

Robert Bell's *The Butterfly Tree*: Universals at Home

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Once when I was a harum-scarum child, curious and constantly bumping into trouble, a yellow Alabama butterfly lit on my finger with a gentle grasp and flattered me with slowly pulsating wings as I were a substantial but mere idling point of the air. Though I was a bit startled, I watched it with growing familiarity until it lifted off again and eventually wafted a distant goodbye that was as far from final as breathing. My more mature experience has been much the same with Robert Bell's *The Butterfly Tree*, a novel by an Alabamian about a special region of Alabama. The evocations persist.

Published in 1959 by Lippincott, the work is currently reprinted by the University of Alabama Press in The Library of Alabama Classics series—and it still demonstrates that a writer may be born and reared in one section of a state but find immediate inspiration to creativity in another section. No doubt the contrasting newness of locale and personalities has much to do with it, but it is really the artist's full experience that accounts for the universal qualities that inhabit and vitalize the poetry, characters, and themes of an original achievement like *The Butterfly Tree*.

Growing up in Tarrant City, located in the ridge-and-valley region of upper mid-Alabama, Bell was in mountain country. Nearby to the southeast the flatness of Jones Valley was expansive enough for the Birmingham Municipal Airport, but to the north Sand Mountain stretched through small towns surrounded by large rural areas. A short distance south the highly industrial city of Birmingham was flanked by Red Mountain and Shades Mountain. It was a fitting geography to match the heights of boyhood experience.

Although not recognized as such at the time, an early influential and repeated high point for a writer-to-be was his mother's reading to him and his two brothers and her firing their imagination by telling stories of her own making. Such reliance on the power of oral words for a child to visualize things found a natural extension in listening to the radio well before the coming of television. It was almost entirely the spoken word that gave life to programs like *Let's Pretend*, *Bob Hope*, and *Lux Radio Theatre*.

But then there was the glorious Imperial Theater in Tarrant City where young Bell eagerly attended movies at every possible opportunity. Except during the polio epidemic of the mid-1930s when many children were kept from most public gatherings, he basked in uncountable Saturday westerns wherein the word (though still important) gave first place to the visual and the narratives depended on well-recognized characters such as Tom Mix, Buck Jones, Ken Maynard, Gene Autry, and Hopalong Cassidy. Suspense was resolved in these shows every weekend, but not in the serials, those continuing movies that left a viewer hanging with question and wonder from one weekly episode to another. In contrast the program would begin with an animated cartoon, a relaxing short piece of comic relief based on action within a tight but simple narrative structure and anchored in familiarity by the imaginary likes of Bugs Bunny and Roadrunner. During the week mystery movies about detective Charlie Chan and others called for close scrutiny of things, people, and events.

Though the fictional settings were almost entirely in a romantic elsewhere, Bell's contact with storytelling was nonetheless a blended Alabama one, beginning with family reliance on spoken words and broadening toward emphasis on plot, character, and attention to detail. It is no surprise, then, that he literally read every book in the children's department of the Tarrant City Public Library by the time he was thirteen and that in junior high school he decided he wanted to be a writer.

He began developing great sagas but could never get past the first chapters. In his senior year at Birmingham's Phillips High School, however, he completed a long, gloomy story about Viking brothers who fell in love only to learn that the girl was their sister. Afterwards at Birmingham-Southern College, he

continued writing with the encouragement of his advisor and freshman composition professor, Richebourg McWilliams, a learned man who became a lasting and major influence, for Bell finished his degree there although he had relocated with his family to Fairhope on Mobile Bay in 1947.

Compared to the ridge-and-valley country, the land around Fairhope was flat with many trees, undergrowth, and vines of a semitropical nature, all of it saturated with the furtiveness of small life. The shoreline was a sequence of coves, beaches, gullies, marshes, and red cliffs that permit Alabama to claim possession of the highest seacoast point in the eastern United States. It was a region of definitive summer heat and humidity, of hurricanes and gully-washing rains, and of surprises in the continued history and culture of its people.

After localities in four other states were considered, the rural Alabama site was settled as the Fairhope Single-tax Colony in 1894 largely because the search committee had appreciated "the Gulf Breeze in its purity" and "the health giving aroma of the pine trees" (Alyea 25). These colonists were individualists and reformers who respected individuality in others. Their varied origins and intellectual interests established from the beginning a cultural atmosphere of friendliness and rural cosmopolitanism, reflected in 1907 by the founding of the innovative School of Organic Education. And time brought others: farmers, shopkeepers, naturalists, summer-home owners, repeat tourists, writers and other types of artists who could work without fear of interruption. An inhabitant could know many in the developing town and country without ever meeting someone who lived just around the corner, for privacy was automatically honored while public and personal contact was welcomed at the beach, barber shop, exhibit, or theater. Even the wharf jutting toward Mobile across the bay equitably invited solitary walks or meetings with gulls and people.

It was this newness of flat land and well-rounded, fascinating characters that Bell came to know in the second half of the 1940s and the first half of the 1950s. These potential elements for a novel, of course, required accretion and sharpening of skill, which came during marvelous year of M.A. work on a fellowship at Harvard in 1950-51. He studied hard for some of the best known scholars and writers of the time such as Douglas

Bush, Howard Mumford Jones, and Kenneth Kempton, in whose writing class he completed what would become his first published story. When he returned to Fairhope, he developed old and new friendships while employed at night as reference librarian for the Mobile Public Library. In the summers he pursued a degree in library science at Columbia and LSU. Then one autumn morning while crossing the bay causeway to work, he was so caught by the clustering thousands of monarch butterflies on their seasonal migration south that he began a new short story which outgrew itself into the beginnings of a novel.

Still, because of writer's block and other concerns, the narrative would not develop until after he moved in 1955 to Fort Worth as assistant director of the Public Library. New encouraging friends, ambition, and nostalgia combined so well that by late 1957 the completed manuscript was accepted by a New York agent and afterwards by Lippincott editor Lynn Carrick as a virtuoso performance by a talented writer. That evaluation ran true when, after some revision, *The Butterfly Tree* was published in the spring of 1959.

His fictional town of Moss Bayou is patterned on the real community of Fairhope, and Mobile is simply itself; but Bell and his main character, Peter Abbott, sense the poetry in reality, even in the ordinary. It is evoked in the wistful place names proclaimed in the boarding call at a bus station. A breeze will stir the trees, "shifting the day to new meanings" (Bell 18). The moon above the pines makes "cut-glass of their needles" (23). Spanish moss is "like the beards of old men whispering together that winter will come" (73). Eulacie's singing voice is "a cotton-patch contralto" (85-86). And Eulacie herself can pin down a neat critical figure of speech about her little daughter, Miss Em-majean, with the aptness of experience: "'I can't leave a can of beer around for five minutes she ain't inhaled it'" (83). Figurative language and the mood of poetry invite the reader to linger and relish.

And to learn, for Bell knows that a novel demands more than poetry. Although some of the characters are eccentrics and all are well individualized, from one point of view they also represent universals. The central character, Peter Abbott, is an initiate, an inquirer involved in a transition time that he has not particularly sought or anticipated. Miss Billy, his aunt with

whom he has come to live while attending college in Mobile, is delightfully off center as the imaginative, with echoes of the magical; to a good extent she is, in her own phrase, a wise fool. Naturalist Margaret Claverly is the scientific, quirkily devoted to her field work and collections. Eulacie is the realistic, bluntly down-to-earth with her speech, her actions, and her reactions. Along with nature and perhaps Miss Claverly's bloodhounds, Miss Emmajean is the elemental, always underfoot, going her instinctive way. Karl Heppler comes through as beauty-and-brains, godlike in his observations, his opportune appearances, and his physique; but he proves to have a tragic mortal incompleteness. As an ominously sybaritic character who is a proudly artistic mortician, Edward Bloodgood stands for patient and smooth predatory evil, commenting that grave flowers prove that beauty, like death, is inevitable.

Each of these personalities is nonetheless an unique character in his or her own right, and their speech vibrates as convincingly true, even that of the two who wax philosophical at the drop of a hello. It is primarily as concrete human beings that Peter comes to love (or at least appreciate to the verge of love) all of these new acquaintances. Four of them have learned, from different unusual strangers, the legend of the butterfly tree, and each is apparently unaware of the others' knowledge. However, each tells the legend to Peter, who goes along on fruitless searches for the tree. By the time he independently encounters a butterfly tree, he has learned a great deal from and about these friends and therefore about himself. When he excitedly reports his discovery, he has more to learn about the limits of identification with others and about reliance on one's self.

This theme of identity can be very helpful in placing *The Butterfly Tree* in the mainstream of its time and also in demonstrating that it is nonetheless an Alabama novel.

When Alfred Kazin published *On Native Grounds* in 1942, he judged the most singular fact about modern American writing to be that the authors were absorbed in all details of their American world but at the same time were deeply and subtly alienated from that world. As anthologies of American literature have pointed out, through the 1960s this sense of alienation often progressed creatively into the theme of individual identity.

But it was far from being a new theme in American writing.

Edgar Allan Poe fictionalized it through the concept of an alter ego in "William Wilson." Ralph Waldo Emerson urged it as Man Thinking in "The American Scholar." And Walt Whitman flourished it even in his titles like "One's-Self I Sing," "Spontaneous Me," "Myself and Mine," and "Song of Myself," that vast encompassment of individual and democratic identity. By the middle decades of the twentieth century, the theme was as Americanized as the theme of innocence and initiation or the muckraking theme of corruption in business and officialdom.

What was different about the fictional treatment of those decades was twofold: the intense changes in the American world and a consequent about-face in exploring the theme. From the mid-40s through the 1960s the sense of alienation was reinforced by overwhelming developments (the Cold War, the hydrogen bomb, greater mobility and displacement of the population) and by a perceived cultural dilution in the trend of regional and ethnic differences toward a convergent sameness. It is no wonder that the new philosophy of existentialism took hold on this side of the Atlantic when Jean-Paul Sartre and others asserted that man in this absurd world is what he conceives himself to be and also what he wills himself to be. The idea that man is condemned every moment to invent man is a clear but (in detail) complex answer to the question of individual identity. How in narrative form is a writer going to depict man inventing himself? Shades of Poe! He does it by letting a character encounter himself eventfully through other things and people. Since it is no longer convincingly possible simply to declare identity (a constantly changing concept anyway), the stance of Emerson and Whitman will not suffice. Instead, fragmentally misplaced in an overwhelming modern American world, a character goes (or finds himself) in pursuit of his identity. Search has replaced declaration—and that is to say that the only truth declarable about identity is the search and perhaps the encounters.

Some brief comparisons will illustrate that *The Butterfly Tree* is within this thematic mainstream but is singular in its treatment and locale.

Like Truman Capote's protagonist Joel in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* of 1948, Peter Abbott is circumstanced into a new place by family conditions, not by a conscious need to find his identity. Both characters encounter mystery to be responded to, but their

divergences lie not just in their difference in age (Joel is 13, Peter 20) nor in their degrees of innocence. Joel becomes involved in the enigma of unhealthy people burdened by the past and caught in stasis, while Peter less quickly learns that newly-met people of easy but vital energy unknowingly share a mysterious legend from their past which they are willing to confide to Peter, identifying him with the earlier revealers of the legend. Following the death of the mule at the isolated, sagging Cloud Hotel, Joel whoops the next morning with the joy of life, "I am me"; then after seeing that Cousin Randolph is nothing but a helpless adult zero who literally has to be steered home through the woods, Joel realizes that he himself has succeeded to the identity of maturity. On the other hand, Peter, who is an adult throughout, identifies with the believing searchers for the butterfly tree even though he is a doubter. Ultimately he has to confront his identity as a doubter who must find his own thing to believe in.

Capote has told us that his setting of Noon City and rural Skully's Landing is based on where he once lived in Alabama, and yet it could be almost any non-coastal, deep-South small town and country. It strikes me forcefully as being broadly representative rather than particular. Bell's locale, however, is beyond quibble the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay, as definite as a name on a map in its delineation of flora, fauna, and geography. It could be only this one area in Alabama.

In diametrical contrast, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) is set everywhere, from coast to coast and border to border (once even beyond in Mexico). Rather than a spot on a map, the ever-moving scene is the whole map, trying and failing to capture the sense of a whole nation, failing because there is something more than seediness to be found in a land. The subject of alienation is not nearly so well focused and executed as in, say, Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* (1952); but the novel, for a time, was so popular and influential with the so-called "beat" generation that it is worthwhile even now to note how the theme of identity can be enlivened with the aromatic fascination of three-day-old sweat.

Although Sal Paradise is the central intelligence of Kerouac's volume, Sal's and the book's focus is on Dean Moriarty, a quester who by-and-large does not know what his is seeking. For ex-

ample, he arrives in New York from Colorado and just has to meet Sal because, incredibly, he wants to be a writer. At the same time he asks another character to teach him "all about Nietzsche and all the wonderful intellectual things that Chad knew" (Kerouac 5). Now, Dean can complete a simple oral sentence about something he has done, but he is never even pseudointellectual enough to express his ideas beyond an anacoluthic gibberish. He is too busy flitting around the country, dragging others like Sal with him and trying to "dig" everything and everybody in sight. Sporadically he looks for his wastrel father but symptomatically never finds him. He applies to everything the wild Whitmanesque affirmation of "Yass, yass" but lacks the Whitmanesque commitment to anything except the mad exhilaration of the moment. Essence, however, is made of more than just moments, and Dean never gains insight into what he really is: a semiliterate, romantic bum. Only the reader (and possibly Sal) can see that identity has been reduced to a blur of sub-dilettantish movement.

In *The Butterfly Tree*, Robert Bell's Peter Abbott, of course, is involved in movement and moments. He has left Birmingham to come to Moss Bayou, where there is plenty of local movement for him. Yet he can pause to reason out or poetize his moments, some of which are quite exciting (in a hurricane, at a carnival, during Mardi Gras). When the occasion is right, he has the good sense simply to let things happen to him. In spite of the unusual characters and events in his life, his experience is far more within the range of the mainstream population of his time than is that of Dean—and even more so than that of the title character of Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, which was published the same year as *The Butterfly Tree*.

Brilliantly seriocomic and inventive, Bellow's novel is a thematic tour de force if there ever was one. As a hereditary millionaire with an inner voice demanding "I want, I want" (Bellow 13 and passim), Henderson believes that he is part of an age of madness, that his failures and attempts (marriage, fatherhood, learning the violin, growing pigs) are as massive as his bulk and 6-foot-4 frame, and finally that his erratic and confused nature must respond to "the destiny of my generation of Americans to go out in the world and try to find the wisdom of life" (245). Taking himself to Africa, he finds that he is still cursed to mar

the objects and actions even of his good intentions. He is a kind of modern, exotic Don Quixote, tilting at frogs and statues, troubling already troubled situations which include his becoming for one tribe the rain king Sungo (a fine referential name like that of Henderson, who is both hindered and hindering). Accepting that position, he comes under the influence of the tribe's educated King Dahfu, who introduces him intimately to a lion and coaches him to translate himself primitively into one. Although once again the complications result in disaster, Henderson decides that he is a Becomer aiming to realize himself as a Be-er. With his unusual qualities (e.g., for him emotions are registered in the gums), Henderson is as marvelously grotesque as the robust development of other characters and events in the novel. Nevertheless, at the end he seems to have established a mixed truce with himself, closely associating with a lion cub reminiscent of Dahfu and with a little non-English-speaking American orphan boy on the plane trip home, where Henderson plans to enter medical school at an age past fifty. The book may well be the ultimate extreme in treating the search for identity—and, given the main character's gusto and intense indulgence in the pluses and minuses of experience, it has a constant thrust of parody.

But if the parodic makes for a major unity in Bellow's novel, it is poetry that does the equivalent in Bell's novel, a tone pervading the encounters, the talk, the legend, the weather, the actions, the insights, and especially the locale. The setting is neither a Southern anywhere, nor a transcontinental everywhere, nor a far-off African elsewhere. Instead, it is a specific here, fictionalized for exploring significant literary themes like the question of identity, a question that arises for most people in a local habitation.

Like many (including Robert Bell) who have settled on the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay, Peter Abbott is an outsider who becomes also an insider, partaking of both perspectives, the kind of role rewarded a reader by any good novel. As a child Capote's Joel progresses (until the very end) as an innocent, wondering outsider. Kerouac's Dean is from beginning to end an observed insider incapable of becoming an understanding outsider, while Bellow's Henderson (in spite of his African involvements) remains mostly an outsider, his tenuous relationship symbolized

by the lion cub that will inevitably grow up and away from him. Bell's Peter, on the other hand, stays well in place at the end as an outsider/insider, his dual position certified by his privately discovering a butterfly tree, by the reaction of his family of friends to his breathless news, and by his acceptance that identity is both a personal and communal reality focused in the individual. Hence the reader is doubly drawn into an outsider/insider point of view by a novel inescapably set "at home" in a recognizable but special part of Alabama, a section which lends itself to the poetry of place, theme, and characters. The treatment hints that a reader can encounter poetry and identity in his or her own neighborhood.

The magic is that the reader of *The Butterfly Tree* meets multiple poetry and lingering coalescences of identity right along with Peter Abbott. By the time Peter reaches his twenty-first birthday near the end of the novel, he has passed through the four seasons on which the story is based and which unify his maturing experience. Summer coaxes him into gradual identification with his new locale as home and into a closeness with his surprising aunt, Miss Billy, from whom he first learns of the butterfly tree. Autumn lures him into a sadly terminal companionship with Miss Claverly, the naturalist, whose no-nonsense focus on the insect world is partly countered by her belief that there is a butterfly tree to be sought. Appropriately, winter almost embalms him within the ominous influence of Edward Bloodgood, the mortician, whose philosophy of beauty and death stems largely from earlier experience when he learned of the butterfly tree. Although all of these three characters (plus the fourth one, Karl Heppler, associated with spring) have kept the legend a personal secret, each one confides it to Peter and takes him on a fruitless hunt for the tree, compounding his doubts while unfolding specialized vistas of experience.

True, Miss Billy's is that of imagination, Miss Claverly's that of science, and Bloodgood's that of evil (significantly his search for the tree occurs at night). But since for Peter these views—separate or combined—lack balance and fullness, Karl Heppler's would appear to be the needed climactic one. Though he proves to have a mortal flaw, Karl's thought and physique are godlike. As with the others, his knowledge of the tree is a revealed one, coming from a closely attached stranger who disappears. Sym-

bologically, Peter's love affair with Karl's twin sister Karen (Karl's soul mate) indicates how intimately Peter is drawn into this higher view of the tree and the world. However, at a hidden human distance away, Peter observes that Karl and Karen together fail in searching for the tree. Though he has learned much from all of them, none of these four valid but vicarious approaches is complete enough for Peter.

The only adequate view for Peter is that of the experiential self, and to a great extent it is the poetry of place that has prepared him for the ultimate event. Early on, he is attuned to and by nature: "Adrift in the treetops, the afternoon shimmered suffocatingly" (Bell 18); "summer dripped around him, into him, and stayed all ambition" (28); "Distant thunder rolled barrels across the horizon and struck the edge of the world with a dull rose flash" (33). In Moss Bayou "old houses leaned into the woods, ancient houses secure against time, weary of time, concealing strange forgotten secrets behind their peeling shutters and flaking paint" (16). When later his and Miss Billy's search for the butterfly tree proved futile, he "tried not to listen to the insect, bird and water voices, for they told, told truths and lies, and there was no way to tell which was which" (68). Throughout the novel Peter's perceptions are calibrated in terms of the poetic shifting of local scenery and people about him as they become a part of him, changing him. Since he comes to be not only what but also how he experiences, it is no wonder that no one but he, when quite alone, suddenly and unexpectedly encounters the butterfly tree in all of its experiential poetic beauty. Only he at present is adequately qualified.

For, as a doubter, Peter must now begin where others fear to end. He is involved in one of the profound human themes of William Faulkner's short story, "The Bear," where the wilderness-seekers know that hunting is a serious exhilarating business and also a cursed blessing. Their instinctive hunt for the kill is deeply countered by a hope and need to fail, because that ultimate kind of possession will be the end of something more than the bear. When, after the climactic hunt, Ike McCaslin emulates the life of Christ, he is a true outsider/insider just as Peter Abbott is after he confronts the butterfly tree. Peter's actual experience clashes with the contradictory but needed dream of others who are very close to him. He is frustrated and hurt by their reactions

to his news, but his final acceptance of the fact is a sure indicator that he has achieved an identity beyond and perhaps sadder than theirs, one that will develop for him and reverberate for the reader well past the final page and into other areas than the unique locale that happens to be on Mobile Bay.

As a work pulsing with things that matter and last and are locally discoverable by the alert, *The Butterfly Tree* richly deserves its newly affirmed status as an Alabama classic. 🦋

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