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AMERICAN IMAGINATION AND THE CIVIL WAR

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SOME sentences of the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh have been prominent in my thoughts for many years. Here is what he says: "Parochialism and provincialism are opposites. The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis . . . has to say. . . . The parochial mentality on the other hand is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish." In spite of necessary qualifications, which I will get to in a minute, Kavanagh's distinction has become indispensable to me in thinking about my native place and history. In Kentucky, a state characterized as barefooted, we might oversimplify Kavanagh by saying that those of us who are always admiring our shoes are provincial, whereas the unself-consciously barefoot or shod are parochial. Or we could more legitimately paraphrase him by saying that people who fear they are provincial are provincial.

I believe I can say truthfully that my particular part of Kentucky, at the time of my growing up in it, was in Kavanagh's terms more parochial than provincial. The parochial in any locality probably always is subject to qualification and inexact in geographical extent. I grew up in a county at that time almost exclusively preoccupied with farming: the county of Henry, a few miles south of the Ohio River. But the country truly native to my family and my experience is in the watersheds of Town Branch of Drennon Creek, Emily's Run, and Cane Run.

During my first twenty or so years, the "social validity" of that place at that time certainly was impaired by racial segregation. That phrase now has the currency of an abstraction, but segregation itself could be experienced only in particular. We were living in the history of segregation, but we were living in it in our place, with our neighbors, and as ourselves. In our small communities segregation involved the wicked prejudice on which it was based, but it also involved much familiarity and many exceptions. Racial inequality was a theory that performed its customary disservices and sometimes justified horrors, but that theory was inevitably

qualified by the daily life in which the two races were separate only to an extent. In those places the history of segregation was lived out familiarly by black and white people who knew one another, told stories about one another to one another, helped or harmed one another, liked or disliked one another, and often worked together. Separate and different as the races were, it is impossible to imagine a white person of that place and time whose knowledge did not include the stories, songs, sayings, teachings, and characters of black persons. An honest accounting of the ancestry of my own mind would have to include prominently several black people. Despite segregation, the communities of my young life were, in function and in their consciousness of themselves, more intact than they are now.

As for the “artistic validity” of our place at that time, I must be both careful and modest. We did have a local music that came to the fore at square dances, though not everybody granted much value to it, and it had begun to be supplanted by music from the radio and jukebox. Most of us were familiar with Protestant hymns and the King James Bible. But we were not greatly concerned with the issues of art, local or otherwise.

The arts that we took for granted, and that did gather us all together, were the arts of farming, gardening, cooking, and talking. Our economy was either agricultural or in service to agriculture. Vegetable gardens, grape arbors, and fruit trees were still commonplace. It was still ordinary to see poultry flocks, fattening hogs, or milk cows in the back yards or back lots of the towns. The grocery stores still bought surplus produce from the farms. Most of the food was homegrown, and excellent cooking was customary. Most of the cooking was done by women, but everybody talked about it.

Everybody, in fact, talked about everything. It seems to me that I grew up immersed in talk. Talk was a fifth element: talk in hayfields and tobacco patches, in tobacco barns and stripping rooms, in kitchens and living rooms, on porches and out in the yards. Sometimes, as we sat out in the yard or on the porch after a hot day, the dark would gradually disembodied us, and we would become just voices going on until weariness reembodyed us and we would go into the house to bed. My best gift as a writer was

that circumstance of talk. We had no cultivated art of conversation. Our talk was practical, local in reference, but was carried on also for pleasure and comfort. It was sometimes crude, but it was also articulate enough—humorous, precise, expressive, and sometimes beautifully so.

Though, by then, most of us had listened to the radio and seen at least a few movies, our talk as yet bore no hint of apology for the way we talked, or for our status as country or small-town people. We knew we were not Yankees, for we had heard Yankees talk, and we knew we did not talk like them. We also had listened to people from “down south,” and we knew we did not have what we called a “southern accent.” Maybe I can be excused for concluding, when I got old enough to read a map, that I spoke a perfectly average language, Standard American, since I could see that I lived at about the middle of the north–south axis. And maybe I can elicit a little sympathy for my surprise when, having clung to this notion all the way to some literary party in California, I delivered an undoubtedly sophisticated opinion to a literary young lady, whose eyes thereupon grew round with recognition. “Wayull!” she said in Yankee-Southern, “Wheah *you* all frum, honey chile?”

And so I turned out to be a southerner—legitimately so, as that term is used. I was born on the south side of the Ohio River, was descended from slave-owners, and certainly did not talk like a Yankee.

The problem, as I am hardly the first to know, is that being a southerner is less a condition than a job. The job, unendingly, is to distinguish between local life and the abstractions that we have allowed to obscure it. There is a huge difference between knowledge and classification. “South” and “southerner” are not terms that are invariably useful. They belong sometimes to a taxonomy of clichés, stereotypes, and prejudices that have intruded between ourselves and our actual country. These shallow powerful abstractions have worked invariably to depreciate local knowledge and provincialize local life, and so have denied us the imaginative realizations that alone could have saved our country from the damage that has befallen it.

These old habits of mind and speech have continued in the babbled-to-nonsense polarity of “conservative” and “liberal,” and

of “red states” and “blue states.” This oversimplified language of the media and politics is as far as possible from the best of the local speech I heard as a child, which was like no other in the world because it was of and about our place, which was like no other in the world. In it we were at least beginning to imagine ourselves somewhat as we actually were, and even somewhat as we should have been. Now, under the influence of media speech, we can only pretend and try to be like everybody else.

The problem is that there can be no general or official or sectional or national imagination. The chief instrument of economic and political power now is a commodified speech, wholly compatible with the old clichés, that can distinguish neither general from particular nor false from true. Local life is now a wren’s egg brooded by an eagle or a buzzard. As Guy Davenport saw, nothing now exists that is so valuable as whatever theoretically might replace it. Every place must anticipate the approach of the bulldozer. No place is free of the threat implied in such phrases as *economic growth*, *job creation*, *natural resources*, *human capital*, *bringing in industry*, even *bringing in culture*—as if every place is adequately identified as *the environment* and its people as readily replaceable parts of a machine. Devotion to any particular place now carries always the implication of heartbreak.

I suppose that human minds have always been threatened by the slur and blur of general bias, but it seems to me that this curse fell upon us Americans with a great fatefulness in the circumstances leading to the Civil War, and that the curse has persisted.

The Civil War and the rhetoric associated with it become penetrable by actual thought only when one asks *Why?* Why could people of good sense on both sides not have treated slavery as a problem with a practical solution short of war? The answers, I suppose, are foolishness, fanaticism, sectional loyalty and pride, the wish to protect one’s faults from correction by others, moral outrage, self-righteousness, the desire to punish sinners, and sectional hatred.

The Civil War was caused undoubtedly by disagreements over slavery and secession. It was contested so fiercely and so long by the Confederacy undoubtedly because of a truth that our federal

government has never learned: people generally don't like to be invaded. But why was there no lenity?

Shakespeare's Henry V, incongruously in the midst of his invasion of France, gives *lenity* a pertinent definition: "we give express charge that in our marches through the country there be nothing compelled from the villages, nothing taken but paid for, none of the French upbraided or abused in disdainful language; for when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner" (3.6). The word occurs more credibly in Edmund Burke's *Speech On American Taxation*, in which he pleads desperately against the impositions that brought on the American Revolution: "Yet now, even now, I should confide in the prevailing virtue and efficacious operation of lenity, though working in darkness and in chaos, in the midst of all this unnatural and turbid combination: I should hope it might produce order and beauty in the end." The American Revolution may have been another "irrepressible conflict," but Burke, who saw it as a civil war, seems never to have doubted that there were two other possibilities: reconciliation on terms of justice or amicable separation.

Lenity can be understood as lenience or gentleness or mercy, and there was too little of it in Burke's England in 1774. There was too little in our North and South from 1861 to 1865, and before, and after. Failing lenity in any conceivable form, relishing its differences, savoring its animosities and divergent patriotisms, the nation divided and went to war. The two sides met in a series of great battles, and at last the strongest won in the name of emancipation and union.

That is the official version, and it is right enough as far as it goes. But to grant a just complexity to this history let us add a third side: that of the dead. Armies, by the necessity and purpose of military organization, are abstractions. We think of battles as convergences not of individuals but of "units." Survivors, in their memoirs, speak as participants. Only in the aftermath of battle, on the nighttime battlefields horribly littered with the dead and the dying, do the individual soldiers begin to enter our imagination in their mere humanity. Imagination gives status in our consciousness and our hearts to a suffering that the statisticians would undoubtedly render in gallons of blood and gallons of tears. Maybe I am speaking

only for myself, though I doubt it, when I say that to me the dead in Mathew Brady's photographs don't look like Unionists or Confederates; they look like dead boys, once uniquely themselves, undiminished by whichever half of the national quarrel they died for. In those photographs we meet war as a great maker of personal tragedies, not as a great enterprise of objectives.

Mathew Brady was by no means the first to show us this, nor was Shakespeare; but Shakespeare did show us, with a poignance unsurpassed in my reading, the tragedy specifically of civil war. In *Henry VI, Part III*, there is a battle scene in which first "a Son" and then "a Father," not identified as to side, enter separately, each bearing the body of a dead man whom he has killed and whom he now looks at. The Son says, "Who's this? O God! It is my father's face." And the Father says, "But let me see. Is this our foeman's face? / Ah, no, no, no! it is mine only son!" (2.5).

Of our own civil war Walt Whitman saw clearly the pageantry and glamor and "all the old mad joy" of battle that Robert E. Lee acknowledged. But he saw also the personal tragedy much as Shakespeare saw it. With the same anonymity as to side, he speaks of coming at dawn upon three of the dead lying covered near a hospital tent:

Curious I halt and silent stand,
 Then with light fingers I from the face of the nearest
 the first just lift the blanket;
 Who are you elderly man so gaunt and grim, with
 well-gray'd hair, and flesh all sunken about the eyes?
 Who are you my dear comrade?

Then to the second I step—and who are you my child
 and darling?
 Who are you sweet boy with cheeks yet blooming?

Then to the third—a face nor child nor old, very calm,
 as of beautiful yellow-white ivory;
 Young man I think I know you—I think this face is the
 face of the Christ himself,

Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.

—“A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim”

Once dead, the dead in war are conscripted again into abstraction by political leaders and governments, and this is a great moral ugliness. The dead are made hostages of policy to sanctify the acts and intentions of their side: These have died in a holy cause; that they may not have died in vain, more must be killed. And, to benefit the victors, there is always the calculation, frequently alluded to but never openly performed: at the cost of so many deaths, so much suffering, so much destruction, so much money or so much debt, we have got what we wanted, and at a fair price.

There is no doubt that wars may have moral purposes. Union and emancipation were moral purposes. So were secession and independence, however muddied by the immoral purpose of slavery. But battles don't have the same purposes as wars. The only purpose of a battle, once joined, is victory. And any price for victory is acceptable to the generals and politicians of the victorious side, who are under great pressure to say that it is acceptable. But the accounting is conventionally not attempted. Victors do not wish to evaluate their victory as a net gain for fear that it will prove a net loss.

I doubt that such a calculation is possible, even if somebody were willing to try it. But that should not stop us from asking, if only to keep the question open, what we gained, as a people, by the North's expensive victory. My own impression is that the net gain was more modest and more questionable than is customarily said.

The Northern victory did preserve the Union. But, despite our nationalist “mystique,” our federation of states is a practical condition maintained only by the willing consent of the states and the people. And secession, today, is still not a dead issue. There is now, for instance, a vigorous and strictly principled secession movement in Vermont.

The other large Northern objective—the emancipation of the slaves—also was achieved. But this too appears in retrospect to

be an achievement painfully limited. It does not seem unreasonable to say that emancipation was achieved and, almost by the same stroke, botched. The slaves were set free only to remain an exploited people for another hundred years. My own guess is that, after the decision was taken to make slavery an issue of war, emancipation was inevitably botched. The North in effect abandoned the ex-slaves to the mercy of its embittered and still dissident former enemy, to whom they would be ever-present reminders, symbols virtually, of defeat.

Furthermore we have remained a people in need of a racially designated underclass of menial laborers to do the work that the privileged (of whatever race) are too good, too well educated, and too ignorant to do for themselves. Our Stepanfetchits at present are Mexican immigrants, whom we fear for the familiar reasons that we exploit them and that we depend on them.

And so our Civil War raised the question that has been raised a number of times since: Can you force people to change their hearts and minds? Can you make them good by violence? Again and again human nature has replied *no*. Again and again, ignoring human nature and history, politicians have answered *yes*. And yet it seems true that Martin Luther King and his followers, by refusing to answer violence with violence, did more to alter racial attitudes in the South than was done by all the death and damage of the Civil War.

Is this reading of history too idealistic and unforgiving? Probably. Must we not say, pragmatically, that a botched emancipation is better than legal slavery? Well, I am a farmer, therefore a pragmatist: half a crop beats none; a botched emancipation is better than none. But, as I am a farmer, I am also a critic, and I know the difference between a bad result and a good one. Of our history, though we cannot change it, we must still try for a true accounting. And to me it seems that the resort to violence is the death of imagination. Once the killing has started, lenity and the hope for order and beauty vanish along with causes and aims. Edmund Wilson's logic of the two sea slugs, the larger eating the smaller, then goes into effect: "not virtue but . . . the irrational instinct of an active power organism in the presence of another such organism" (*Patriotic Gore*).

Once opponents become enemies, then the rhetoric of violence

prevents them from imagining each other. Or it reduces imagination to powerlessness. Men such as Lincoln and Lee, from what I have read of them, seem not to have been destitute of imagination; of this I take as a sign their grief, their regret for the war even while they fought it. I see them as figures of tragedy, each an instrument of an immense violence which, once begun, was beyond their power to mitigate or stop, and which made of their imagination only a feckless suffering of the suffering of others. Once the violence has started, the outcome must be victory for one side, defeat for the other—with perhaps unending psychological and historical consequences.

When my thoughts circle about, trying to give my disturbance a location that is specific and familiar enough, they light sooner or later on “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” This song has a splendid tune, but the words are perfectly insane. Suppose, if you doubt me, that an adult member of your family said to you, without the music but with the same triumphal conviction, “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord”—would you not, out of fear and compassion, try to find help? And yet this sectional hymn, by an alchemy obscure to me, seems finally to have given us all—North and South, East and West—a sort of official judgment of our history. It renders our ordeal of civil war into a truly terrifying simplemindedness, in which we can still identify Christ with military power and conflate “the American way of life” with the will of God.

I have made clear, I hope, my failure to perceive the glory of the coming of the Lord in the Civil War and its effects. The North was not uniformly abolitionist; the South was not uniformly proslavery or even secessionist. Theirs was not a conflict of pure good and pure evil. The Civil War was our first great industrial war, which was good for business, like every war since. The Civil War established violence against noncombatants as acceptable military policy. The Army of the United States, no longer the Northern army, proceeded from the liberation of the slaves to racist warfare against the native tribespeople of the West. Moreover, as the historian Don Worster has said, the Civil War supplanted the “slave power” of the South with the “money power” of the North: “The fact of the matter is we have not even today figured out how

to come to terms with the money power that replaced the slave power.” The great advantage of the aftermath went, certainly not to the ex-slaves or to the farmers and small tradesmen of either side—not to the people Wallace Stegner called “stickers,” but rather to those he called “boomers”: the speculators and exploiters, the main-chancers, the Manifest Destinarians, the railroads, the timber and mineral companies.

My purpose in reciting these problems is not to suggest that a Southern victory would have been better—which I doubt—but only to point out that the Northern victory set the tone of overconfidence, of self-righteousness and assumed privilege, that became the political tone of the whole nation.

The Civil War was followed, perhaps as a matter of course—and would have been followed, no matter who won—by the industrial exploitation of our land and people that still continues. While we have stood at our school desks or in our church pews asserting the divine prerogative of “The Battle Hymn,” we have been destroying our country. This is not an impression. By measures empirical enough, we have wasted perhaps half of our country’s topsoil; we are destroying by “development” thousands of acres every day; we have polluted the atmosphere and the water cycle; we have destroyed or damaged or brought under threat all of our natural ecosystems; in our agriculture and forestry we are treating renewable resources as carelessly as we have burned the fossil fuels; we have severely damaged all of our human communities. We have established unregarding violence as our means of choice in everything from international relations to land use to entertainment.

What are we to conclude? Only, I fear, that violence is its own way, which is entirely unlike the ways of thought or dialogue or work or art or any manner of caretaking. Once you have committed yourself to the way of violence, you can only suffer it through to exhaustion and accept the always unforeseen results.

I have been describing an enormous failure, and to me this appears to be a failure of imagination. Though we are now far advanced in the destruction of our country, we have only begun to imagine what our country is. We are destroying it *because* of our failure to imagine it.

By *imagination* I do not mean the ability to make things up or to

make a realistic copy. I mean the ability to make real to oneself the life of one's place or the life of an enemy—and therein, I believe, is implied, imagination in the highest sense. When I use this word I never forget its definitions by Coleridge and Blake, but for present purposes I am going to refer to the writings of William Carlos Williams, whose understanding of imagination, though compatible with that of his English predecessors, is peculiarly American in its urgency.

Three generations and more ago, Williams was fretting about the inclination of Americans to debase their land and, with it, themselves,

as if the earth under our feet
were
an excrement of some sky

and we degraded prisoners
destined
to hunger until we eat filth . . .

—“The Pure Products of America”

We were, he observes in *In the American Grain*, “like a chicken with a broken neck, that aims where it cannot peck and pecks where it cannot aim, which a hog-plenty everywhere prevents from starving to death.”

Williams seems to have been one of the few so far who could see the vulnerability of a highly centralized economy. In a letter to James Laughlin on November 28, 1950, he tells of the disruptions of a recent storm, and then he says: “But witnessing what one small storm can do to a community in these parts I am awonder over the thought of what a single small atom bomb might not accomplish. Disruption of every service, now become more and more centralized, would starve us out in 3 days.”

Against such craziness he set the “single force” of imagination: “To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live.” And imagination, in this sense, is not passively holding up a mirror to nature; it is a changing force. It does not produce illusions, or copies of reality, or “plagiarism after nature.” And yet it does not produce artificiality. It does not lead away from

reality but toward it. It can be used to show relationships. By it “the old facts of history” are “reunited in present passion.” Thus I have pieced together his thoughts from the prose fragments of *Spring and All*. Thirty or so years later in “The Host,” one of the devotional poems in *The Desert Music*, he lays it out more plainly, giving imagination, like Coleridge and Blake, a religious significance:

There is nothing to eat,
 seek it where you will,
 but of the body of the Lord.

The blessed plants
 and the sea, yield it
 to the imagination
 intact. And by that force
 it becomes real.

If what we see and experience, if our country, does not become real in imagination, then it never can become real to us, and we are forever divided from it. And for Williams, as for Blake, imagination is a particularizing and a local force, native to the ground underfoot. If that ground is not in a great cultural center, but only in a New Jersey suburb, so be it. Imagination is as urgently necessary in Rutherford, New Jersey, or in Knott County, Kentucky, or Point Coupée Parish, Louisiana, as it is in San Francisco or New York. As I am understanding it, imagination in this high sense shatters the frameworks of realism in the arts and empiricism in the sciences. It does so by placing the world and its creatures within a context of sanctity, in which their worth is absolute and incalculable.

The particularizing force of imagination is a force of justice with obvious crucial correspondences in biology and in our legal system. Robert Ulanowicz says that “in ecosystems comprised of hundreds or thousands of distinguishable organisms, one must reckon not just with the occasional unique event, but with *legions* of them. Unique, singular events are occurring all the time, everywhere!” And, except for identical twins, every creature that comes into being by way of sexual reproduction is genetically unique.

Recognition of the uniqueness of creatures and events is the reason for the standing we humans grant (when we do grant it) to one another before the law, and it is the reason we “return thanks” (when we do so) for food and other gifts that come to us from the living world. Without imagination there is no right appreciation of these rarities—no lenity, amity, or mercy. And, I think, there is no satisfaction either. Imagination, amply living in a place, brings what we want and what we have ever closer to being the same. It is the power that can save us from the prevailing insinuation that our place, our house, our spouse, and our automobile are not good enough.

Historians and scientists work toward generalizations from their knowledge, just as all of us do. We must do this, for generalization is a part of our means of making sense. But generalization alone, without the countervailing, particularizing power of imagination, is dehumanizing and destructive.

The South, for example, as the name of an historical side, can have a reckonable and useful meaning. But, as the name merely of a part of the country, it means less. If *region* means anything at all, then the South, like the North or the West, is a region of many regions. But so is Kentucky. My county has several distinct regions. My neighbors don't look like southerners or Kentuckians to me. The better I know them, the more they look like *themselves*. The better I know my place, the less it looks like other places and the more it looks like itself. It is imagination, and only imagination, that can give standing to these distinctions.

If imagination is to have a real worth to us, it needs to have a practical, an *economic*, effect. It needs to establish us in our places with a practical respect for what is there besides ourselves. I think the highest earthly result of imagination is probably local adaptation. If we could learn to belong fully and truly where we live, then we would all finally be native Americans, and we would have an authentic multiculturalism.

And yet the problem I began with has never been resolved: how do we equilibrate or even negotiate between local identity and the abstractions of regional or national identity with the attendant clichés of economic growth? Obviously there can be no general answer to this question. If we see the need for an answer, then

we must attempt it for ourselves in our communities. I believe that there is hope in the increasing uneasiness of people who see themselves as dispossessed or displaced and therefore as economically powerless. Growing out of this uneasiness, there is now a widespread effort toward local economy, local self-determination, and local adaptation. In this there is the potential of a new growth of imagination, and at last an authentic settlement of our country.

But we must not fool ourselves. This movement toward local adaptation necessarily is being led from the bottom. And it confronts a leadership from the top—in government, in the corporate economy, in the universities—that is utterly lacking in imagination, local loyalty, and local knowledge. Both conservatives and liberals, having accepted the ecological and social damages of industrialism as inevitable, even normal, have conceived the individual as subject alone either to the economy or to the government. In this official numbness, though it is clearly self-doomed, there is for the moment an almost overwhelming power.

Let me give you an example of the way a failure of imagination works against people and land. At present, in the eastern mountains of my state, the coal companies are blasting the tops off the mountains and pushing them into the valleys, covering the streams. They are doing this without concern for the land, the topsoil, the forest, the waterways and the water, or for the homes and lives of the people. This total permanent destruction is not anomalous in our economy or without causes in our history. I need not delay you here by retelling the history of the corporate pillage of eastern Kentucky, which you will find well told in *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* and other books by Harry M. Caudill, or by describing the culmination of that malignant history in “mountaintop removal,” which Erik Reece has accomplished fully in *Lost Mountain*. But, if you want to know how this hardly credible or bearable waste could have happened, consider the chapter “Mountain Passes of the Cumberland” in *The Bluegrass Region of Kentucky and Other Kentucky Articles* by James Lane Allen, published in 1892.

Allen was a “genteel” writer of the Bluegrass and an outsider to the mountains, about which he had a curiously divided mind.

On the one hand he regarded the then mostly unspoiled forests of that region with a sort of rapture. But he was equally rapturous about the economics and machinery of industrialization. Between these enthusiasms he saw no possible contradiction. The beautiful forest, of course, was invaluable in itself, and it would be nearly completely cut down by the middle of the next century. Beneath the forest lay enormously valuable deposits of coal. Allen accurately foresaw the industrial exploitation of the region, but he thought only good could come of it.

As for the local people, he characterized them in the person of “a faded, pinched, and meager mountain boy” driving a team of oxen and eating from a sack of candy: “In one dirty claw-like hand he grasped a small paper bag, into the open mouth of which he had thrust the other hand. . . . He had just bought . . . some sweetment of civilization which he was about for the first time to taste.” These people, according to Allen, needed to be civilized and Christianized—which was the official rationale of the federal campaigns against the Indians in the same era.

I don’t think Allen was an evil man. Probably, like us, he was pretty good. But he also was ignorant and naïve, as we too have been about our continuing bonfire of coal and oil. Being only a prophet, Allen had no doubt about the beneficence of industrialization; he thought it was the coming of the Lord: “You begin with coke and end with Christianity.” Compare this bit of prophecy with James Still’s *River of Earth*, written half a century later, and you will see what I mean by failure of imagination.

I would like to end by turning to the work of a southern writer who, for several reasons, is exemplary and dear to me. Ernest J. Gaines inherited the harder side of the racial history that I inherited, and I believe I know some of the questions he faced as he made his way into his work. Could he imagine sympathetically a southern white person? Could he imagine, so as to require us to imagine, an uneducated black farmhand as a person of dignity, wisdom, and eloquence? Yes, as we know, he could. He has imagined also the community of his people as a part of the life of their place and the hardships of that community. He has imagined the community’s belonging to its place, the houses that had the names of people, the flower-planted dooryards, the church, the

graveyard, the shared history and experience, the shared stories, the talk of old people on the galleries in the summer evenings and the young people listening. He has imagined also the loss of those things.

In a time when the provincial fear of provinciality has brought the local into suspicion, Ernest Gaines has been true to his place, his people, and their story. He has shown that the local, fully imagined, becomes universal. He has brought his place and his people to such a pitch of realization that again and again as I read him he seems to speak also for me and mine. He has done this in a language like no other, belonging to a place like no other.

The novel *In My Father's House* contains a passage that alarms and consoles me every time I read it. The reason for my alarm is obvious, for the passage is about somebody's damage that becomes everybody's danger. But I consent to the author's understanding of the damage, and I am consoled by the companionship of that.

The main character in the novel, Phillip Martin, gives a ride to a terribly angry young black man named Billy. Billy has been to Vietnam. He is now a would-be revolutionary. He would like to burn the whole country by setting fire to the gasoline in every filling station. In his fury this Billy is thoroughly frightening. I am frightened of him and for him. But then Billy says: "You see all them empty fields round here, mister? . . . Go all over this place—empty fields, empty houses, empty roads. Where the people used to be—nothing. Machines. Every time they build another machine that takes work from the people, they hire another hundred cops to keep the people quiet." And I am caught. I see that Billy and I are joined by a mutual sense of calamity and loss. From my well-wishing in the safety of my chair, I have been carried into the trouble itself that has so nearly consumed Billy. Suddenly, in the midst of his rant, he has spoken from the grief felt by many rural Americans, of whatever race, and certainly by me. I know well that it is possible for me, like Billy, to respond with anger and despair. But I know also that it is possible for me, as for Ernest Gaines, to respond with work, hope, and love.