S. K. Winther's Testament to Life on the Land

by

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Sophus Keith Winther is best known as a novelist for his Grimsen trilogy: three novels about a Danish immigrant family in Nebraska, published in the 1930s. These works are deeply rooted in the land. The title of the last one, This Passion Never Dies, suggests that the passion for the land lives on even if the son leaves the farm: he carries with him the values learned, and ever loves and respects nature. Winther's subsequent fiction has not dealt with farmlife, nor has his literary criticism explored the works of those who wrote about life on the land. Winther himself was raised on Nebraska and Oregon farms, but since entering graduate school at the University of Washington and later teaching there, he has lived in Seattle, the largest city of the Northwest. Recently, however, his creative imagination has returned to the scenes of his youth to form a new novel which is far less obviously autobiographical than his earlier trilogy, but is nonetheless deeply rooted in his childhood on a farm where horses personified the link between man and nature.

In this as-yet-unpublished novel Winther explores the relationship between man and nature and what happens to that relationship when horses are replaced by tractors, the independent farmer by the corporation.[1] Winther is working with historical realities, for the tractor has indeed replaced the horse and corporate farms have become commonplace, usually squeezing out the "family farm" of earlier times. Winther's narrative seems to proceed according to the expectations of a realistic novel: plausibility in characterization and incident, verisimilitude in descriptive detail. The philosophical perspective is naturalistic (as it is in Winther's earlier fiction): what happens is the result of the operation of forces which are beyond the ultimate control of individuals and which work in conjunction with an evolutionary process that is indifferent to man's desire for meaning and order in his existence. The novel should not, however, be read as a realistic-naturalistic novel, for in its fictional method it is a romance (with the romance's tendency toward exaggeration, character types, and melodrama), and in its vision (structure and meaning) it is pastoral. Understood in these terms, the seeming lapses from realism take on meaning as symbolic statements of theme.

The novel begins by introducing the central character, Ben Wood, a boy of ten who is battling grasshoppers that threaten his family's existence. Winther's descriptions lyrically suggest Ben's closeness to the land: he is at one with nature, in all its beauty and its inherent capacity for destruction. Conflicts within the natural realm, however, are contained within a whole which is as re-creative as the cycle of

the seasons. A far greater enemy than grasshoppers faces this erstwhile romantic hero: the enemy is change which will eventually threaten his existence in ways grasshoppers never could. In that larger struggle, Ben will again be pitted against insurmountable forces, in a vain though heroic attempt to control his "corner of the world" (p. 6). The first chapter symbolically presents the central conflict of the novel and implies its resolution.

I have said that the enemy Ben will eventually face is change. But there are many kinds of changes, not all of them threatening or evil. Moreover, as Ben discovers, some seeming changes may bring us back, in a circular motion, to where we began. Ben's problem, which is the plight of every man, is to lay claim to those changes and circular repetitions that promote fulfillment and happiness, and to cope successfully with those changes and circular repetitions that threaten to darken human destiny.

Chronologically, the novel falls into two sections. In the first, we see Ben's growing up: the loss of childhood, the traumas and intense excitements of adolescence, the discovery of sex and birth of love. Winther has always been adept at capturing an adolescent boy's emotional life; he has not lost this ability with age. This section of the novel explores the changes that take place as one grows to adulthood. They are part of the natural process of life and death, and so they combine love and sorrow, gain and loss. In the second section of the novel, Ben is married and farms the land inherited from his parents. Sadly, Ben discovers that he unwittingly repeats some of the errors his father made in raising him: son becomes father and engenders the same resentments, even hate, in his own son. The circle is not broken, though distance and a degree of understanding mitigate the pain.

What remains constant in the midst of changes in human affairs is nature, and nature is microcosmically represented in the novel by the horse pasture, which becomes the central, dominating symbol in the book. The setting is indeed pastoral: an unfenced portion of land that is simply enjoyed by those who can appreciate its beauty. Moreover, the animals we see are domestic ones suited to a pastoral scene: cows, horses, chickens, a pet dog, and several beaver who provide a seeming link between man and primitive nature as Ben and Ruth talk to them, sharing their sorrows and their happiness. The horse pasture is a Garden of Eden; but like that earlier Eden, it is the setting for a fall from innocence. The boy Ben one day retires to his treehouse in the horse pasture to read a nickel-novel thriller.[2] While Ben pursues his innocent pleasures, a girl he dislikes appears and lures his dog into the corn rows where she entices the dog to have sex with her. Ben is horrified, but his full awareness of what is going on comes too late. The next day, when friends visit his family, the dog assaults a child and consequently is destroyed by Ben's father. Ben accepts this seemingly inevitable denouement, but regrets his innocence that kept him from rescuing his dog from the girl's advances. His childhood has come to an end, and Eden has been violated.

Though Paradise may not be fully regained, it is to some extent recaptured when Ben meets Ruth in the horse pasture (p. 82). She is one who also perceives and appreciates the beauty of this place, though the love they share there is not sexually consummated. Rather, it is Judy--a lively, very sexually-appealing girl-- who seduces Ben in the horse pasture. But Judy does not share Ben's vision; to her, the horse pasture lacks meaning. And yet years later, after Ben's marriage to Ruth and her death, as he visits the horse pasture for the last time, it is Judy, not Ruth, who appears to him in his fantasy-vision. At that moment, he regrets the direction his life had taken: he had rejected Judy when he suspected her of being unfaithful to him, though (in true romance fashion) she had appeared to him in a white dress and pleaded innocence. Judy then left town, and Ben turned back to Ruth whom he soon married. Now, late in life, he feels he had become "compromised to the reality of a commonplace life, endurable but stubborn, sometimes drab. He had for a brief period that summer believed himself made of finer stuff, a winged spirit--and then instantly he had been reduced to the ways and habits of all plodding, human life" (p. 321).

Winther is working here with a complex of good and evil, love and lust, romance and reality. At one point, it is the vision of Ruth in the horse pasture that keeps Ben from falling for the invitation of a prostitute (p. 159). Perverted or simply lustful sex seems to be repudiated by the ideal vision of the horse pasture; yet it is the setting for both perverted and lustful sex. Moreover, what seems to be lacking in Ben's and Ruth's relationship is the release of self in intense sexuality.[3] We need to look back to an earlier scene where Ruth invites Ben to go horseback riding with her. She takes him to another beautiful natural scene that is an abandoned railroad right-of-way. There they picnic, talk, and caress; but both are restrained from fulfilling their relationship sexually by their "conventional morality." Afterwards, in an ironic reversal of that conventional morality, Ben experiences "shame" when he realizes that he failed Ruth by not making love to her, and Ruth believes that she has lost Paradise by not being more aggressive in her advances toward Ben (pp. 110, 147-48, 150). A year later, after Ben's affair with Judy, he and Ruth return to this pastoral scene for another picnic that culminates in their sexual union. They soon marry; but as Ruth had recognized earlier, if Ben did return to her, it would be "reality, not a miracle" (p. 150). Ruth and Judy represent two distinct worlds to Ben: Judy is a romantic dream, Ruth is a prosaic reality.[4] During his last visit to the horse pasture, he is haunted by visions of Judy. Later, though, he asks himself if he really would have preferred a life with Judy which would mean not having had "the many good years of life with Ruth" (p. 335). At the end of the novel, he wanders aimlessly away from his farm, but he soon finds himself at that same abandoned railroad right-of-way where he and Ruth had had those two fateful trysts. He has come full circle. "Holding her dearly in his memory he went to sleep" (p. 342). The implicit regret for what was lacking in his relationship with Ruth

is never denied; but he has indeed come home--come home to as close a realization of the vision of the horse pasture as he can achieve in his life.

Interwoven with this drama of Ben's emotional life is the socio-economic theme of the transition from the family to the corporate farm. Ben's elder son, Peter, graduates from university with a degree in business administration. He soon secures a position with a corporation that is buying up land around Ben's place. Horses are being replaced by tractors; there isn't even a market any more for horses. Larger farms and sizeable capital are now necessary for successful farming, and Ben is finally forced to sell. Peter arranges the terms so that Ben can retain the house and the horse pasture. Actually, Ben assumes that his son will move to the farm with his family and build a new house there; then he finally realizes that Peter has no such intention--there is no longer any need to winter with the land, and he will live in the city. Ben, though, believes there is truth to Black Elk's notion that winter is "a time for resting, healing and meditation" (p. 301). As Ben ponders this new way of farming, he feels that "something living and vital had been left out." Even though the earth might not need human touch through the winter, still, the sense of relatedness brought "a sense of continuity, a feeling that he was a part of nature." Ben knows this, and believes that the rock on which one should build is the farm; Peter chooses to build on the shifting sands of the city (pp. 299-301).

Peter has no appreciation for horses (or for the horse pasture). Just as the central symbol for the depiction of Ben's emotional life is the horse pasture, so the horse itself is the central symbol for the portrayal of the transition to the corporate farm. The symbols are obviously interrelated--as are the themes, which can be subsumed under the single, more general theme of our relationship to nature. Winther asserts that man's relation to the horse is the keystone of evolutionary development (p. 212). While Ben tries to analyze the reasons for his strong sense of loyalty to his horses, he speculates that as he has been dependent upon horses, so has mankind. Although other animals have played their parts, no other compares in importance with the horse, and the prospect of losing that connection is fearful: "had [man] not accepted the friendship and the strength of horses, he would still be scratching the soil with a stick and living in mountain caves, as he will again when machines and men have raped mother earth, destroyed the animals, poisoned the delicate crust that covers the earth, polluted the rivers and made the oceans into cesspools" (p. 239). Still trying to sort out for himself what the horses mean to him, Ben ponders further:

> The horse is so close to the nature of the earth and of such principles as may govern the creation and development of life, that his being, when not perverted by man, comes very near to expressing the meaning of life. Not the meaning of life in some silly abstract sense with mystic overtones, but in the sense of functions, actions

> and loyalties that are shared among all living things, or if not as grand as all that, then those he shares with man, when he in his turn responds to the warmth and kindness of a horse. (p. 260)

Faced with the prospect of getting rid of his horses, Ben recognizes the folly of placing so much value on them: "'After all,' he mused, 'life does not lose its meaning just because you have to get rid of eight horses! No, of course not, but still find me the meaning that will serve as an adequate substitute!'" (p. 277).

It is indeed hard to conceive of a substitute, for Winther succeeds in making these horses come alive for the reader. In what are surely some of the best passages in the novel, he shows us these horses as individuals with distinct personalities whose lives are intertwined with Ben's memories. No wonder that he cannot sell, for a pittance, these noble beasts to a man who will likely slaughter them for dogfood. But what <u>can</u> he do? Slowly his plans take shape, almost unconsciously, with the inexorableness of fate. After his nighttime vigil in the horse pasture where the image of Judy returns to him, he turns to the barn in the early morning, pours kerosene on the floor, and lights the blaze. As the flames leap upward, a tractor-driver on a nearby hill, accustomed to excavations of now-useless farm buildings, calls out, "'There goes another one'" (p. 337).

The victory of the corporate farm, of machine-power over horses, would seem to be complete. The tie between man and nature is severed. This is the tragedy of the novel. But the novel does not end with the inferno of the horses' fate. I have stated that the novel is pastoral in its conception, and one dominant trait of pastoral literature is the attainment of some sort of resolution to the conflict between rural and urban values. Winther's novel reaches such a resolution, though a qualified one to be sure. Here we can see a vital connection between the two themes of the story. As Ben contemplates the fate of his horses, he also contemplates his own fate. So intertwined is the meaning of his own life with the life of his horses that he plans to die with them in the flaming barn. But as he ponders upon his own past and the two worlds represented by Judy and by Ruth, he recognizes that he does not "have to die with his horses. That idea must have been part of the romantic dream of what life might have been [with Judy]" (p. 334). And so he abjures the theatrics of suicide with his horses. But he nonetheless leaves the farm, wandering "westward" (p. 340) where he comes full circle and is comforted by Ruth's memory. Perhaps the fact that the final scene takes place at an abandoned railroad right-of-way provides some hope for the ultimate victory of the enduring land and its values over the transitory intrusion of man's mighty machines. There, he drinks deeply from the stream that had watered Ruth's and his horses years before; there he sees "new shoots . . . budding" from a tree with many dead branches; there he makes his bed of "dead leaves" (p. 342).

Ben is an exile from the land, just as Meliboeus is in Virgil's first eclogue. Tityrus, however, remains on the land, though he owes the continuation of his pastoral existence to the Roman politics which have conspired to exile Meliboeus: the pastoral life is tenuously held next to borders that threaten its very existence. In Winther's tale, no one remains on the land: there is Nobody Home. The exile is complete. In Winther's earlier novel, This Passion Never Dies, values associated with life on the land continued into the next generation through Peter Grimsen's son Hans. Winther's latest novel is more deeply pessimistic, for the continuity through the younger generation is not there.[5] And yet there is hope, for the land itself remains.[6] So long as nature survives man's abuse, so long as sensitive individuals respond to its pulse, so long will life be realized with beauty.

Notes

[1]Winther's novel has evolved through several drafts over the past few years. An early version, entitled The Horse Pasture Revisited, was completed in typescript in July, 1974. In this version the action took place on a single day of the central character's life, with earlier incidents related by flashbacks, and ended with his suicide. This version was expanded and the ending changed to the present one by February, 1978. Winther then decided to elaborate the early life of his character and changed the organization to chronological development, beginning with Ben's boyhood. This version was completed by June, 1979, and was titled The Horse Pasture and Beyond. In July, 1980, Winther revised the first chapter and changed the title to Nobody Home. Page references included in the text of this essay are to the 1979 typescript.

[2]Unlike Winther's earlier farm families, this one does not seem driven by work or plagued by poverty. The pastoral character is emphasized by the relative leisure of a boy who has time to indulge his interests and fantasies.

[3]These points are reinforced by the experience of Ben's son, Frederick, who is also sensitive to the meaning of the horse pasture and meets his girlfriend there. But she becomes pregnant, he flees, and Ben arranges an abortion. Unbridled passion is destructive, yet the horse pasture seems to encourage sexuality which can, of course, be life-affirming.

[4]Ruth reminds the reader of her Biblical counterpart: faithful, steady, and loving. Perhaps there are also some echoes of Judith in Judy; she uses her sexual charms to attain her ends, and in a sense she beheads Ben (paralyzes his reason or common sense). Ben is a favored one in the sense that he is a sensitive soul who responds to the beauties of nature, but his relationship to his father is not that of a favorite son. In earlier versions of the novel Winther used a non-biblical name, Wade.

[5]The younger son, Frederick, is one who should carry on these values. However, he drops from the story. After his disastrous affair, he disappears. Four years later he writes his father from Arizona, where he is prospecting for silver, and asks for money. Ben replies with news of Ruth's death, and no money. He never hears from Frederick again (p.219)

[6]History seems to suggest that we may be coming full circle: the workhorse is making a comeback. Perhaps a generation or so has been skipped, but the horse is still appreciated and is proving economically feasible in some situations. See Peter Chew, "If Fuel is Too High Down on the Farm--Just get a Horse!" Smithsonian, 10, No. 11 (February 1980), 76-83.