

A VISIONARY REACTIONARY

Derek Turner quizzes cult American novelist TITO PERDUE



You have been called “America’s lost literary genius” and compared with many different writers – James Joyce, William Faulkner, Samuel Beckett, John Kennedy Toole, to name just some – but with whom would you wish to be compared? Who or what made you want to be a writer?

My fate was sealed, I believe, when my father began reading aloud each night a chapter from some piece of children’s or young adult literature – *The Swiss Family Robinson* for example, or *The Call Of The Wild*. Later on as an adolescent I bumped into the novels of Thomas Wolfe, and thereafter I had no choice but to try to do what I’ve tried to do. I think maybe Swift and Aristophanes (I do not compare myself to these masters) felt as estranged from their societies as my character Leland (Lee) Pefley from his.

Your novels tell the story of Pefley at different stages in his own life,

through the lives of an ancestor and even posthumously. Pefley is reactionary, elitist, misanthropic, arrogant, intolerant, dreamy and inspired; he delights in being hated. He possesses a literally extreme idealism – “It accorded with his philosophy that good things should be far, far better than they were, and the bad worse, and never to avoid an extreme” – with exceeding nastiness – cudgelling people, stealing cars and books, leaving toilets unflushed to show contempt for the next user. Obviously, you do not behave as he does, but equally obviously he is at least semi-autobiographical. I have to ask – where does Perdue stop and Pefley begin?

Lee actually carries out actions that his creator would often wish to perform if he but had the courage. However, most of Lee’s worst behaviour occurs after he has lost his wife. I am minded of a line in Eisenstein’s *Ivan The Terrible* when, after the Tsarina has been poisoned,

Ivan declares that he now intends to be fully as terrible as he had been credited with. Of course, a person who feels genuine contempt would not consider his fellow citizens significant enough to deserve mistreatment.

Pefley is appalling, but he is also occasionally admirable. He loves beautiful things, he loves learning, and he has a devotion to his wife that lasts even beyond the grave. He does not hate people, but rather society, for turning them into ovine voters and sports fans - infantilized, weak-willed, sensate, soft, avaricious, narcissistic, guilt-ridden, frightened. What, for you and/or Pefley, are the chief causes of civilizational decay?

Some people believe our decadence has been caused by loss of faith, but I've come to believe that loss of faith is itself caused by prolonged prosperity, which dissolves discipline and offers temptations that cannot be resisted by most people. America could have stood up to anything except this.

For Pefley and/or you, the 1950s were a time of transition "between the rough men of the past and the soft ones of the generation coming up". Can you explain what you mean by this?

I think I've read that G B Shaw once prophesied that America would prove the first civilization to advance direct from barbarism to decadence without having ever passed through civiliza-

tion. And yet we did have that brief period, about 15 or 20 years worth between 1940 and 1960, our very own *Belle Epoch* when people behaved well for the most part, the economy was sufficient without being sumptuous, and a man could support a numerous family on his one salary alone. It was a romantic age, too, and in a way that lies altogether outside the experience of the young people of today.

You have Pefley say, at the age of 18, "I had rather be young now, in this decade, than rich and immortal later on", and you write about the specific qualities of Pefley's teenage years in the 1950s - how much better the music was then, how much pleasanter society, and so forth. But isn't this sort of thing highly subjective? Doesn't every generation think itself special, and its experiences and tastes richer than those of previous generations?

Lee is predicting that his age, the 1950s, will have been far better than the next generation's, a remarkably prescient piece of prognostication for one so young. But he's not dismissive of the past, if I remember correctly. On the contrary, as an adult he is prone to idealizing past ages.

Pefley is contemptuous of the incurious - "They would rather have something than be something - had they rather to read in Persian or have a new

car? How I long to grant to them the death that Crassus had – a good full meal of molten gold!” But surely the majority of people have only ever been as civilized as their exemplars?

There are an infinite number of people who could be selected as exemplars. And if the majority has always preferred rock stars and basketball players to composers and heroes of thought and action, then let them be criticized for it.

Some people strike Pefley as particularly objectionable, especially those who are economically successful – “[Lee saw] a nightmare face in a sports car. The car was a miracle of science and engineering, the driver himself pure rubbish, a pattern that seemed to hold for the century at large.” Pefley is always panting for the return of poverty, which for him is intrinsically ennobling. But surely poverty more often has a degrading effect?

Not poverty, but a certain degree of austerity, that’s what fosters the best. Under present conditions, the very wealthiest people are also generally among the very worst. It is far, far better under contemporary capitalism to short-sell futures indexes than to be any sort of creative human being doing actual work. It’s embarrassing to talk about these matters, as debased as the system is.

Must there always be an inverse correlation between economic prosperity and social decay?

Between sumptuousness and decay, yes I think so. The Hellenistic Period was far richer than the Hellenic. Of Rome, Gibbon writes, “Prosperity ripened the principle of decay.” Britain has never been wealthier than today.

If true, doesn’t that mean that civilization is always doomed to fail?

Civilizations don’t have to get wealthy. Sometimes they become poorer. America was a better, if more uncomfortable, place during the Great Depression than it is now.

Pefley seems to feel that all that can be done is a kind of opting-out, like Christian setting out from the City of Destruction. What would he think of someone who shared his views, but who wanted to fix things from inside?

Lee would have the greatest respect and sympathy for anyone striving to repair the system from within, even if he also believes such people are on schedule to fail. His rather morose view is that nothing can save us short of a catastrophe of some kind, a pandemic perhaps, or well-targeted meteorite.

Lee’s character is prefigured in his grandfather (*Opportunities in Alabama Agriculture*). Yet despite having similar natures and impulses, Ben stays and endures in rural Alabama,

whereas Lee moves away – although he is admittedly drawn back eventually to his hometown. Is Lee’s leaving a product of his simply having an enquiring mind – or is it just because he could? Don’t people always leave if they can? What price then Pefley’s idealized ‘life on the farm’?

A farmer, if he owns his own land, is his own boss and will rise or sink according to his own merits and effort and luck. A person of that sort is likely to form his own opinions and is largely immune to current fashion. America once was populated by just such folk, and the result was splendid. Lee himself, of course, is much too refined for a life like that, and consoles himself by admiring it from afar.

Leland didn’t understand what he was doing when he abandoned the South at age 18, and paid dearly for his mistake by ending up in New York.

One of Pefley’s chief targets is ugliness – “He, who had thought all of life to be like certain divine measures in the music of Debussy and Ravel, saw instead that there was a gas station, an immense pile of disused tires, and warehouses with broken windows”. Do you really feel that society today is less interested in aesthetic matters than at other times?

Today’s society suspects that there might well be such a thing as beauty, but doesn’t know where to find it.

Instead, our people rely upon the recommendations of authorities, who tell them that a canvas covered in camel dung is an example of high art. They want to do the right thing, but what is it?

It is said that when the Greeks put on a play, the people would come from miles away – that when Byron issued a new volume, crowds would begin to gather an hour before the shops had opened – that Verdi was the most admired Italian of his times. Today that sort of recognition belongs only to the aforementioned rock stars and basketball players.

Can a lost aesthetic sense be recovered? Is it inherent or inculcated?

Inculcated, Lee and I believe. Unfortunately, the condition of American education makes impossible the inculcation of a sense of beauty in the young, primarily because most educators are themselves ignorant of art and literature. My mother, who attended a one-room schoolhouse in which boys and girls of all ages were crowded together, received a much better education than any young person of my acquaintance. She could recite long passages from Browning and Tennyson when she was 96.

You say of Pefley “In him, the aesthetic had long ago overborne the ethical”. Should aesthetics be more important than ethics?

I think of Wagner, an unethical man who created in my opinion the greatest work of art in any format at any time. Would it have been better on balance if he had never lived? In him the aesthetic justifies the unethical. Mao Zedong, on the other hand, wrote poetry, and nothing can justify him.

Your books seem highly melancholic, albeit relieved by surreal gallows humour and numinous language. Death is always present for Lee – the Elizabethan ‘skull beneath the skin’. What is wrong with our present way of thinking (or not thinking) about death?

Modern people seem confident that it is better to be alive than not, a rash assumption. Lee loves that poem by Poe in which life is treated as a sickness that can be cured only by death. And then, too, there are so many other possibilities. If we can believe in black holes and ten dimensions and the outrages of quantum mechanics and particle physics, then we ought to be able to conjure up all sorts of inviting alternatives to eating and sleeping and earning a living.

Fields of Asphodel is set posthumously, with Lee searching for his wife’s ghost through a purgatorial landscape. The sort of afterlife you conjure up is as hallucinogenic as anything envisioned by Hieronymus Bosch. I have the impression that your conception of the afterlife may not be all that

different from that which obtained in medieval Christendom. Can you summarise your religious views?

I believe in something, but I don’t exactly know what it is. Humans are so complicated and capable of so many fine things that it is hard to believe that they are designed simply to transmogrify to mulch. The secularists say that love and beauty are but prejudices that arise in the mind as a result of atomic interactions – are illusions in other words, good only for appeasing some natural requirement. I doubt it. Cockroaches have no great appetite for poetry, but biologically do quite well. No, I think beauty is a reflection of something that actually exists in some domain that is not available to us in our present state. ♦

TITO PERDUE

was born in Chile in 1938 and brought up in Alabama. He obtained a BA in English and History at the University of Texas, and an MLS in Librarianship and an MA in Modern European History at Indiana University. He has worked as an insurance underwriter, librarian and bibliographer, and is the author of five acclaimed published novels – Lee (1991, reprinted 2007), The New Austerities (1994), Opportunities in Alabama Agriculture (1994), The Sweet-Scented Manuscript (2004) and Fields of Asphodel (2007). Fields of Asphodel is reviewed on p74

