David Middleton

Nunc Dimittis: Two Poems

I

More Than Words Can Say

written after doing a program on poetry and music for the Thibodaux Music Club in the Parish Hall of St. John's Episcopal Church, October 10, 2018

These fragments I have shored against my ruins
- T.S. Eliot

*

I have made a heap of all that I could find.
- David Jones, translating from Nennius'
Historia Brittonum

1

Late winter nights he reads his book of stars
By light that casts bright shadows on the page,
The captured flattened depths, the gleaming sheen,
World pictures in a single picture framed,
Bringing him word of things unseen before,
Grounded abstractions glimpsed in the misty grain,
Unburied skeletons of ghost and bone,
Their last remains immortal on the shore.

2

He holds creation open in his hands,
The color photographs of galaxies,
Pixels of atoms and their atmospheres,
Ptolemaic correlations, coming round,
Elliptical and wayward as they stay,

Swayed by the uncorroborated gods,
Epics of ice and fire, of rock and dust,
Old chronicles beyond interpreters,
A world of worlds inscribed in nothingness,
Spontaneous proposals, free as fate,
The given, the un-given, and the found,
Sojourners moving to and from their home,
The point of everything their starting point,
Inerrant in their plotted wanderings,
Strangers in some strange fellowship akin,
Adopted and abandoned, kept apart,
The matter of apocalyptic psalms,
Their parallels balancing clause by clause —
The Serpent, Virgin — Libra in between,
The golden discs and chains, the Maker's Scales —
Verses reversed, reflections of themselves,
Turned and returning, cycling line to line,
Beginnings inconceivably complete,
Repeating with "original response,"
Unlisted catalogues of goodly stuff,
The one thing done the only thing undone,
Said lyrics for the music of the spheres,
A language "understanded," of the tongue,
The hand of Cranmer steady in the flame,
The Norman, Saxon, Latin all transposed,
Made plain in stately rhythm, simple phrase,
Vernaculars archaic, obsolete,
Current through eons, coinage of the realm,
The grammar of creation fitted, fit,
The sentence going on beyond its end,
Inscriptions scored, incisive and precise,
Case, number, tense, and person making sense,
The telling prefix, suffix, stem, and root,
Eternal chapters finished just in time,
The cursive flourishings of *ur-* and *ens*,
The starlight in the window on the page
From stars that died the moment they were born,
Brought down by Hubble arcing round and round —
A silence ringing true in stellar bells,
Their changes ranging constant as the hours —
By Voyager sent back while sailing on
Toward some most distant Ithaca no man knows,

The final island where each flowering vine
Is native and invasive and at home
By towers whose walls are burning on the shore
Beyond the planets and their pebble moons,
Beyond the bubble of the heliosphere,
Beyond the domination of the sun,
O how he learns to grasp them, weigh and praise!
Saved by a late revival of the eyes.

3

He moves his index finger word by word
Under the captioned photographs and charts,
A radiance translated from the page,
The Deep itself upwelling, mired in fire,
The lordly correlations, ranked and named,
Doves hovering above the governed tongues
Sworn to an ancient liberty they restrain,
Not even Einstein, Ptolemy at odds,
Wayfarers on the way to here and there
Where what is known is never wholly known,
The mysteries of fact and common sense,
The sheer unlikely likelihood of things,
God's *That* and *What* obligatory gifts,
The lettered essences from A to Z,
Lections no editor can rectify,
The toppled columns at the ledgers' edge,
The pastured stars still grazing in their flames,
Fall slaughtering in houses, holes, and zones,
The Farmer making night-rounds, field and yard,
Digging up boundary-stones where none were laid,
Exploring shores beyond the reach of seas,
Glaciers in the hayfields, fossil-shells
Imprinted on the inland mountaintops,
Washed up by tides still ebbing as they swell,
(Way stations on the only way to go),
The weathervane and road sign pointing on,
The astral tabulations graved in fire,
The scattered patternings that loose and bind,
Findings beyond judgment, verdicts unconfirmed,
The bitter hemlock, vinegar, one cup,

David Middleton

Socrates and his questions on the cross,
Christ dead in Athens, finished with his friends,
Peter's rooster, a cock for Asclepius,
Torn pages from the star book's book of hours.

4

The mind inhabits its own world, this world,
Knowing itself by what it can perceive,
Perceiving what itself alone can know,
Peering far off through telescope or probe,
Scanning deep space for measure, stave, and rhyme,
Sojourning toward a home it never left,
A place strangely familiar, all but named,
A grammar school of atoms parsed apart,
Elements only numbers diagram,
Foundations quaking under their own ground,
The turbulent universals, battered facts,
The given that the mind would give a voice,
The deafening proclamations' faintest strains,
Things that would sing of things their state declares,
Telling the story they were made to tell,
This book of stars the stars themselves compose,
Epiphanies midwinter clarifies,
Their matter scored for elegiac lyres,
Word music of the music of the spheres
For Lyra rising, star beams yet unstrung,
As taut and haunted as they always are
When poets write and read the selfsame text
Whose telic metaphors would show the way
Should "like as unto" be the likely end
And words be something more than words can say.

II

Evensongs

> At evensong survivors sang and prayed.
> We turned aside to perish with the saved.
>
> "Reliquiae," 1974

1

Grown old, and growing older, not caring
As one should care, hardly able to care,
Familiar things held dear now passing strange,
Enticing in their rapt indifference,
A universe come out of nouns and verbs,
The dying birth cry, snow dust on the bud,
Sojourning clouds staying unshaped, untouched
By our interpretations — matter detached,
Waves breaking on the rocks they wash away.
Those pitiless pietàs without tears.

2

Harps in the trees, the fiddle on the wall,
Ur-waters calmed by words troubled once more,
Incarnate nothing's uncreated face,
The silence letting language have its say,
Translation's seeds plowed under, line by line,
Soon rooting deep and flowering in time,
Tautology and paradox at one,
A there that was not there before it was,
The ground always moving under our feet
As we look around, both up and down, at
Oblivion's star-point epiphanies.

3

The mystery remains, a presence felt
Until the senses weaken and the mind
Is ready to hold on to letting go,
Odysseus on the raft, no land in sight,
Borne on and on forever on the swells
Beyond the burning houses of the stars,
And nature in its veils of nakedness,
The seven sins and virtues in a dance,
Partners changing, the games of masks and names,
All these a dream within a dreamless sleep,
And death abed our breathless paramour.

4

And yet . . . whatever is is surely given,
The syntax of largesse whose timeless verbs,
A fundamental wonder, conjugate
Person and number, tensing moods and modes,
Heavenly etymologies unearthed,
The accidents and essence of a thing,
Kingdom to species, like the water thrush,
Its song descending note by warbled note
Voicing the hillside stream by which it lives,
Both resident and migrant, in accord.
The Psalmist's *Selah* breaking from the strings.

5

And so with wanting magnanimity
We must be satisfied, yearning to care,
Be cared for, hale, yet nearly out of breath,
Placing our long lost faith in that good day
When noon was of a night no light shone through
Until a twilight dawned midafternoon
And timely hours of sun and moon and star
Would mark a sacred waiting, remembrance
Of what had been as what again would come,
The signs and seasons stations on a way
Where evensong and lauds are sung as one.

David Middleton

The Striking of the Lyre: Demodokos in Modernity

A Statement on Poetics

When, in *The Odyssey*, we first behold Odysseus, he is weeping on the shore of Kalypso's isle, gazing over the waves toward Penelope and home and thus toward his intended human place and fate — not as divine consort to a goddess nor yet as a shade in Hades, nor as one of Circe's herd — but as ruler of far-off Ithaca, an island realm in the middle world washed by the middle sea.

But then, set free by the will of Zeus, Odysseus with Kalypso's own strong olive-handled ax, fashions a raft out of the felled black poplar and alder trunks, a raft that takes him over the turbulent waters until it breaks apart — and floating for two long days upon a single beam, at last from atop a rising wave he has an "unexpected glimpse of wooded land" and then is swept away onto the rocky shores of remote Phaiakia to whose untroubled people the gods still show themselves without disguise.

Guarding his identity, Odysseus comes as a nameless stranger to the palace of Alkinoos near which lie perfect gardens with their "orderly / rows of greens, all kinds . . . lush through the seasons" and orchards of pomegranates, apples, figs, and pears whose fruit is exhausted or spoiled "neither in winter time nor summer." And in this pastoral kingdom Odysseus hears the bard Demodokos sing twice to his fine "clear lyre" of Odysseus' own role in the Trojan War, including the final ruse of the wooden horse.

In response to the powerful singing, this "stranger" — whose own great exploits have been thus traumatically revealed in the rhythms and in the words of measured verse — first seeks privacy by hiding his head under his purple mantle, yet then uncovers, and, by pure compulsion, publicly weeps: "tears running down his face before the Phaiakians." And when Demodokos pauses, Odysseus — who soon after such singing will at last risk revealing his identity to his host — once again "would take the mantle away from his head, and wipe the tears off, / and taking up a two-handed goblet would pour a libation to the gods." And so this crafty hero, who wept for the return to his full humanity on the sands of Kalypso's isle, now weeps from the depths of his being at poetry's shattering revelation of who he is.

This profound effect of poetry on a hero both modern and archaic is among the most compelling evidence we have that

our greatest verse and the mystery of human existence are at one. And there are other clues. Keats, for instance, in his search for ideal disinterestedness, named Socrates and Jesus as the only persons in history who attained to such a state, though their teachings were taken down — perhaps in necessary accordance with this ideal — only by others. Yet what do we find when we examine the final acts of these two figures who so readily stand as symbols of the two great strains in the Western tradition — the Greco-Roman and the Judeo-Christian?

Awaiting death in his cell, Socrates turned Aesop's *Fables* and the *Prelude to Apollo* into verse because his daimon had said for him to "practice and cultivate the arts," and fearing now that not philosophy but poiesis was intended, Socrates says: "I thought it would be safer not to take my departure before I had cleared my conscience by writing poetry and so obeying the dream." Likewise, on the cross, before the final cry that escapes him with his spirit, Christ, according to Matthew, utters his last words in the poetry of the Psalms: ("Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" Psalm 22:1). Even Plato, whose life and thought link Socrates and Jesus, declared on his deathbed, by the slightest gesture, the *differentia specifica* of verse: "Plato died at the age of eighty-one. On the evening of his death he had a Thracian girl play the flute to him. The girl could not find the beat of the *nomos*. With a movement of his finger, Plato indicated to her the Measure" (Eric Voegelin).

The origin of measured verse is lost in prehistory. But it seems reasonable to suppose that, in some long defining moment, archaic man awoke from primal sleep and so was struck with wonder and with terror at the beauty and the mystery of a world in which he seemed fated ever afterwards to dwell as a being on the verge, placed in a middle station somewhere above the flora and the fauna, and the elements themselves, yet well below divine powers obscurely apprehended. The cycling of the seasons, the progress of the stars, the rhythms of the body and the stages of human life — such things must have drawn forth from out of the depths a first measured response to consciousness both in music and in words. Perhaps at last man recognized a strange power in language that led him to think of the Maker's power as a language in itself, an attribute of deity, as in the Book of Genesis, where, in God's own mind, the *word* "light" somehow came before and helped to give existence to the *thing* called "light": "And God *said*, 'Let there be light'; and there *was* light" (Genesis 1:3).

The story of Adam the Namer, who spoke to the answering beasts before the Fall, and the story of the Fall itself as involving disruption — not only between human beings and the other creatures and between language and things but even between words and the very Word itself — may be archaic indicators that poetry lies at the center of human life and remains the one power by which man might still return from his long sojourn through history to a realm where Edenic innocence and conscious existence, both in time and beyond time, are reconciled at last.

Such reconciliation may be symbolized by Homer's bard Demodokos, who sang of the fall of Troy amid the gardens and the orchards of Alkinoos' pastoral kingdom. And indeed, it is King Alkinoos himself, who, in one of the most remarkable passages in *The Odyssey*, encourages Odysseus, so profoundly stirred by Demodokos' song, to transform himself from listener into poet not only to tell his own story but also to say why he weeps at tragic history, for such history, says the king, is not the final end but rather a godly gift for a further, sublime purpose: "Explain to us also what secret sorrow makes you weep as you listen to the tragic story of the Argives and the fall of Troy. Were not the gods responsible for that, weaving catastrophe into the pattern of events to make a song for future generations?"

And to this may we not add that as long as human beings continue to ask those two primary philosophical questions — Why is there a universe instead of nothing and Why is that universe as it is and not otherwise? — poets will try to write what Wallace Stevens called the "central poem," a poem in which the poet attempts the great return from the fallen world to the Bible's *peaceable kingdom* (Isaiah 11: 1-9). Such poets will glimpse what Jacques Maritain calls "the radiance of the ontological mystery," and, like Caedmon, the cowherd poet and symbolic initiator of the English poetic tradition, they will "Sing about the Creation." And should the authors of these poems ever close the circle of being — if such an act be possible and allowed — then, like Adam the Namer, they and we may commune once more with all those things which, even now, as the Psalmist says, mysteriously converse among themselves: "Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world" (Psalm 19: 2-4).

To all such poets who attempt the "central poem" should go the praise Odysseus himself bestows upon the Phaiakian: "No one on earth can help honoring and respecting the bards, for the Muse has taught them the art of song and she loves the minstrel fraternity." So the doer of great deeds pays homage to one of those through whom such deeds live on, Demodokos, whose measured verse was chanted to the striking of the lyre.

David Middleton

From the Diaries of Alabama Writer John Martin Finlay (1941-1991)

Finlay the Man and the Poet

John Martin Finlay was born in his maternal grandmother's house in Ozark, Alabama, on January 24, 1941. His parents, Tom Coston Finlay and Jean Sorrell Finlay, owned a peanut and dairy farm outside the nearby town of Enterprise, and there John Finlay spent his early youth coming to know firsthand the mystery, the beauty, and the hardship of agricultural life. He also became a deep and avid reader, sometimes reciting passages of Shakespeare to the cows (whom he named after Greek goddesses) as he took them to and from the pasture every day.

After finishing public school in Enterprise, Finlay earned his B.A. (1964) and M.A. (1966) in English at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa and taught for four years at the University of Montevallo in Montevallo, Alabama (1966-1970). Then, in the fall of 1970, Finlay entered the doctoral program at Louisiana State University in order to study under Donald E. Stanford, editor of *The Southern Review* and former student of Yvor Winters. Along with Allen Tate, Winters was one of Finlay's two primary models of the poet-critic that he himself aspired to be.

Except for the years 1972-1974, which he spent on the Greek island of Corfu and in Paris, then back home in Alabama, Finlay was at LSU throughout the rest of the 1970s. He was awarded the Ph.D. in December of 1980 after completing his dissertation on Yvor Winters' intellectual theism. He also joined the Roman Catholic Church in 1980.

In 1981, Finlay left Baton Rouge for the family farm in Alabama where for ten years he wrote essays, reviews, and new poems. On February 17, 1991, John Finlay died of AIDS, leaving behind his unpublished book of essays on the Gnostic spirit in modern literature and thought — *Flaubert in Egypt and Other Essays* — three published chapbooks of poems, and the typescript of his collected poems — *Mind and Blood* — as well as unpublished and uncollected poems, three essays from an unfinished book on the Greeks, and several diaries kept in Enterprise, in Tuscaloosa, in Montevallo, on Corfu, in Paris, and in Baton Rouge.

Finlay's poems are almost all in traditional literary forms. He mainly wrote plain-style lyrics of direct statement,

short narratives, and post-symbolist poems whose sensuous details exhibit controlled associationism in which definite ideas and feelings are indirectly yet logically presented. Whether plain-style, narrative, or post-symbolist, Finlay's poems are serious, simple, deep, direct, and often traumatically revealing of the human condition. The best of them are truly unforgettable.

Finlay addresses such subjects as the origin of the mind, the relation of mind and matter, mind and the irrational, mind and God, the nature of evil, Thomistic theology, philosophical subjectivism, the inscrutability and beauty of the natural world, primitive religious rituals, and, especially in the later poems, family life in the South since the early nineteenth century, Indian life in the South, the nature of modern war, and the isolation of the serious thinker and artist in the contemporary world.

And how high does Finlay rank as a poet?

In his essay in the Fall 2020 issue of the *Alabama Literary Review*, "The Romance of Modern Classicism: Remarks on the Life and Work of John Finlay (1941-1991)," Jeffrey Goodman assesses Finlay's stature: "As for Finlay's literary place: he was certainly not among the very highest rank of literary geniuses, Shakespeare, Dante, Baudelaire, or Racine. Nor does he stand without debate with the very first rank of American poets. His poetry was just peaking, wrote [Donald E.] Stanford, when he died. Yet Finlay's poetry contains here and there lines and passages at this high level, or near enough to it. Because he wrote five or six major poems and, in addition, twenty or more poems 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. Possibly, he ranks higher than this. At the same time, he was one of the most brilliant literary essayists of the last decades of his century. He has earned himself, indeed, a deserved place in American letters."

And in 1992, English poet Dick Davis, Fellow of The Royal Society of Literature, succinctly made the case for Finlay's verse: "The concepts that inform Finlay's poems, the fierce, lonely Manichaeism they articulate and struggle with, are so absent from most recent poets' intellectual landscape that his seems truly a voice crying in the wilderness. And yet in their discipline and grandeur Finlay's best poems are so harrowingly beautiful that they speak to any reader with ears to hear; they deserve the

minute attention of *everyone* who claims to care for the truth and craft of poetry."

Moreover, Edgar Bowers (1924-2000), the distinguished poet from Rome, Georgia, who won the Bollingen Prize — America's highest award for lifetime achievement in poetry — began his *Collected Poems* (Knopf, 1997) with a poem in memory of Finlay entitled simply "John."

Finlay's poetry is now collected in an annotated edition entitled "*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*": *The Poetry of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991*) edited by David Middleton and John P. Doucet. Belmont, North Carolina: Wiseblood Books, 2020). This poetry volume, along with its companion prose volume, was reviewed in the Fall 2020 issue of the *Alabama Literary Review* (29:1, 160-165) by Dr. Anna Head Spence of Enterprise Community College.

Finlay the Diarist

But in addition to his now widely acclaimed poetry, Finlay's essays, reviews, short story, diary entries, and miscellaneous prose are also of a high quality and of interest. And particularly in the diary entries we can trace the fascinating development of the mind of a poet and an essayist who later would earn a high reputation in Alabama, the South, and beyond.

Growing up to be a poet on a farm in the South, Finlay, especially as a younger man, felt a deep affinity with the southern Fugitive poets and the broader group of southern Agrarian writers, some of whom — including Andrew Lytle and Allen Tate — he met and sometimes visited, as his earlier diaries indicate.

The diaries are a record of Finlay's literary, intellectual, and spiritual concerns and struggles. Many of these entries have the polish of a well-crafted miniature essay or piece of poetic prose, like the entry on Finlay's reaction to the Impressionists in a museum in Paris. (Finlay would occasionally read aloud from his diaries to family and friends.)

In some diary entries, Finlay describes the facts of rural life on an Alabama farm, including the nature of a beloved milk cow named Red. Other diary entries on farm life may be taken as implied commentaries on modernity and on the general postlapsarian human condition.

In a few of the later entries, Finlay strives to understand

and then confront what he calls (perhaps the two were one) his "demon" and a demanding, condemning, unforgiving, remote "father" figure. But against these beings Finlay, quoting St. Augustine, posits a loving God the Father who says, "I want you to be." This prolonged conflict was finally resolved only at the very end of Finlay's life when Finlay said to his mother, "Mama, God has finally taken my demon away from me."

And at the close of his poem "The Black Earth," about the killing of a father in a dream — the father screaming as he dies — Finlay presents, through symbolic description, the final triumph of goodness and the rational. The poem ends with the rational and the good (the sun) triumphant over evil and the irrational (the moon):

> The moon has risen white. The mirror clears
> Of darker fire. His voice now fades like pain
> A human takes, absorbs, and then survives.
> This moon itself will fade, whose cobalt glow
> The dawn soon strikes to almost nothingness.
> Throughout morning it will but faintly gleam
> There in the west, a disc of thin white bone,
> The center eaten through with constant light.

*

What follows are some representative entries from the John Finlay diaries.

The first set of entries below is reprinted — with permission —from "*With Constant Light*"*: The Collected Essays and Reviews*, *With Selections from the Diaries and Other Prose of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991)*, edited by David Middleton and John P. Doucet, Belmont, North Carolina: Wiseblood Books, 2020). Many other diary entries, not reprinted here, may be read in that book.

The second set of entries below consists of previously unpublished selections from the diaries. None of the diary entries in either set have been published before in serial format.

The one exception to this two-part format is the diary entry made in Paris on Christmas Eve of 1973. Though published in "*With Constant Light*," that entry seemed an appropriate one to place at the very end of this selection. Further annotations to

the diary entries in Section 1 can be found in the Notes included in "*With Constant Light*".

*

I. Diary Entries from "*With Constant Light*," *With a Fragment of an Introduction of Allen Tate*, *A Passage from the Dissertation*, *and Finlay's Final Poem*

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I have the pleasure this evening of introducing Allen Tate to you. The details of Mr. Tate's public life you are familiar with: the famous Fugitive group of which he was a member when he was a student at Vanderbilt University, the Agrarian manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, to which he contributed an essay, and the later distinguished career as critic, novelist, biographer and, most importantly, as a poet. In fact they are so familiar that some graduate students have gotten ahold of him and written dissertations about him. So, I suppose we may safely pass all that by!

First of all, we must acknowledge debt as best we can. If the poets and critics help us to see our world and to "know the time" (to borrow from one of Mr. Tate's poems), then I am sure that many of us here tonight have a special debt to pay Allen Tate. I am thinking of all those whose reading of a short story by Henry James or a poem by John Donne has become more exact and perceptive because of a knowledge of Mr. Tate's criticism, as well as of the apprentice poets who have learned to use their language more effectively after carefully studying the technique of his own verse. Of course, we can never fully pay this kind of debt. But we can humbly and gratefully acknowledge it, which we now do.

The voices in which Mr. Tate has spoken are indeed wonderfully many; yet there is a thematic unity in all he has written. As Mr. Andrew Lytle has said: Mr. Tate's theme is nothing more or less than what is left of Christendom. . . .

[from Finlay's Introduction of Allen Tate at The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, mid-1960s. Compare Finlay's poem "For Allen Tate" in "*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*": *The Poetry of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991*), page 105. Finlay inscribed this poem in his copy of Tate's *Collected Essays*, 1959. Also see Finlay's "Introduction" to his book *Flaubert in Egypt and Other Essays*,

Essays on the Gnostic Spirit in Modern Literature and Thought, now collected in "*With Constant Light*," pages 31-34. Tate (1899-1979) was a major influence on Finlay both as a poet and as an essayist.]

*

We cut oats and wheat in June. I used to ride the combine and sack up the grain as it came through the chute. The combine shook, grumbled, [ground], roared in the scorching heat. It looked grotesque with all its complicated wheels and wheels within wheels turning with a rapidity that only increased its incredible complication. I remember how it cut evenly into the tall golden wheat, a thousand grasshoppers jumping out of its path. The chaff of the oats. The rattlesnakes that desperately jumped out of the oats and stood for one moment upright as they struck at the terrifying machine. They glittered in the sunlight. To ride the combine in the heat. The narcotic effect of it, the trance.

. . .

Her name was Red and of the many animals I knew in my childhood on the farm it is she that I still remember most vividly. We kept her for over ten years, during which time my brother and I took turns milking and feeding her in a barn my father had built especially for her. She had good blood in her and at the height of summer could give up to three or four gallons of milk a day. I can still feel the weight of the milk pail between my knees and see the thick foam of her milk falling sluggishly in the early morning light over its brim. But her most impressive feature was her horns. They were long and magnificent and the upward thrust of their sharp points made her majestic, primitive, and unapproachable, especially after she had sleeked and honed them on the bark of pine trees.

[from *The Red 3-in-1 Notebook* kept in the 1980s. The Finlay family owned a peanut and dairy farm outside Enterprise, Alabama.]

*

Keeping a journal is valuable. I'm beginning to understand why Johnson insisted upon it so.

[from *The Baton Rouge Diary*, 1980. See Finlay's two translations, in "*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*," pages 78 and 79, from the Latin verse of Samuel Johnson (1709-1784): "After Samuel Johnson's Latin Poem to Thomas Lawrence, M.D." and "After Samuel Johnson's *Summe Pater*."]

*

Be patient. Don't try to move heaven and hell. . . . Be a craftsman. Be careful.

[from *The Blue Horse Composition Notebook*, 1961-1966; opening entry in the earliest surviving diary, December 17, 1961]

. . .

1965. 1 had a dream about Heaven (not Heaven exactly, but that part of Purgatory which is nearest Heaven). At first I thought it was Claybank — but it changed — A garage in which there was a bottomless pit over which hung an apparatus like a crane — all the non-essential fell into it — The Space — green valley — tall, shady trees full of large flowers — azaleas, japonicas (big as the moon) invisible angels singing Alleluia; the sky that pale, gold blue before sunset; In the distance, banks & banks of marigolds; The Church; oil lamps instead of candles, girl acolytes; small church-light (circle) behind the altar came on when candles were lighted; Christ himself coming to church.

[Claybank is an old cemetery in Ozark, Alabama where members of Finlay's family are buried. His poem "At Claybank" is set in this cemetery. See "*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*," page 32.]

. . .

T.S. Eliot died night before last. Funeral services tomorrow on Epiphany—

. . .

On looking back over these notes, I am struck with the connection between a person's private life and his public art — I have been so thoroughly in agreement with Eliot, et al and their detachment, etc. until now . . .

. . .

Laurie's story: A Southerner went to live in N.Y. — in an apartment house — a little white coffin in the hallway — "Who is in the little coffin?" he asked everybody — No one knew — apathy — "I'm going back down South to find out who is in the coffin."

. . .

Met John Crowe Ransom today in Columbus: a kind of southern gentleman, who sort of looked like a retired Baptist preacher — *but what a poet!*

. . .

December, 1970. Ma and I saw the star that some think appeared at the birth of Christ. I had been unable to sleep and had gotten up to get some water. As soon as I had gotten to the sink, the star was the only thing I saw: tranquil, strong, intense and white. Ma said that it was "sincere" and went on to describe Judgment Day when those unfortunate ones who will be damned will "stay on this old earth and burn." She also said that the star made her feel as if the Nativity scene were a present reality.

— Enterprise, Alabama

[from a diary fragment. "Ma" is Mattie Coston Finlay (1887-1976), John Finlay's paternal grandmother.]

*

Easter, 1972. Corfu.

Easter was beautiful. But Easter Eve was more beautiful still.

. . . The whole town of Corfu darkened, millions of candles illuminating the night, the processionals, the hushed excitement just before the priest *shouts* CHRIST IS RISEN and then the shouts, screams, embracings and salutations with the whole island lit up with fireworks whose brief yet far-flung lights exhaust even all those candles. [A] ritual meal [follows] in each home. . . . This meal is eaten only after the midnight service and consists of the new wine, cheese and olives and a meat dish filled with the innards of a lamb slaughtered the day before— the lungs, brains, eyes, kidneys, liver — everything. It is a kind of sacrament. . . . the Greek religion is strangely both literal and mysterious at the same time.

. . .

July 2, 1972

Yesterday James . . . and I rented small, automatic scooters and rode to Kassiopi. We walked up to the fortress and then down to the beach. The path was steep and led to the rocks that sometimes had backs to them sharp as knives. We sat and listened to the waves. Albania was only a short distance away. The sun was hot and in the brown grass produced a haze almost narcotic in its effect. The fortress is Byzantine but only the walls (or part of the walls) are standing now. Nero supposedly danced there on one of his visits to Corfu. To think of the soldiers and ships once there, to realize its military importance and at the same time to see it turned into sheep pasturage with wild vines climbing up its walls is all very strange. The view from there is beautiful. As we went back to Corfu, freewheeling on the scooters, we suddenly came into view of the northern mountains towering above us. I saw them briefly and I also saw, again briefly, James make the sign of the cross and I heard him shout something I couldn't hear.

[from *The Green Corfu Diary*. Finlay spent much of 1972 on the Greek island of Corfu where he apparently supported himself by working as a picker in the olive groves and as a laborer in construction.]

*

Dec. 3, 1973

On the train ride from Luxembourg to Paris I shared an apartment with an American couple and a French girl who was returning from a year or so stay in the U.S. The cold was almost unbearable to my Southern blood. The snow covered the night. No sleep. Worn out, exhausted. One small French town after another, glimpsed at from the train. At one station I made out the letters of CHARLEVILLE and came to. Later the girl told me she didn't like Rimbaud. He was "too much," in the sense of "overwhelming." Once while in Florida she had to read *A Season in Hell* and couldn't take it. She herself was somewhat like Rimbaud ended up as: lonely, without settlement, irrational, child-like, open willingly to strange influence he couldn't control and didn't want to, even dirty. I liked her. When I told her good-bye at the Paris station, it seemed as if she were about to cry. (I might have imagined this.) Not for me, but because of something inherently and uncontrollably sad in herself that requires only the least provocation to surface and dominate. (Again, my imagination?) Why am I going on with this? I liked the details: my first train on French soil, the night, the snow, the girl, Rimbaud, Charleville accidentally, unexpectedly made out in the night, and, most importantly, Florida, which is almost my half-home. Rimbaud got a little closer to me. Through the girl, he had wandered through Florida.

. . .

Dec. 14, 1973

The small square in front of St. Sulpice gives one the impression of being in a provincial town, not a city like Paris. Again the sense of space, of allowing the buildings a chance to assume their own undisturbed proportions. This pleasure is heightened by the initial frustration of it: as you approach it from the side, through the smaller streets leading off St. Germain, the church is hemmed in and crowded against by surrounding buildings. But as you walk to the square, it opens up and the relief of finding the unhoped for space is overwhelming. The bottom row of columns is Doric; the upper row Ionic. I think I prefer the simpler Doric. As you walk across the square to the church the façade is an invitation to and a promise of majesty. The organ inside is famous. In the gray vistas of the marble lengths and heights, old women were walking

slowly to masses being celebrated here and there in its chapels. I said prayers in the Virgin chapel behind the main altar.

. . .

December 15; 1973.

An organ concert at St. Séverin, Paris.

We sat and then leaned on the marble floor, the steps going up to the chancel. People here and there were walking around and talking. They were mostly young, and, with their dates, couldn't be expected to pay much attention to the music. . . . But there were one or two serious, bearded boys sitting in isolation and being very intent on the music. It all seemed medieval to me. One of the side chapels was lit by several candles stuck in large red pots filled with sand. Above them was a painting of the Virgin that looked like a Greek icon. One or two old women, dressed in black, were leaning over the chairs in front of them and praying. From the dimly lit distance, they looked as if they had collapsed in the candlelight and had given themselves up to the Mother.

. . .

Dec. 19, 1973

I walked and walked today. I spent some time in Jeu de Paume, which houses the Impressionists. For so many of these paintings, distance is necessary for whatever appreciation you wish to give them; a close examination reveals the indistinctness, the vagueness, even sometimes the distortion, that I don't particularly admire. In some of them, one gets the eerie impression that you are watching the material world, reality itself, just at the point of evaporation and dissipation. Or that it is about to be done away with by millions of small concentrated dots and swarms, thick like glue, of warm, sweeping colors. Of course, not true of all of them. Van Gogh's self-portrait, though, is a good illustration of what I'm talking about. The surrounding pattern of thick, bright blue-green colors, that remind me of liquid flames (whatever they would be), seems to be locking in and engulfing the face. A kind of total subjectivity is being suggested. And the frightened, quietly desperate quality in his eyes, the sense of neurotic inability to grasp and feed on tangible reality, or to

make contact with another person, all this is a result of those thick swarms of paint that enclose the head. One way to get at what these painters were after is to notice what is not in any (or most) of their work: religion, man as a social being with certain obligations and responsibilities, human love, the human face, "normally" represented and illuminated by character, knowledge, moral virtues or vices. What is there, of course, is nature, the sense of being uncomplicatedly and amorally lost in the dream of sensualness. The trees, the herbs, the flowers, the weathers of the seasons permeate totally the ambiance of so many of these paintings. Before one of them, which one I've forgotten now, that had a view of some distant village hovering in the lush new growth of spring and the warm sunshine, I got a kind of brief throbbing sense of nostalgia for childhood and the life one leads during that period, along with a great desire to live as intensely and as long as I can. And in this emotion, it came to me (admittedly melodramatic) that Paris can stab the heart. So these painters are like so many of the French, English and American poets of the 19th and 20th centuries. It would be interesting to delve a little more deeply into their correspondences and likenesses.

Later on the way back to rue St. Jacques, I passed the "existentialist" cafe, Deux Magots. At the side of the cafe some students had a band going. They were playing circus-like, um-bah-bah music; others were dancing, some even in the street. One was so damn typically French: thin, short, and brought in the nose to a sharp, satirical point. His movements were like those of a puppet that knew the nonsense of it all and yet enjoyed showing off in it. By the way, the "existentialism" of these cafes along St. Germain, Deux Magots, Cafe de Flore, Brasserie Lipp, is very comfortable these days, well fed and full of affected, well-dressed people. Is this really where anxiety started?

[from *The Green Paris Diary*. Finlay spent the winter of 1973 living in Paris and working there at CBS as either a janitor or a receptionist].

*

[The following passages are selected from detailed notes on psychiatric patients in Bryce Hospital, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where Finlay briefly worked, answering the telephone, in 1974.

Compare his poem on some of these patients, "The Locked Wards," "*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*," page 102.]

The one who said she was God and was creating the world with her hands. For hours she would sit in a chair placed out of the way, with this intent, trance-like expression on her face, and slowly and seriously move her hands in a determined pattern that for her resulted in creation.

. . .

The older woman who gave me the drawing. How easily she would break down and cry, with her face grimaced and ugly, if someone had slighted her. Then in the same moment, it was all changed to curses and screams. She was crippled in one leg and consequently had some difficulty in walking. But this didn't stop her at all. The corridors were paced and the desire to find somewhere, in some corner or cell, the attention and love and respect she wanted in her child-like way, this was unappeased.

. . .

Their minds are arrested, stopped, paralyzed by incidents in their past from which they are unable to free themselves. Their minds, memories forever possessed by cruelty done to them; of such a ferocious and explosive nature that they cannot free themselves of it.

Though their bodies are frail, old, falling apart, yet the cruelty of demons, of past deprivations, of their protest against demons, "the evil brutal men have done to them," [cruelty] or energy drives them still, like puppets.

For most of these old women, the present does not exist. If you ask them what year it is, the answer will probably [be] either that they don't know or that it is twenty or thirty years removed from the present.

They are locked in a time during which they experienced the shock that led to their mental breakdown. That time and the people who populated it are their realities. The present is for other people. For them it doesn't exist.

. . .

You must make a Paris in your own mind.

[This brief statement reflects Finlay's resolve to go on with his literary work even in isolation on the family farm in south Alabama after his years on Corfu and in Paris, the latter of which he called, in a diary entry quoted above, "my intellectual home." See also his poem "Ovid in Exile" in "*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*," page 70.]

[from *The Orange Journal*, 1970s-1980s, back in America, but the journal itself—Vélin D'Angoulême—was purchased in Paris]

*

June 5, 1980. I can't sleep tonight. It's 2 in the morning. As soon as I turn the lights out, the demon (as I not too poetically call it) comes out. It's as if I am being watched and judged by some suspicious tyrant who thinks nothing of me; as if I am determined to do something which will merit his idle disgust. Locked inside his own perfection, he waits in grim satisfaction, knowing that any moment I will do something which will confirm his opinion of my sorriness. And how many times have I performed exactly to his bidding, how much of myself have I torn up and given this beast to eat! There are so many more fathers beside this one. St. Augustine has God the Father say to his creature, "*I want you to be*." This is the perfect father to whom I must bow.

. . .

June 10, 1980 . . . The health of the body, or rather the acceptance of the body, is an essential part of the moral life. Soul, body, and mind have to be in harmony with each other and with themselves, apart from the others. Benediction after mass moved me profoundly — the element of adoration, almost of an impersonal or supra-rational nature, is so absent today and yet still such a need of human nature, that when it does happen, such relief is experienced.

. . .

July, 1980

Physician of souls, heal my diseased mind, restore it to health, so that, in grace and with grace, I may accept thy Love of me and give in turn my love of Thee. Amen.

[from *The Baton Rouge Diary*, June-October 1980. This is the bleakest of Finlay's diaries. During 1980 Finlay was under great strain trying to finish his Ph.D. dissertation on Yvor Winters' "intellectual theism" while at the same time dealing with deeply troubling spiritual, emotional, family, and sexual issues.]

*

Notes for the Perfect Poem

1 It must be about the truth. It must give truth.

2 It must be literal, very literal.

3 It must be symbolic, very symbolic, but symbolic only in terms of its literal "base" or narrative, not in terms not growing out of this literal whatever you may call it.

4 It must be literal, very literal.

5 It must be clean and lean and have the supple, yet firm movement of pure muscle.

6 It must be of the physical world, have winter mornings, summer nights, stripped trees, creeks, smoke, smells, the reflection of a star in a bucket of water, etc. in it so that the reader will say, "Oh, yes, this is just the way it really is."

7 Yet it must also be abstract.

8 It must come from a man who is mature and has mastered himself so that he is calm in the good knowledge he has of our mystery, our language and history.

9 It must be rooted in a particular place.

10 It must be whole in its beautifully compelling demand that its reader engage his wholeness, both his intellect and his emotion.

11 It must be moral and cause the reader to make one of the three following statements: "I should and want to lead that kind of life." "I should not and do not want to lead that kind of life." "I should and want to have the patience to resign myself to these unavoidable facts about life."

12 It must have both the intensity of engagement and the detachment of judgment.

13 It must be fully realized in language.

14 It must be plain.

[from a journal kept in the 1970s. Note 2 is repeated as Note 4 for emphasis. This is one of two major statements of Finlay's poetics. The other statement, the Mary Roberts Rinehart Foundation proposal, may be found on pages 225-227 of "*With Constant Light*".]

*

He [Winters] held on to his "real beliefs" to the end and never compromised them. After "To the Holy Spirit" was written, his poetic career was all but finished; he had only three more short poems to write. The real work which remained for him to do was two books of criticism, *The Function of Criticism* and *Forms of Discovery*, and the anthology of short poems which he co-edited with Kenneth Fields, *Quest for Reality*. A great deal of *Forms of Discovery* was written while he was suffering from terminal cancer; in fact, close to the very end, he postponed an operation in order to finish the book. Donald Stanford has the best epitaph for him, which succinctly captures his peculiar combination of dignity and stubbornness. In the obituary notice which Stanford wrote for Winters in the *Southern Review*, Stanford quotes from a letter from a friend who had known Winters since his youth: "There never was anyone like Arthur [his name among his friends]. He got his work done and he died."

[the closing paragraph of Finlay's Ph.D. dissertation, pages 194-195. Yvor Winters' completion of his literary work just before his death may to some degree be compared to Finlay's life and work.]

*

John Finlay's final poem is "A Prayer to the Father." Finlay composed this poem wholly in his head and then dictated it to his sister Betty from his sickbed during the last year of his life. Finlay intended this poem to be his death poem, as indeed it turned out to be.

A Prayer to the Father

Death is not far from me. At times I crave
The peace I think that it will bring. Be brave,
I tell myself, for soon your pain will cease.
But terror still obtains when our long lease
On life ends at last. Body and soul,
Which fused together should make up one whole,
Suffered deprived as they are wrenched apart.
O God of love and power, hold still my heart
When death, that ancient awful fact appears;
Preserve my mind from all deranging fears,
And let me offer up my reason free
And where I thought, there see Thee perfectly.

Spring 1990

[from "*Dense Poems and Socratic Light": The Poetry of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991)* edited by David Middleton and John P. Doucet. Belmont, North Carolina: Wiseblood Books, 2020, page 94.]

*

II. Previously Unpublished Entries from the John Finlay Diaries

"The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the

ability to function." F. Scott Fitzgerald.

. . .

"Ceci, darling, I am about to lose my mind. I have been reading Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*."

. . .

The bare trees against a sky illuminated by the distant city's myriad neon lights. By the way, the trees stood in a graveyard.

. . .

One night we all went to the Cotton Patch. . . . I came back drunk & realized when I fell down on the bed drunk — "God, you are the only thing I have."

. . .

My fear of the world's coming to an end. At the woodpile at sunset (those red, lingering sunsets of winter). When I looked at the fire burning in the fireplace I was frightened. So this is how hell is going to be. . . .

. . .

Dec. 6, 1965. I had a dream, which, I think, was caused by the blood drive here at the University [of Alabama — Tuscaloosa] today (for the war in Vietnam), and, of course, other things. Denny Stadium was on fire; the top part looked like an apartment house. Black smoke. The sirens, the fire truck. I was having an argument with someone about the reality of blood. Blood, I said, was real only insofar as it partook of the reality of the Blood. There was somewhere a black or grey cross — the blood was seeping into the black or grey earth. Allen Tate was somewhere in it. Where, I don't know.

. . .

A poem — the ghost of Daniel Boone rejected by both Heaven and Hell and wandering America — the Natchez Trace brought this to my mind (when O.B. Emerson, Marvin Weaver and I

went over to Jackson, Miss. to interview Eudora Welty). Why do Americans travel so much? And don't like the silence?

. . .

I rowed Jimmy Colquit over the river. He was drunk and liked to look at those shadows on the other side of the river, which always retreated or vanished when we approached them. Jimmy said, "Maybe your guy Plato is right." Later when I commented on those stars, he said, "They might be beautiful to you, because you have your religion, but they are terrifying to me."

[Compare Finlay's early poem "The Voyage" in "*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*": *The Poetry of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991)*, pages 138-139.]

. . .

"Always seek the hard, definite, personal word." T.E. Hulme.

. . .

The epitaph of Walter Reynolds near Mount Ida (Talladega, Ala.) "Whether curiosity or affection shall lead you to this spot, and whether friends or strangers shall trace these lines: yet let this solemn impression rest in your mind and deeply impress the heart: This is the work of death! This is the end which awaits all the living, and you, too, must die!"

. . .

Yvor Winters . . . said all this modern insistence on POV [point of view], etc. was wrong. What he wants is the mature, reasoned reflections of the author; "universal" wisdom instead of eccentric, individual ejaculations. Perhaps he is right. Who knows?

[Yvor Winters (1900-1968), American poet and critic, who, along with southern poet and critic Allen Tate (1899-1979), had the greatest literary influence on Finlay]

. . .

Ginko tree: *Alabama Journal*, Nov. 29, 1963. Chinese consider the tree sacred and planted it around their temples, "a living fossil," oldest thing on earth from [the] point of view of change. (And they are here at the University.)

. . .

Ma: "I've prayed for you. Don't know if it got beyond the ceiling though."

. . .

Ma: "Now don't tell anybody this. I could be prosecuted."

. . .

Holy Saturday Mama and I carried flowers out to Claybank to put on the graves. Wisterias, moss, honeysuckle, bridal wreath, japonicas — our remembrance of [the] dead only flowers that wilt up in an hour or so — while Christ in the grave will make them good.

. . .

Life is now inexpressible to me. I am drunk. It is Saturday night. That is, Sunday morning, December 12, 1964 (the 3rd Sunday of Advent.)

. . .

I want to write a poem on the Ginko tree — beginning with this sense of frustration and fragmentation I have lived under for the last four weeks, then working into the tree all its suggestions of ancient China, [complete] serenity, etc. — then at last, resolve to look up to the tree as a meeting place for Heaven and Earth.

. . .

East German Christians singing around the car of a visiting bishop: "Tomorrow we must suffer the consequences but tonight we must sing."

. . .

Ma's telling about Moses in the Wilderness: "You know sometimes I think I'm in that Wilderness all the time." Laughing at the Bible: "I am going to be punished for that someday." "I'm going to get down on my knees and ask God to reveal it to me: 'Moses begat Jacob . . . etc.'"

. . .

Fall — the dust, the yellow butterflies, sandspurs, cockleburs, the sun, the clear quiet air around sundown, the days shortening, harvesting and work, sweat, the quietness and loneliness of the country, the leaves turning, falling and drifting — scuppernongs fat and rotting on the vine — "The world is a dream, and we are harvested by death" — at the last — "Do not think what this land can produce." Gather out the little harvest, etc.

. . .

The Use of Mythology in Recent Fiction — In the paper on K.A. Porter "She did not mistake the myth for the reality" — And a little later on we have this — "The myth is just another kind of reality." — Of course this leads to the question of Belief in Poetry — Truth vs. Beauty, etc. — and the failure of modern poetry. No "framework." Nothing yet comparable to the Christian synthesis, which they want to use now only for decorative purposes: Why this is not possible — Christianity is too historical: The Incarnation: Either A Lie, a Falsehood or else the Truth — No alternative — No vague, poetic middle way — when so used the results shallow, tentative, lacking conviction or intensity which is necessary to art. Modern literature's "flirtation" with Christianity only the Doctrine of Original Sin the one theory they can somehow get to work functionally to make convincing — and this gives only *one* segment of human life — it is the preliminary to the others — The Incarnation.

[from the *Blue Horse Composition Notebook* (1961-1966)]

*

Tate [said that] he wrote the first sentence of *The Fathers* 75 times. Mr. Lytle said that 3 paragraphs a day are *quite* a lot for him.

[*The Fathers* — published in 1938 — is Allen Tate's only novel.]

Mr. Lytle: "If only we had a civilization." "The artist today has to build their [*sic*] own world.

Tate at one time was offered the editorship of the "Books" in *Time* but refused, because he didn't think it was fitting, etc.

Later Mr. Lytle 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.

[From Notes in a Visit with Allen Tate and Andrew Lytle at Mr. Lytle's House The Log Cabin, Monteagle, Tennessee (March 11, 12, 1967)]

*

September 23, 1967. Jeannie Robison & I went out to Fred and Charlotte Blackburn's for dinner and a party. For part of the time we listened to the Alabama-FSU football game (37-37 — a great disappointment). Mrs. Barron (Charlotte's mother) started talking about Alabama football in the old days. She was living in Birmingham when Alabama first played in the Rose Bowl. No television. No radio broadcast. Everyone went down to the *News* to find out the score. The streets were all littered with cars. Winter. Someone (who is dead now, of course) every once in a while would come to the window and shout down the score. Another time after a fierce Alabama-Tennessee game (an Alabama victory) a special coach was arranged for the Alabama team going from Knoxville back home. Mrs. Barron was in the other part of the train. The team raised so much hell that the windows were broken out. Winter. By the time they got to Birmingham the happy drunken crew was cold and sober.

Fred, Charlotte, and Mrs. B. had a great argument about the War Between the States. Things got too heated and personal. "You've insulted the South. I'm going home." Mrs. Barron said one time. We were defending the South though.

*

March 17, 1968 in Montevallo. Our first spring day, and the strange longing it awakens in me. I think of those March sunsets at home, and the green oat fields.

The Browns came over from Marion for the day. We all went out to the foundry, the old Confederate one, most of which the Yankees burned. One furnace is still standing though, and a tunnel goes from one end to the other. Inside, the earth is black and packed down and very cool. Later in the spring honeysuckle vines will cover the entrances and make it even cooler. It is hard to imagine a place of fire.

*

[1968]

A poem on Yvor Winters — the modern absolutist who isn't a Christian.

The bare notes:

1. Coldly you analyzed
   The rampant poetry
   Of yelps and scorned its side Which is carefree
   Of relativity.

2. What men in madness think they know

3. You needed God to make an absolute
   But became shamed through pride?, etc.
   And dismissed him (nostalgia)

4. The disdain for nostalgic needs

5. And what did it reveal?
   Irrelevance and death and multiplied

6. Heretical nobility. And yet I praise you.

*

Notes for a Poem (1968)

"For Friends"

The wood was stuck together tight in ice
And by the time we had it pulled apart
Our hands were raw and numb. *We'll need something*
More than oak logs to burn the night through.
Far away down through the black trees we saw
The sun weakened and brought low in the west.
It was finished. Night would have it now
And the sleet and the tighter warp of ice.

May 11, 1970

the seeds are appearing on the cedar trees — from a distance they look like a sprinkling of grayish green snow scattered over the entire tree. Also — now is the time for honeysuckle — it is everywhere . . . over fences, up trees, down gullies, into rose bushes. The air is thick with it. And the magnolias are blooming.

*

"The task of the civilized intelligence is one of perpetual salvage." Allen Tate.

*

The time: the summer of 1970, that dreadful summer at the end of which I left Montevallo. Perhaps a poem about a modern novelist (or poet?) who affects a kind of existential anguish, which, in turn, is really nothing more than anger at people's neglect of his "genius." Pride and ignorance are what rule his life. (Remember that one time said he really had no need of God, and that he had said it so casually.) He gives a party, the occasion being the publication of his first novel. It turns into a drunken mess. He dominates everything with his vulgarities, shouts, cries, curses and prideful boastings. I stay and listen into the morning which breaks outside pale blue and grey and which reveals the intractable, multitudinous world of objectivity, full of crisis, demands, etc., that call for all of our human intelligence. My anger and (really) hate for the novelist is changed to pity

when I realize how ill-prepared he is for this world, how far from the truth he is which would enable him to meet those problems with some dignity, and how pathetic he will eventually end up. *Suicide*. I leave him passed out with a mock-serious expression on his face, as if he were now concentrating totally upon himself. Get across the idea of an intellectual and spiritual death. The whole poem should be an attack upon instinctualism based upon a pride which will not allow a person to recognize the fact that he needs something else, etc. And solipsism and secularism. Details: the littered living room with empty or half-filled glasses around, heavy cigarette smoke, talk, talk, talk, the affectation & worship of youth, the red splotches on his face, the sprinkling of grey hairs & OTHERS. The meter: iambic pentameter — the form: heroic couplets.

[Compare Finlay's poem "A Portrait of a Modern Artist" in "*Dense Poems and Socratic Light": The Poetry of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991)*, page 101.]

*

[Notes for a Poem]:

Towards the end (or at the end) bring in the idea that the initial act is one of charity or love and that the whole work of the mind (if it has any worthy) is derived from the desire to understand the circumstance favorable to that act. Perhaps the last word of the poem should be "love" or "charity." . . . the realization of 2 realities on the part of "innocence": (1) death & (2) the essentially alien human position in a beautiful yet indifferent (to human values, that is) nature, and, as a consequence, the formation of the critical intelligence to protect those values — the source, the end of intellect is disinterested "charity" — the justification of knowledge is the humanity (in the fullest sense) it provides.

[*Miscellaneous Entries from the Diaries and Other Sources*]

*

Tulip tree at the corner of the Cullens' front porch. A japonica

close to the edge of the porch, also a pittosporum (the same that curved around the corner of Mama's with exposed trunks that looked like the muscled arms of a minor god, deity), some vines (clematis?) Confederate jasmine?), Lady Banks rose tangled up in the fence. A ginkgo tree further back near Laurie's room. One palm tree. A grove of pecans trees in the side yard with rich green St. Augustine grass.

[Mama — or MaMa — was Finlay's maternal grandmother, Toxie Ard Sorrell [1891-1971.]

. . .

Laurie: "How do you expect me to believe in God? Look at what the Germans did to the Jews. Look what the Yankees did to *us*."

[Laurie is Annie Laurie Cullens (d. January 17, 1984, age 90 — a well-read family friend of the Finlay family who had a great impact on John Finlay as a man of letters.]

. . .

"Annie LAU-rie," Jim said, pausing and emphasizing then first syllable of [the] second name in that malicious way, that way full of meaning, that only Southerners know how to do, "I don't know why you look up those words. You'll be dead soon and can't use 'em."

. . .

I've just returned from a trip to Ozark [Alabama]. Great argument between Laurie and Helen. Just out of the clear blue Helen darts at Laurie: "Well, I'll tell you who *I* don't like — Robert E. Lee. He sent all those boys needlessly to die in the last battle, when it was all over anyway." Laurie: "But Gettysburg was not the last battle." Another argument over the plants belonging to [the] nightshade family such as tomatoes, squash, eggplants, etc. and whether or not they caused arthritis. Helen also furious with Laurie for telling me Aunt Kate had had a heart attack. Later Laurie said to me in her plaintive and emphatic tone: "Why don't they let her go on and *go*?"

David Middleton

[from the *Green Penway Journal* (kept in the 1980*s*)

*

[Three drafts of the poem "At Kalámai"]

[untitled]

Clean bones in green weeds
Are what the sea can know.
Beyond ourselves it lies
And whores with no shame.
The brown peninsulas.
Quiet night-roofs glimmer
In the cobalt haze,
Give out to the moon.
It can never have enough.
What dream have you turned in
That what I kiss is salt?
Lie silent in these sheets.

Nightpiece

Bones in cold weeds
Are what the sea can know.
All night ~~she~~ it waited outside
The room and you beside me
Asleep in the small space.
~~Her~~ Its drawn reaches glimmer
In the cobalt haze,
Gave out unto the moon.
~~She~~ It could never be enough.
What dream were you turning in
That what I kissed was salt,
Lay silent in those sheets?

[untitled]

Bones in ~~green~~ cold weeds
Are what the sea can know.
All night it stood outside
The window and you beside me.
Deep nightroofs glimmered
In the cobalt haze.,
Gave out unto the moon.
They could never be enough.
What dream did you turn in
That what I kissed was salt,
Lay silent in those sheets?

Corfu, July 7, 1972

[from *The Green Corfu Diary* (1972)

*

The final version of this poem is in "*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*": *The Poetry of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991)*, page 96:

At Kalámai

Bones in cold weeds
Are what the sea can know.
All night it waited
outside the house,
you beside me sleeping.
Towards dawn it turned.
The waves crashed
Into the cobalt haze,
gave out unto the moon.
They never were enough.
What dream were you turning in
that what I kissed was salt,
lay silent in those sheets?

*

Dec. 14, 1973

Walking back through the labyrinth of narrow winding streets, at every open space, there was Nôtre Dame facing us in the rain, in the drizzled illumination of its quiet, yet powerful, beauty.

. . .

I walked completely around the Ile St. Louis looking for a house with a plaque on it that would tell me if Baudelaire lived there. But I couldn't find it. Later I discovered that he lived off 17 Quai d'Anjou in 3 rooms on the top floor, which he rented. The year, 1849; the house, the "magnificent" Hotel de Lauzun. And their Hashish-Eaters Club met in the second story salon. (Speaking of residences, etc., Katherine Anne Porter lived in Rue Nôtre Dame des Champs; Pascal and Racine are buried in the same Lady Chapel of St. Etienne du Mont (which is close to [the] Pantheon); St. Thomas Aquinas and Albert the Great once taught at a Dominican convent that once stood at 14 rue Soufflot (which leads off St. Michel). There's not much to say about the St. Louis. Quiet, crowded with houses, hotels, that I think were formerly where some of the nobility lived, no open spaces. But it does afford some magnificent views of Nôtre Dame and the Left Bank, particularly the Pantheon whose dome I found, unexpectedly enough, to dominate the whole quarter.

. . .

Dec. 17, 1973

After a long, bitterly cold walk through the Flea Market, rows and booths of trivia and old, pathetic things, the best meal so far. James and I (Janick continued shopping) went into a rather big restaurant that had a kind of low life, circus atmosphere about it that reminded me of Rimbaud. A very high ceiling, tall windows that let in plenty of light, a lot of workers and peasants, a couple, middle-aged, in front of us, embracing, kissing and caressing each other. The meal: *moule* in an onion-like soup, hot *frites*, cold beer with a head of thick foam on it. French bread that we sopped in the onion soup. Our waitress had on a tight, bright yellow T-shirt and the biggest, proudest pair of boobs I've ever seen. After dinner we sat and talked in the lazy drifts of our cigarette smoke, and basked like comfortable, full-bellied animals in the warm sun.

And I mean it was cold outside!

. . .

Dec. 20, 1973

Not much today. I stayed home and studied, read and wrote. James and I went out to get a takeout order of steak and *frites*. At the "restaurant" close to St. Julien, a beggar was at the open window, saying something to its cook. James later said that he would have given him a five franc but that French beggars are too proud to accept handouts.

[from *The Green Paris Diary* (1973)]

*

June 5, 1980

Freud's insight about the internalization of the father's condemnation. Allen Tate's line: "What, shall we set up the grave in the house, the ravenous grave?"

[Finlay is recalling from memory lines from Allen Tate's poem "Ode to the Confederate Dead." Tate's lines actually read:

What shall we say who have knowledge
Carried to the heart? Shall we take the act
To the grave? Shall we, more hopeful, set up the grave
In the house? The ravenous grave?]

. . .

June 6, 1980

Saturday night, a little after midnight. A party at Karen Wheatley's. I'm now half drunk on warm beer, and hot as hell. It's summer now in Baton Rouge. One day I shall be dead. Startling fact I don't often think about. The demon is still here with me. Envy is a sin. A sin is an offense against God and against our own nature. It prevents that nature from realizing itself. I envy strong people who don't need the approval of others. And

I'm tired of talking about all this. I'm ashamed of it. Will we ever (will *I* ever) be freed of the bondage of the psychological? Will I spend my life asking these questions, making these statements? I wish so much for sleep now. Soundless, dreamless sleep, deep, buried quiet. All the tissues healing, the wounds closing up, and flesh and mind becoming whole again. I feel this is going to be a rough night. God help me.

. . .

June 10, 1980.

First sentence of "novel-memoirs": "All the people I am going to write about are now dead." Some of them I never saw, but only heard about from . . . ." Later: the thought struck recently that I live among the dead. "Where nothing can be other than it was." Fixed and unchangeable, yet how it is changed in the mind. I often think of Claybank, the graves under the weather. Rain and wind all night, the sunlight at noon. . . .

[Compare Finlay's poem "The Wide Porch" in "*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*": *The Poetry of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991*), page 31. The first line of that poem is "Where nothing can be other than it was." Also see the poem "At Claybank" on page 32 of the same volume.]

. . .

June 10, 1980 (around midnight)

No demon right now. It's been a good day. I starting 3rd chapter of the dissertation, continued exercising, went to evening Mass, did some sunbathing and swimming earlier. A few minutes ago I walked up to an all-night store, bought a quart of beer, and walked back, feeling tired and good. The health of the body, or rather the acceptance of the body, is an essential part of the moral life. Soul, body, and mind have to be in harmony with each other and with themselves, apart from the others. Benediction after Mass moved me profoundly — the element of adoration, almost of an impersonal or supra-personal nature, is so absent today and yet still such a need of human nature, that when it does happen, such relief is experienced.

. . .

June 29, 1980

From Gilson's *Heloise and Abelard*: "Its heroes [i.e., Heloise and Abelard) observe themselves, and analyze themselves as only Christian consciences fallen prey to passions can do it."

. . .

Sept. 10, 1980

An important discovery for me. I've been reading Plato's *Republic* and thinking about the differences he saw between *images* and what we can call *logos*. Today I came home disturbed, nervous, and uncertain of what I would do tonight. I've been imaging all sorts of scenes, crazily enough, about students and classes, all of which cause me profound psychic discomfort, even pain. The scenes either concern a rebellious child who is upsetting a parent nervously . . . [to] the point of condemnation and reprimand and punishment, or about a male (vestiges of the old father or someone approved of and standing in for the father) who jeeringly condemns me or silently lets me know that he knows what I am. I decided to stop it. I lay down and in the bed I deliberately began a sustained discourse (the *logos*) made up of complete sentences, which defined, analyzed, explained and understood the situation. (All this done silently in my head.) At once the random violence of imaging activity ceased; a peace and a calmness enter my soul; I felt purged, whole, a master of the problem. In fact, it was nearly impossible to "imagine" the other kind of mental activity. It seemed that the two states are as incompatible and "ruling out" as dryness and wetness. I then realize the other state — let's call it the primitive child — depends upon images which it is *forced* to see or upon voices, coming from the outside, which it is also forced against its will to hear, and that it is incapable of speech, of complete sentences, of sustained discourse. It is on the other hand a victim and the emotional effects it feels — very noticeable and apparent effects — are centered around fear, and its resists, protests and cries out. The images, it should be noted, are random, unconnected, and invested with a dumb built-in symbolic meaning which it refuses to articulate itself. A sure sign of the irrational: images, and incapacity for speech, for *logos*; something that causes fear;

something heard and seen, not thought, and not coming from the self. When the *logos* speaks: there are no images as such and the whole self speaks and says "I," not "you."

[from the *Baton Rouge Diary* (June-October 1980)]

*

Dec. 24, 1973. Christmas Eve . . . . On the Metro or rather in the stations underground, I got my first glimpse of Metro life. There were "hippies" singing and begging for money. One old woman who, I think, was drunk beyond consciousness, was pathetically trying to sleep on crumpled-up bags and old clothes which were piled up on the Metro bench. No position suited her. One hand was extended and it moved awfully here and there, making meaningless gestures. Her cold poverty and discomfort were overwhelming. Once she turned over and in the full glare of the electric light, with her eyes closed and her lips moving silently, she made or rather tried to make the sign of the cross. Later, after the party, a small group of us went to Midnight Mass at St. Germain l'Auxerrois, which featured Gregorian music. It was the bells of this church which gave the signal for the massacre of St. Bartholomew. And on the second Sunday of every month, a mass is celebrated for the souls of departed poets.

[from *The Green Paris Diary* (1973)]

*

Note: I wish to thank Joshua Hren, Editor-in-Chief of Wiseblood Books, for permission to reprint diary entries and other material from "*With Constant Light*"*: The Collected Essays and Reviews With Selections from the Diaries and Other Prose of John Martin Finlay 1941-1991*, edited by David Middleton and John P. Doucet, Belmont, North Carolina: Wiseblood Books, 2020) and from "*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*"*: The Poetry of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991*), edited by David Middleton and John P. Doucet. Belmont, North Carolina: Wiseblood Books, 2020).

David Middleton
Literary Executor for John Martin Finlay
Thanksgiving 2023