon a name  
And Cemetery Ridge received its slain,  
Petersburg's winter trenches, long and deep,  
Then overwhelming numbers, Saylor's Creek  
And Appomattox where a conquered Lee  
Rode Traveler through salutes of blue and gray,  
The whole war but one battle in a strife  
Unending still, the country's great divide,  
Tense armistice with snipers, picket lines —  
And yet so many gone before their time,  
Those farm boys doomed — Rhode Island, Maine, Vermont! —  
Sowing with stones the lawns of Arlington  
Where, pensive, at a post he cannot leave,  
Last guardian of the Old Republic's tomb,  
The ghost of Lee surveys the Union dead,  
His shadow gray where blue wool stained young bones  
Forever buried deep in southern soil,  
Fable and fact in endless combat coiled:  
And all across the South's blood-seeded fields,  
The ploughshares, beaten back from melted swords,  
Turning up settled relics of the war,

Exhuming with their bright abrasive blades  
The scattered Minié balls and gilded hilts  
Or buttons stamped *US* or *CSA*,  
Brass letters worn away by rust and rain,  
There, too, the planters' chapels, crumbled, burned  
By men a pure high righteousness had made  
Angels of their own rage that freed the slaves,  
The altar's stolen chalice, pyx, and plate,  
The shot-out azure panes of Mary's face  
All twinkling in their shards, the Virgin's tears  
(The splendor of their Anglican restraint!),  
Tears for all her children — black, white, blue and gray —  
Fort Sumter, Appomattox, prelude days:

7

Yet what of this plain farmhouse never named  
Like Old South mansions called Felicity,  
Mount Bountiful, Heart's Rest, the Muses' Grove,  
Arcadia, New Eden, Avon Glade,  
Belle Mont, Fair Haven, Stronghold, Reverie,  
Clear Vistas, Tanglewood, and Waverley —  
But only *home*, only a dwelling-place,  
Familiar spirits — bellows, tongs, and wood —  
The Lares and Penates of our hearth,  
The kindled memories so far beyond  
A world in which the dead are left for dead  
While rigs pump up from under sea-floor sands  
And bedrock the remains of layered graves,  
Agribusiness in bondage to machines —  
Their rattling chattel chains — topsoil worked thin,  
Strong chemicals the Mississippi drains  
From northern farms, a toxic underflow  
Spreading The Dead Zone further in the Gulf,  
Great kills of crab and flounder, shrimp and bass,  
Bottom-rotting or scooped by swooping gulls,  
The bumper crops of protean new strains,  
The blight and pests that weather every change,  
Unplanted tracts left fallow for a price,  
Slaves of the banks and futures and the exchange,  
No garden near for this day's corn and beans,  
No family graveyards but the graves of farms

David Middleton

Once seamlessly beseeming, apt and fit,  
Collations of the gods of sod and star,  
Like-mindedness and loving-kindness one,  
Both comely and becoming, well in hand,  
The culture of a cultivated earth,  
The coulter's tropes no curses can reverse,  
Tillers grown still to take in the long view  
And keep the ancient sabbaths of the land,  
Playing the fiddle brought down from the wall,  
No longer hung on crooking willow-hooks  
The pioneers wedged deep in fireside stone,  
Songs with Scotch-Irish, English, southern roots —  
"Carry the News to Mary," "Sally Ann,"  
"Frosty Morning," "Over the Waterfall,"  
"Lost Indian," "Sourwood Mountain," "Shady Grove,"  
"Wild Mountain Thyme," and "Sugar in the Gourd" —  
The words and music keeping souls attuned  
Through evening when the shadows gather in  
Plowmen walking their tired plow-horses back,  
No bells rung hard for slaves or tenant-serfs  
But goat bells tinkling deep in pasture grass,  
Each human life a human sacrifice,  
Its modest state the right estate of man,  
The trusted customs, valid habitudes,  
A village made of names recalled and lost,  
Proportioned to those roles this roll proclaims:  
The farms of Martial, Horace, Penshurst kept  
By Sidneys whom Ben Jonson praised the best,  
Appleton House of Fairfax and de Vere  
Where Marvell taught the daughter of those walls  
Its history he'd commemorate in rhyme,  
Croft's Saxham and Worth's Durrants, G.N.'s Wrest  
Where Carew saw a "usefull comeliness"  
Grinding "the Yeallow Goddess into food,"  
Coole Park where Lady Gregory walked with Yeats,  
Home places celebrated in their time,  
Even flawed Woodlands dreams of Gilmore Simms  
That Donald Davidson would dream anew:

And now as my own dreaming nears an end  
 And rocking slows to stillness on the porch  
 I lay my fiddle down in quiet hope  
 That one day we might fully know again  
 God's hospitalities, sojourning zones,  
 Old houses like my fireplace, starry hearths,  
 The candles and the anthems and the choirs,  
 The song of was and is and yet to be —  
 Elegant delegations of a love  
 From Mind to minds undisinherited,  
 The givenness of magnanimity  
 Whose breathless essence breathes a universe  
 Expanding and contracting to its end,  
 The prime rhyme turned and turning, fixed adrift  
 Between the stuff of nothing and the One,  
 Pegasus drawing the Plowman toward the Lyre,  
 His twinkling wings appointed star by star,  
 Cain's wheat and Abel's lamb near Eden's trees,  
 Both spared the altar-fire of stalk and blood,  
 New grain on the cedared peaks of Lebanon,  
 The bones of Joseph carried home at last,  
 Jerusalem's breached walls of rubble-stone  
 Rising again in Nehemiah's eyes,  
 The pelican of David and the owl  
 Flying beyond the wilderness and ruins,  
 Noon deserts where the dunes will flower out,  
 Those early rains and late that never fail,  
 Christ's private writing published from the dust —  
 While Ceres in the breasted haystacks sleeps  
 Until she wakes to Saturn's second reign  
 When Justice comes to raise a world debased,  
 Descending with a wind now mild and kind,  
 And farmers see what they were last to see,  
 Her scales balanced again with coin and corn,  
 Our cause not red, white, black or blue and gray  
 But only graded shades of meadow-green  
 As daybreak burns off darkness from the land  
 And all we long have longed for draws us home,  
 The ripened light, the harvest of the stars,  
 First fruits that only dawn-time tilling yields,

David Middleton

Astraea's rays over the golden rows,  
The fall's last twilight leaving fields and hills:

### **Author's Note on The Dwelling Place**

*The Dwelling Place* is a poem in the ancient "pastoral" tradition as well as in the tradition of the "country house" or "country estate" poem traceable to Horace and Martial. It makes use of history as well as myth and, as a pastoral poem, presents, at times, a happy picture of country life; at other times, however, it addresses and depicts suffering, war, death, problems of modernity, other evils, and other themes. It differs from every other country estate poems in English in having as its setting not an English or Irish manor or the mansion of a plantation in the antebellum South but a family farm and farmhouse, in this case in my native north Louisiana.

The pastoral mode of the poem and its central themes are also deeply rooted in the southern agrarian tradition. The poem tries to evoke a world that may well lie just beneath, beyond, above, beside, within, or barely out of sight and reach in relation to what we are perhaps too quick to call "the real world." As Coleridge said of Wordsworth, the poet — in his true self — has the power to pull the scales of custom from our eyes so that we may once more see the world in its persisting wholeness and in all its primal wonder.

*The Dwelling Place* is dedicated to traditional north Louisiana farmers and to Fugitive poet and remembers agrarian writer Donald Davidson (1893-1968). Two immediate sources of the poem are Davidson's own country-estate poem, "Woodlands, 1956-60," Woodlands being the South Carolina plantation home of southern man of letters William Gilmore Simms (1806-1870), and M.E. Bradford's essay "Donald Davidson and the Great-House Tradition: A Reading of 'Woodlands, 1956-60.'"

Of particular interest in Bradford's essay is his quotation from Lewis P. Simpson's *The Dispossessed Garden: Pastoral and History in Southern Literature* (1975): "as nearly as the South had a center in the Republic of Letters following the age when Monticello was such a place, Simms's plantation (called Woodlands) was it." The wrongful dependence of that plantation system in antebellum days on chattel slavery is addressed in my own poem.

*The Dwelling Place* is divided into eight numbered sections. These sections may be characterized as follows: (1) Introduction

— the speaker, his family, the setting, and the invocation of the Muse (Astraea); (2) Description of prehistoric north Louisiana and surrounding areas north and south thereof; (3) The Indians; (4) The Settlers; (5) The Planters; (6) The Civil War; (7) Modernity; and (8) Conclusion — including a return to the Introduction’s setting and Astraea, then ending with hope for a renewal — or a new vision of — the human condition insofar as that is possible in a fallen world (noted in the poem’s “final” line).

The Muse of the poem, Astraea (Star-Maiden), is the virgin goddess of Justice with her scales. When The Golden Age ended (some say also the Silver), Astraea was the last divine being to depart from the earth, and the last human beings she departed from were the farmers. She then became a constellation. Her return to earth would signal a return to The Golden Age — something like Eden in Christian terms.

The speaker is a farmer in present day north Louisiana. He is well educated, a fiddler-poet, and is in accordance with the pastoral tradition that grants to its rural speakers a knowledge of things usually beyond what a farmer or shepherd would need to know in order to perform his daily tasks.

Readers might recall the conversation between the shepherd Pierce and the shepherd-poet Cuddie in Spenser’s “October” eclogue in *The Shepherdes Calender*, an eclogue on the nature and role of poetry and the poet. Cuddie and Pierce discuss Maecenas and Augustus Caesar, seem well-versed in the classics and Greco-Roman myth, apparently have at least indirect knowledge or intimations of Plato’s philosophy, and discuss the major poet’s attempt to rise from the pastoral lyric to the epic poem — as did Virgil, Spenser, and Milton.

The speaker in *The Dwelling Place* also has at times the voice of an Old Testament prophet, such as Amos, a simple shepherd and a tender of sycamore trees who was inspired both to know and speak of things beyond his normal ken. The speaker’s voice is indebted as well to voices in Blake’s prophetic books and the rhetoric of southern Fugitive-Agrarian poet Allen Tate.

*The Dwelling Place* is structured as one long catalogue, and within the poem-as-catalogue are local catalogues: Indian moons, titles of antebellum hymns and slave songs, the names of manors praised by other poets who wrote in the country estate tradition, Civil War battles, names of southern plantations, and several more.

All of the items in these catalogues are real and of their period so far as the author can tell. Two exceptions are some of



the names of the southern mansions and some of the artwork of the planters. As with T.S. Eliot's names of Tarot cards in *The Waste Land*, the reader will find in these catalogues real names and subjects together with invented but likely seeming ones, introduced for symbolic purposes.

The ultimate philosophical-theological nature of the catalogue as a literary device going back at least to the list of ships in Homer is implicitly argued throughout: its invocation and evocation of pure being, things perceived as *what* they are and *that* they are (with a divine Maker also presumed). It should be noted that "the dwelling place" of the title, a north Louisiana farmhouse, unlike other dwelling places in the country estate tradition in English, has no name but *home*. Whether the poem as a catalogue with catalogues is effective or simply tedious will be up to the reader to determine.

The poem, though long, is, grammatically, a *single sentence* as is Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. There is no period (.) in the poem. The colon functions in the flow of the poem as a weir does in a stream, slowing the poem at crucial moments but not fully impeding its onward going as a period (like a dam) would do. The last line of the poem rounds back onto the first; thus, the poem is both a circle and a line, the ancient symbols of eternity (the circle) and time (the line) or idea and history. In fact, one might wonder whether the poem is a "sentence" at all since it has no period, cycles back into itself, and, thus, but for the mortal reader's necessary abandonment, has no end.

Throughout the poem are echoes, translations, and transpositions of details from earlier poems in the country estate or pastoral tradition and from other sources. One example is at the end of section 6 where a north Louisiana plowman turns up sunken Civil War relics. This detail comes from Virgil's *Georgic I* where an ancient Roman farmer does the same. Historical echoes include the phrase "overwhelming numbers" in section 6, words taken from General Robert E. Lee's well-known General Order No. 9 (Farewell to the Army of Northern Virginia), an order issued at Appomattox but with implications that go far beyond its original use and context.

Certain symbolic images may be followed through the poem. Three examples are wind, stars (including constellations and the zodiac), and fire. The old trope of "versus" as the poet's turning of verses and the farmer's (or poet-farmer's) turning of rows is also woven into the poem from beginning to end.

Music and paradox, too, are important in the poem. When

sound begins to challenge sense as central to a word, phrase, or line or when paradox is used frequently to indicate that we have reached a point beyond which language and the mind may not be able to go, then we know that the brink between a golden age or perfect garden and our age has probably, at least for now, been reached. Nevertheless, a reader may perhaps be able to peer over such a brink into what English poet T. Sturge Moore (1870-1944) once called “the unknown known.” The poet as Linker whose metaphors are devices of a deep (re)-connecting between all things is also present.

In addition, *The Dwelling Place* can be read as a defense of poetry in the spirit of Sir Philip Sidney (who is mentioned in the poem) including a defense of the deep interrelationship of poetry and the natural order, especially farming (culture and agriculture). It is a poem about poetry and poetics in addition to other subjects.

Finally, speaking more personally, *The Dwelling Place* brings together themes, phrases, tropes, and strategies that have appeared in many of my earlier poems as well as in the poems of poets who have influenced me and to whom I owe a literary debt of one kind or another. *The Dwelling Place* seems like a culmination that has been coming for a long time. I prepared for writing this poem by reading — for several years — earlier pastoral verse, country estate verse, and scholarly commentaries on such verse for nearly a decade. Especially important were the works discussed and cited in M.E. Bradford’s essay.

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The Atoms of Democritus  
And Newton’s Particles of light  
Are sands upon the Red sea shore,  
Where Israel’s tents do shine so bright.

William Blake (1757-1827)

— David Middleton