

**RE-ENVISIONING REGIONALISM: HARRIETTE SIMPSON ARNOW'S *THE KENTUCKY TRACE***

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Harriette Simpson Arnow like to recall that, as a child, she had rewritten her mother's and grandmother's stories to suit herself. She went on to say that she was not so easily able to change the narrative that her mother imagined for Harriette's life. But rewrite it she did, for she managed, finally, to leave the teaching career her mother had urged upon her and move from Kentucky to Cincinnati to begin a new career as a writer.<sup>1</sup> Arnow's work is filled with an ambivalence about her chosen profession, however. Not only was her family set against it, but writing, for her, meant leaving the region she loved so well. As late as her last novel, *The Kentucky Trace*, we find Arnow examining the subjects of fiction writing and her relationship to the Appalachian region and her family.

In her 1983 essay "Heritage and Deracination in Four Kentucky Novels," Gwen Curry, like so many critics of other Arnow works, criticizes Arnow's use of details in telling this tale of a Kentucky rebel during the Revolutionary War. She contrasts Arnow's narrative of life on the Kentucky trails with the tale Arnow might have told, one which would have concentrated on the better-known heroes and events of the period. Arnow's work is decidedly not lacking in historical specificity, however, for *Kentucky Trace* is in some ways a fictional version of *Flowering of the Cumberland*, the second of two histories of the region Arnow published in the 1960s. Like the history, *Kentucky Trace*, quite by design, acquaints us with the place and period not through a litany of battles and leaders, but through a well-documented description of the daily lives of those who lived in it. This retelling of history with a focus on the lives of ordinary people -- both through exposition and through fiction -- is Arnow telling it her way. And her telling it her way is not unrelated to her living it her way. In this novel, Arnow reaffirms her relationship with a nation built on values which she found in the social life of the Cumberland region during the days of the pioneers but which she found lacking in the twentieth-century America around her. *Kentucky Trace* is Arnow coming home to a utopian recreation of the Cumberland region she had left as a fledgling writer -- the utopia, paradoxically, of a realist.

In her early fiction, much of it unpublished, Arnow repeatedly writes of the dilemma she herself faced as a creative writer: to leave or not to leave the mountains. In some versions, her protagonist leaves only to be so homesick that he or she must return. In others -- most notably *Between the Flowers* -- Arnow concentrates on the contrasting enticements of wealth and excitement beyond the hills and the security and peace of life on the farm. In *Hunter's Horn* and *The Dollmaker*, Arnow focuses on the creative imagination itself with its obsessive pull away from social commitments of any kind. Arnow's last published novel, *Kentucky Trace*, is also concerned with the relationship of creativity to identity, and identity to region. In it Arnow is affirming her identification with the Kentucky of *Flowering*, an earlier and more humane world.

In *Flowering on the Cumberland*, Arnow tells us:

The early Cumberland country seems to have been a world remarkably free from hatred of all kinds. Few are the expressions of hatred for any Indian, and the man who hated all Indians was nonexistent. There were likewise no expressions of hatred for the Negro. One finds, instead, pity, sometimes love, and often understanding. Slave or no, the black man was to most still an individual. (92)

Such a description fits the microsociety found by William David Leslie Collins, Arnow's protagonist in *Kentucky Trace*. He is a troubled supporter of the revolutionary cause who is returning home after a battle in which, he believes, he has wounded his own brother. Finding his wife, child, slaves, and family goods gone, he sets out on the Trace to locate and reclaim them. He is ambivalent about the project, however, because he knows that his wife had tricked him into marriage so that she might have a father for her already conceived child.

In his search, Leslie comes across an encampment of unlikely pioneers: a yellow-haired, loud, eastern lady from Philadelphia who speaks in the clipped tongue of a New Englander, her infant son, and an abused black slave, Rachael. Also in this group is an Indian from a non-identified tribe speaking an unknown language to whom Leslie gives the generic name "Little Brother." The needs of this group provide our hero with a reprieve from his wanderings and provide him with a family to replace the one from which he has been separated.

The woman, left here on the trail by her guide to bear the illegitimate child, now wants to abandon the infant and go on to Detroit. She is totally self-concerned, carrying with her supplies and paraphernalia -- silver spoons, fancy clothes -- which are wholly inappropriate to her travels, and is repelled and frightened by the natural world around her. Rachael is caught between serving the excessive demands of this eastern mistress and preserving the life of the baby. Soon Leslie is captivated by the child who bears an uncanny resemblance to himself, and he bands together with Rachael and Little Brother to care for it and plan for its survival. The new family/society/nation is complete when Leslie is joined by the runaway son of a white farmer and by his missing slave Jethro, who informs him that his wife and son have died from poisoned milk.

Guilty for his lack of feeling for his previous family, Leslie pours attention on the baby he has found in the woods and is determined to save the infant and carry it to safety. Thus, Leslie as the best mother in the novel, also steps out of the pages of *Flowering of the Cumberland*. There Arnow describes an egalitarian white pioneer attitude to gender identity as open as that towards Indians and Blacks:

[T]here seems to have been on the whole little glorification of mere maleness. . . . The ability to take responsibility, to put others ahead of self . . . was more truly a mark of manhood than mere maleness as evidenced by a man's abilities in bed. . . . Judging from tradition and family life in the hills, small boys not infrequently played with dolls. Willingness to protect the weak and watch over children were, at least for those Cumberlanders who elected Bailey Peyton to Congress because he married a stranger woman's baby on horseback many miles through the woods, more truly a mark of manhood than the fighting of duels. (70-71)

Even Leslie's name, of course, suggests an androgynous nature.

Curry's claim that Arnow is advocating deracination, denial of one's heritage, is based in part on the fact that Leslie seems to have cut all biological ties and created his own family. Actually, Leslie is recovering control of his life by disentangling himself from a life he feels trapped into, and ultimately reaffirming -- choice is important here -- his association with his family of origin, with the region, and with the ideals of the emerging nation.

One of the pivotal scenes in the novel is the baptism of the infant. Under pressure from his companions, Leslie participates in a ceremony to christen the child after himself. It is a comic scene in many ways -- we don't quite know how seriously Arnow intends it. Despite his great uneasiness at the seeming inauthenticity of the ritual and his role in it, Leslie sheds his backwoods clothes and dons his fancy gentleman's attire to play the minister; his self-styled family spiffs up one of the rockhouses where they are camped and turns it into a church complete with altar and candles. In order to satisfy everyone's sense of how the ceremony should go, Leslie both immerses the child and dribbles some water on his head. And yet, in the context of the plot, it is all very serious indeed. The narrator links the scene to a larger world:

Leslie looked out and up at the rockhouse roof. He was reminded of a church he'd been in sometime, somewhere; a country church of stone, big, but plain; maybe in England, not Wales, the stone would be gray; could be Scotland or France. The nave high and all red-brown stone like this, and past it a great sweep of world, but different; no trees like the ones he could see from here, and beyond, the hill across the creek with the pines on top, black-seeming against the blue sky. And while he looked a great bird, too big for a hawk, had to be a golden eagle, cut a trail across the sky with never a wing beat. (255)

The scene is notably the same as, but different from, the home the colonists have left behind. Arnow calls our attention to the eagle again after the ceremony as Little Brother, now the godfather of the child, and Jethro emerge from the church. It seems clear that Arnow means to associate this rebirth of Leslie in the form of his namesake with the creation of the new nation (the novel takes place, after all, during the Revolutionary War). But the form this rebirth takes is most interesting. Werner Sollors, in his thought-provoking study *Beyond Ethnicity*, discusses the use of Biblical typology and imagery by ethnic, minority, and regional peoples in the United States to affirm an American identity, a solidarity with the country's mythic mission of creating the "City on the Hill," the new utopia. Citing the work of Sacvan Bercovitch in *The American Jeremiad*, Sollors details the historic use of such symbols as the eagle:

The eagle that was finally used for the [Great] seal is not just the classical emblem of republics but also the biblical eagle of Exodus [19:4] and Revelation [12:14], an image of escape and immigration. . . . The typological elevation of the migration experience to a new exodus was and continues to be a dominant mode of conceptualizing immigration and ethnicity. . . . (44-46)

Further, the use of such typology can serve both to identify a group and to establish its relationship to the nation as a whole. Sollors asserts: "Typological rhetoric may indicate the Americanization of people who use it. Yet it can, alternately or at the same time, serve to define a new ethnic peoplehood in contradistinction to a general American identity" (49).

What Arnow seems to be doing here, is no less than associating Leslie Collins' rebirth with the region's claim to authorship of the American dream. Significantly, *Kentucky Trace* follows *Flowering on the Cumberland* in emphasizing a distinction between the Cumberland and New England, that region usually claiming to have fathered the new democracy. We are frequently reminded in *Kentucky Trace* that the yellow-haired woman is from the northeast. She is associated with the crassness and materialism, the regional chauvinism and the will to exploit, which to Arnow and to Appalachia typify the northeast. The Appalachian region, on the other hand, and the motley crew who here represent her, are more clearly in tune with the egalitarian ideals of the new Canaan. In *Flowering*, Arnow says, "Middle Tennessee, thus, looks around 1800 like a dream of democracy come true. . . . The region, up

river as well as down, was undoubtedly for some years after the end of the Indian troubles about the closest thing to paradise the world has ever known" (110-11). In contrast to this world, the north is frequently described as cold. "Travelers of later years wrote of the 'morose habits of the sad Americans' found in Philadelphia and other eastern centers, but no visitors ever accused the Cumberlands of cold reserve," Arnow reports (123), and "Compared to the New England child, the Southern baby was reared with great tenderness" (69). In fact, Arnow argues, the infant death rate was significantly lower in Appalachia than in the North (68). Clearly, Leslie Collins, by saving young William David from the callousness of his Philadelphian mother, contributes to that statistic.

Sollors has a useful discussion of ethnogenesis, a process whereby generations reaffirm their connection with an ethnic (here regional) and American identity through consent rather than by descent, by choice rather than by birth. Leslie Collins is the son of a Virginia planter, a Loyalist turned rebel. In the beginning of the novel, we find him alienated from his parents. He ran away from home several times as a child, and at the beginning of his trek believes his father to be a Loyalist. Only after he has chosen his new family and consecrated his association with the ideals of the new nation can he make peace with them. This is not deracination; it is self-identification in the American, the Appalachian, way.

It was also Arnow's way, for she, too, after having left to assert her right to a career of her choice, frequently returned to reaffirm her connection with the Cumberland. The similarity between Arnow's own experience and her protagonist's is highlighted further by the fact that Leslie Collins becomes a writer. His decision to name William David after himself and to claim him as his own is followed by the careful, almost tedious composition of a letter to his mother in which Leslie creates a fictional past to explain the baby to his family and thus gain acceptance for it and, by extension, for himself.

The composition of this letter home (to reconcile himself with his mother) takes place over three chapters and many narrative interruptions. While he is writing it, Leslie must stop and take care of the needs of his new family. (One can't help but think of the intrusions into Arnow's writing space here.) The process involves drafts and rewrites. Leslie weaves a tale which dramatizes the death of his first wife, the meeting of a second fictional and idealized wife, the birth of William David, and the death of the baby's mother during the war. So effective is the writing that Leslie finds himself moved to tears by the story. When he shares it with Rachael, who is entirely too familiar with the truth of the baby's parentage, she, too, weeps. The narrator, reflecting Leslie's thoughts, tells us:

It could be he had written an exceptionally fine tale. Rachael's tears didn't mean anything. Some women could get so wrapped up in a novel they'd cry and carry on as bad as Rachael and all the time they knew the tale was a lie from one end to the other. Men could be just as bad. Two or three years back, he'd taken a copy of *Robinson Crusoe* with him on a surveying trip. One of his chain carriers had got so wrapped up in the tale, he'd look for the print of a big bare foot whenever he happened upon a bit of bare sandy creek bank. (284)

That Arnow associates Leslie's self-created past and identity with writing novels is obvious here. So, also, is a certain amount of ambivalence about it. The tale is powerful -- Leslie himself is affected by it -- and is associated with its prototype; but it is also a little foolish, sentimental, and a lie. During the whole process -- from the christening to the writing of the letter -- Leslie is obsessed with guilt for the fiction he is creating. But we do not join in that judgment of him; he is a loving man with the welfare of his chosen family at heart. The emotional truth of the letter is clearly valid as is the significance of the christening ceremony, no matter how "sacrilegious" it may seem. Also, he is weary of traveling, as he tells us, and wants to go home. On the other hand, it is not so clear why he must create this false past. His mother is concerned with propriety (not unlike Arnow's mother) but why such an

elaborate tale? So implausible is this letter-writing sequence in terms of the realist plot that its psychological resonances cannot be contained in it.

The series of events which interrupt Leslie while he is working on the letter add to the ruminations about truth and fiction, for they all contain small narratives which involve the telling of lies for greater truth. For example, Jethro counterfeits some papers to get supplies for the rebels, and Leslie agrees to kill the baby in exchange for Rachael's freedom, all the while planning for the infant's escape. Arnow seems to be commenting on the efficacious nature of good writing, for she draws a distinction between such "lies" and that told by Sadie when she falsifies Leslie's Bible to conceal the illegitimacy of her son.

The incredibility of Arnow's narrative as she traces Leslie's writing forces us to concentrate on the tensions produced in the text over the issue of truth and fiction and the creation of tales. A further tension is created between the detailed description of the daily activities of Collins and the forward movement of the plot -- typical for Arnow and, I would suggest, further evidence of her ambivalence about the making of meaning in fiction. It is clear that she associates details with everyday life and people, and I would argue that she partially experiences her writing ambitions as conflicted with, as pulling her away from, "the common folks" of her past. The writing scenes in this novel are entirely unnecessary to the plot and yet resonate as the crux of the matter.

*The Kentucky Trace* is Arnow's letter home. Coming at the end of her life and career, it contains as much resolution as is to be found in her work about her relationship to Appalachia, to her family, and to her creative vision. It claims for the region a central place in the creation of the American dream. But it has an aura of nostalgia about it. The novel contains several scenes in which Leslie laments the passing of the pristine environment as the pioneers forge west. Destruction is born with the nation. And, as we have seen, Arnow's exploration of the nature of her art is fraught with conflict and tension. In its struggle, the novel reveals that resolution was as yet incomplete.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Sandra L. Ballard for her transcriptions of two tapes made of lectures delivered by Arnow late in her life in which Arnow speaks of her early experiences rewriting her grandmother's stories and of her mother's expectations regarding her future. The first is "Writing and Region" given at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville on July 19, 1984; the second was delivered at Morehead State University in Morehead, Kentucky, on June 29, 1985. Wilton Eckley in his 1974 biography Harriette Arnow also discusses Arnow's conflict with her family.

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