



AUGUST PLINTH reads from GERONIMO'S CADILLAC and SATURNIAN VISITORS

THE SENSE OF PLACE

by

Lawrence E. Carr

In American poetry of recent years there have been few poems rooted in a specific locale. For many reasons, chief among which is the mobility and uprootedness of the American life style, the American poet has moved toward an abstract ambience in which to set his poems. "Real frogs in imaginary gardens," Marianne Moore once said, and that seems to be the rule among contemporary poets. Nevertheless, there have been a few poems rooted in a sense of place, and these have been very notable poems indeed: William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, rooted in the East Coast; T.S. Eliot's *Three Salvages*, which adopts the Midwest, and particularly the Mississippi River, as its locus; and most recently August Plinth's *Geronimo's Cadillac*, which uses the Southwest, and particularly New Mexico, as its point of departure, or perhaps I should say *return*.

It is in the sense of return to the earth, to the "vast country of terrible winds and wonderful emptiness" which inspires the 25 poems in octet form which make up *Geronimo's Cadillac*. They are not parts of one poem, but separate poems, and so in this sense they are closer to Dr. Williams' *Paterson*, except that unlike his great poem, there is no sense of the arbitrary, no sense of sprawl. And the idea of a return to the origins runs through each of the poems, and gives them a unity of theme which is reflected in the octet structure of eight three-line stanzas. The poems are the most highly structured and *paced* poems which Plinth has ever written. They were written in 1962 and 1963, after Plinth's return from a rather unpleasant stay in Washington, D.C. His references to the capital in the later octets suggest that he found Washington a nightmare of glass and white stone; it was on his return to New Mexico he saw that place of his birth and growing up for the first time.

*Not wondrous, like Washington,
The fabulous in fountains,
Does the homeland abide.*

The "wondrous" and the "fabulous" is exactly what he was fleeing, since he found it encased in granite, enormous impersonal buildings, and vast "publicness." He called the first draft of the octets, some of which appeared in 1965 and 1966, "The Secret Life" as if the private life, the individual life, might support the roots which "publicness" threatened. But the later drafts of these octets, XV through XXV, suggest that the walls of the private life cannot prevail or even survive against the huge guns of "the huge world."

*Danger of Publicness, I see it, I see it!
Now the German battleships are lining up
Against the green and undefended coasts.*

In rethinking the poem over the years between 1968 and 1972, it became clear to Plinth that the "secret life", the merely private roots, could not grow up through the cracks of the public pavement. What was needed was some deeper, stronger foundation for this "secret life", this physical and earthly reality. He found those roots in the culture which had always kept aloof from his own early life, the Navajo and Hopi cultures of the cliff cities and the plains, which he calls the "Wolf" in the octets, and in *Deep Sleep* and *The Saturnian Visitors*, the "Crow". Here was a people who guarded their secret life and their physical reality through ritual and custom, through observance and through the ingestion of the psychotropic plants native to the area, particularly peyote. None of their "ways of guarding the way" would be sufficient by themselves, but together they suggest a recurrent "return to the origins" which offered much to Plinth in the way of a still valid "permanent reality".

*We thought ideas were deeper than things.
We were wrong.
We thought the power to leap out of place
would make us strong.
We were wrong.*

It sums up the significance which Plinth finds in physical reality, and particularly "one's own place" and "the place of the origins" which are often, if one is lucky, one and the same. Abstract thought and abstract poetry are equally regarded as menacing in *Geronimo's Cadillac*, and in *The Saturnian Visitors* as well. The latter, his only novel, concerns the same locale as the octets, but the approach is different. The novel starts off in total abstraction, vast empty space, a buoyant place offering possibilities of ecstatic transcendence, but also the fluid root of alienation and isolation. The solipsistic Air Force "flyboy" who is always hearing the "voices" buzzing and arguing in his head, must return to the earth and "the homeland" through the medium of a peyote rite at a Crow reservation. Through his first real view of the overpowering, warm, physical world, he is able to start his long trek back from the wastes of abstraction and "pure spirit" to the sense of place realized from the very first octet in *Geronimo's Cadillac*. The later octets move out toward a transcendence from a firm basis in physical reality, and so too there is a kind of circular flow between the terrified subjectivity of the novel and the harmonious objectivism of the octets. The effort in both works to adapt the inner to the outer is as extraordinary an effort at reconciliation as his technical synthesis of the German octet and the Hopi imagery, as his welding of the science fiction form to the Dostoevskian psychological novel. In both cases he has made a real contribution to the direction of contemporary literature.

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AUGUST PLINTH
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(Chapter 1)
- 2.- KISSING THE EARTH
(Chapter 1)
- 3.- LAST SECTION: THE PASSERS - THROUGH -
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