

"Willow Sheridan Rode Voltaire" was found among the many unpublished papers Coleman Dowell left in his New York apartment overlooking Central Park where this sophisticated writer and composer loved to entertain his many friends. Critics and avant-garde writers from the New York and other literary milieus—Walter Abish, Edmund White, Gilbert Sorrentino, Bradford Morrow, Christopher Cox—were his frequent guests.

I chose this story among the various papers I received from his literary executor. Dr. Bertram Slaff, as I was immediately aware of the fact that it lets us steal a revealing glimpse of Dowell's talent. Most probably a segment of a larger project—the Sheridan saga, which the author had been planning for a long time¹—this story offers not only the charm of the unfinished but also the promise of an open work.

It presents perhaps some difficulties for those unfamiliar with Dowell's writing—his narrative preciosity, his muscular and even baroque lexicon, the unpredictable, chameleonic nature of his characters, figures often presented in silhouette or by superimposition: male/female, child/adult, white/black. These effects are typical of Dowell's characters. Their function is to mitigate some of the disturbing contiguities in his central themes—the complicity between disgust and desire, human suffering and the darkest side of Eros—and to enlarge the fragmented identities of his ambivalent characters.

This ambivalence, which in some cases takes the form of antinomic doubleness, is clearly evident in "Willow Sheridan Rode Voltaire." From the very beginning the reader is struck by the presence of an intriguing, often oppositional duplicity. There is duplicity in the young protagonist, thirteen-

year-old Willow, eccentric and two-faced, who through an odd play of reflections and disguises turns herself into a woman, quite literally putting herself in the shoes and clothes of Ivy, an inhabitant of the house. There is duplicity in the Southern setting—to Willow what is homey (the garden, the house), is linked to awe and horrors; with its blinding overexposure, its dark landscapes and dark memories, the setting seems illuminated less by the natural brightness of the sun than by the stark light of a flashgun.

Again, the antinomy appears in the tone of the narration, often characterized by a counterpoint rhythm; for Dowell was also a composer. It appears in the merging of the initial realistic dimension into a surrealistic plane—an effect achieved through the peculiar use of voice shifting, which creates different levels of temporality, with the past resurfacing from a present that is fixed in a suspension of objects, architecture, and disguises.

Chronology is denied by a narrative process which engenders anomalous time sequences, a concept tentatively synthesized in Dowell's first novel through a character "feeling like a melted watch in Dali—time out of sequence, function impaired if not destroyed" (Dowell 1987, 219). The same concept presides over this story with its flux that progresses and gains as it turns backwards to bring people and things back to older shapes and orders.

Dowell's ability lies here in constructing an ingenious story on the irrational and on the abandonment of logic, exploiting the narrative possibilities therein to the maximum. The figure of a little girl who projects a negative of herself is in itself irrational: stripped to the bone, oxidized by the sun, Willow has no shadow left in this blinding scenario.

As the reader soon realizes, the realistic dimension of the story disappears the moment Dowell deprives Willow of her "real" presence and another figure—that of Ivy, the adult—is superimposed on the child. Both live an alternative existence—one which is past and future at the same time. It is the existence of the adult the girl is going to become, as Willow already feels this metamorphosis in her own body.

The relationship with time has a determining role in Dowell's fiction, as it does with many authors of the South, Faulkner for one.² Dowell proved that for him, time—that great fetish of history—was always present, and that he respected its inexorability, especially in its ultimate form, death.

But Dowell knew how to mold time, and convert it into an ally for his own narrative strategies. Although he observed it closely, often fixing it in a symbiotic link with eroticism,³ he also strove to court it with the respectful

mocking irony of Emily Dickinson, one of his favorite sources of inspiration. In their match with death, Dowell's characters devise the boldest strategies in order to exorcise it, turning to strange mimetic and transformational forms. Thus, for example, Miss Ethel, the spinster protagonist of Too Much Flesh and Jabez, reacts to the horror of a life without carnal knowledge—which for her is death—by creating Jabez, her fictional alter ego, a beautiful androgyne through whom, at least in her fantasy, she can seduce her favorite pupil.

The overlapping of identities is one of Dowell's most masterful effects, and one in which he excels. His playing with voices—viz. the skilful building of various narrative levels in Island People, his masterpiece—is by no means the sterile, fashionable game in which many contemporary experimental writers engage, for Dowell uses his technique to build the complex psychology of his characters.

The skill and originality of Coleman Dowell lie in his capacity for producing (deceptively) smooth surfaces out of very complex stories; it lies in his ability to render an elliptical and complex fictional structure plausible, in such a way that it is not merely an elaborate artifact but, above all, a vehicle of sense.

The literary quality of his books won Coleman Dowell the admired attention of an elite of intellectuals and writers (Edmund White discovered him after reviewing Island People), but it never earned him the popular acclaim he wished for and deserved. This wish was never realized, not even after Dowell wrote a more conventional text such as White on Black on White, an exploration of the racial barriers and links between blacks and whites, mostly viewed on the common territory of sex, violence, and human suffering.

Dowell yearned for fame all his life, from his first coming to New York from Kentucky in 1950.⁴ He settled in Manhattan, working as a writer and composer for a television network, and writing several plays, including the The Tattooed Countess, a musical based on the novel by his friend Carl Van Vechten. Deeply disappointed by his failure in musical theater,⁵ in the mid-sixties he shifted his attention to fiction, to which he dedicated the rest of his life until its tragic end.

Even in his relationship with the publishing world Dowell maintained his taste for elegance and style. He was as intolerant of vulgar compromises as he was of being assigned to any specific literary genre. He objected to being labelled "a gay novelist" or "a Southern writer": "I am a writer . . . I am a New

Yorker," *he would say in his musical, velvety voice,*⁶ *pointing out two of his life's passions: his art, and the city in which he lived and in which he felt "at home."*

Bitter disappointment in his literary career or fear of old age may have triggered Dowell's final tragic gesture. We still do not know for certain. What we do know is that the literary achievement of this master of style will soon receive deserved recognition, while the work of many of his celebrated contemporaries will be erased from our memory.

M.V.D.

¹ In his last year Coleman Dowell began reworking the Sheridan story as a novel. The Sheridan saga had been the subject of a play, *The Eve of the Green Grass*, which was given a non-commercial production by the Chelsea Art Theatre in the mid-sixties. (From a letter from Dr. Bertram Slaff dated March 19, 1995.)

² Proust's "sense of the simultaneity of time" was a great inspirational source for Dowell. See his interview with O'Brien, 96. Certain connections between Faulkner and Dowell have been pointed out by Karl, 295-96. On Dowell's aesthetics see also Kuehl and Kuehl.

³ The link between George Bataille's aesthetics and Dowell's is discussed in my essay on the author, 343.

⁴ Dowell was born in Adairville on May 29, 1925. He met a self-inflicted death in New York on August 3, 1985.

⁵ *A Star-Bright Lie*, Dowell's dark memoirs on these years of apprenticeship in the show business world, was published posthumously and was named the Lambda Literary Award's "Editor's Choice" (May 1995). See also Hirson.

⁶ The musical quality of his intonation was best defined by Edmund White ("He punched the one word *forte* in his otherwise *piano* sentence") in his article (23), later reprinted as a foreword to *A Star-Bright Lie*.

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