

Understand Me Completely

by Fred Chappell

Selected One-Act Plays of
Horton Foote

Edited by Gerald C. Wood
Dallas: Southern Methodist
University Press; 320 pp.,
\$29.95 (cloth), \$14.95 (paper)

Cousins and The Death of Papa:
The Final Two Plays From the
Orphans' Home Cycle

by Horton Foote
New York: Grove Press; 194 pp.,
\$18.95 (cloth), \$9.95 (paper)

The Trip to Bountiful, Tender
Mercies, and To Kill a
Mockingbird: Three Screenplays

by Horton Foote
New York: Grove Press; 219 pp.,
\$19.95 (cloth), \$9.95 (paper)

Ordinary people, we are told, ordinarily speak in clichés, bromides, and dotty banalities, and it is the task of the literary artist, of the playwright in particular, to give them expressive and convincing words. This is the practice of Aeschylus and Shakespeare, of Tennessee Williams and Tom Stoppard. The success of heightened language upon the stage is undeniable; Hamlet ponders and Lear rages and the language they utter is as much a spectacle for the ear as the high deeds and carnage are visual spectacles.

But spectacular diction can cause problems. Lear rages, yes, but only the most accomplished actor can give point to his rage and poignance to his lament; often enough our stage Hamlet appears not a thoughtful troubled youth, but a long-winded wimp. We spectators have difficulty in suspending our disbelief; always in our inmost thoughts we know that people really don't talk that way and never did, not in Shakespeare's time, nor in Euripides', nor in our own. Most assuredly not in our own time.

So that there has arisen another tra-

dition of stage diction that we might call the Laconic and that may derive in modern times from Chekhov. This tradition employs, insofar as it can, only the most ordinary words and sentences, the same phrases we hear at the supermarket and in traffic court. It is a poor medium for revealing the secrets of our heart, we think, savorless and without individuality, as drab as galoshes but not as serviceable.

The playwright who chooses to employ laconic rather than heightened diction may have elaborate philosophic motives for his choice. Harold Pinter's characters are less interested in revealing secrets than in keeping them hidden, even from themselves, and their terse cryptic sentences generate a steely tension. The banal phrases of Paddy Chayevsky's timid bachelors display their uneasiness with social custom, with courtship and every formal occasion, because for all their immersion in the urban crowd they are lonesome strangers. Samuel Beckett's use of dull colloquialism requires the premise of characters so dimwitted that the commonplaces they mouth with such fearful determination are actually products of the deepest cogitation they can muster.

Our example at hand, though, is Horton Foote, whose usage of ordinary language differs from almost everyone else's usage. Of contemporary playwrights only Peter Taylor and Reynolds Price approach Foote in purpose and to successful effect, and neither Price nor Taylor is content to keep his language at such a low level of intensity; they both rise to rhetoric when their stories need heightened diction.

The difference between Foote and similar practitioners is one of respect. For this solidly rooted playwright people speak the way they do because they find everyday speech expressive; no matter how trivial it may seem to the cultivated literary sensibility, the cliché says what is in the heart of a citizen of Harrison, Texas. It doesn't say all that is in his heart, but then neither do Hamlet's soliloquies tell us all. And the reason that such flat colloquial diction is ex-

pressive for one of Foote's characters is that it is understood by others; speech is less a matter of self-expression than an act of social reassurance. A language code is present in all of Foote's situations, a code formulated in these terms: "I will say only what you expect me to say, but I expect you to understand that I think and feel things that neither you nor I have words to express. In this way, I expect that you will understand me completely."

Here is Wilma Thompson talking in the 1953 one-act play, *A Young Lady of Property*: "You know sometimes my old house looks so lonesome it tears at my heart. I used to think it looked lonesome just whenever it had no tenants, but now it comes to me it has looked lonesome ever since Mama died and we moved away, and it will look lonesome until some of us move back here."

These lines come about as close as Horton Foote cares to get to "poetic" diction. If they went an inch forward toward poetry, they would be phony; if they slipped an inch back toward the common, they would be bathetic. We can hear in them the tone of plangent lament for the past that we hear from Mrs. Watts in *The Trip to Bountiful*, a screenplay written 30 years later. In both plays Foote makes his characteristic point that by renewing a relationship with the past one can aid a determination to live more amply and more effectively in the present. Wilma Thompson and Mrs. Watts turn a momentary regard upon the beautiful things that used to be in order to face the bleak present and the bleaker future. Both of them know that their futures can have no meaning until they have paid their respects to the past; they realize that they have no stake in the present unless the past is always included as a part of it.

The strong people, the characters whom misfortune and disaster can wound but never destroy, are those who have kept the past firmly with them here and now and ever after. In *Cousins*, published first in 1979 as one of the nine plays of *The Orphans'*

Home Cycle, Horace and Elizabeth Robedaux remember the birthday of their dead daughter, Jenny. "I thought later I'd walk out to the cemetery and take a flowering plant of some kind. Maybe a poinsettia," Elizabeth says. "I don't forget her. I remember Mrs. Huston telling me at the time I would, but I don't. It's like Mama says, you think of her differently than the others, but you think of her."

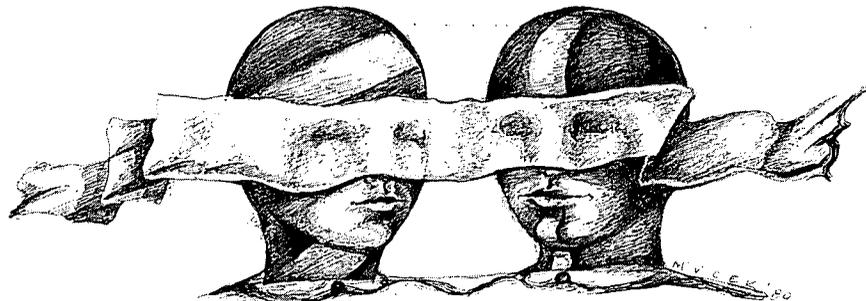
Mrs. Huston says one thing, but Mama says the other . . . The memory of Jenny's birthday is not private; the differing opinions of the community are attached to the event so firmly that Jenny remains—for her mother, anyway—a member of the community. To think of this birthday is to compare communal views about our relationship with the dead.

The characters whom Foote has drawn as happy or content are those who have found a way to come to terms with the past, who have in some sense made their peace with the dead. Mrs. Watts in *The Trip to Bountiful* wants to die in her home, a place that has vanished from the face of the earth. Twelve miles from her destination she is apprehended by a sheriff and to him she makes her plea: "Let me go these twelve miles . . . before it's too late. Understand me. Suffering I don't mind. Suffering I understand. I didn't protest once! Even though my heart was broken when those babies died. But these fifteen years of bickering, of endless, petty bickering. It's made me like Jessie Mae sees me. It's ugly. I will not be that way. I want to go home. I want to go home."

"Suffering I understand," she says, but she does not. She only means here that she has experienced a great deal of suffering and expects it as a normal part of life. But she does not comprehend why suffering is necessary. Earlier she has confessed to Thelma, her seatmate on the bus, the great shame of her life, the fact that she wasn't in love with her husband. "Do you believe we are punished for the things we do wrong? I sometimes think that's why I've had all my trouble. I've talked to many a preacher about it; all but one said they didn't think so. But I can't see any other reason."

On one side, then, Mrs. Watts' trip to Bountiful is a penitential pilgrimage toward expiation. On the other side, it

is the satisfying of a compulsive need to make sure that her past actually did take place, that her identity is consonant with the facts of her life as she knows them. It is an ordinary fate in our century to become an orphan of history: our parents and relatives die or are killed, the towns where we were born, or even the nations, change their names and are robbed of their cultures and heritages, sometimes even of their languages. Our present life is so puzzling in shape, so hysterical in tone, so inimical in its daily details, that it seems merely phantasmal, a nightmarish delusion. How could we get from the *there* that we remember to the *here* that is so dreadful to endure? The bridges between past and present have been destroyed, and Foote's characters have to make extraordinary efforts to reach toward the past, to assure themselves that their memories are true and not illusory daydreams.



The Death of the Old Man is a television play of 1953. It is told in subjective camera from the point of view of Will Mayfield, the old man who has been rendered speechless by stroke. He hears his sons discussing the fate of their maiden aunt, Rosa, and deciding that they are unable to take her in. One of the sons explains his feelings: "I refuse to feel guilty over it. I'd like to be with Papa and open my home to Rosa and the world, but the times have changed, Tom. People can't live that way anymore."

In his paralysis, the old man hears these words and makes a fearful vow, almost Lear-like in its sudden but powerless intensity: "Let me out of this bed . . . let me out . . . I'll work again. I'll fill the banks with money. I'll buy houses and land and protect us from the dark days because kindness has gone from the world, generosity has vanished."

As it turns out in the play, Rosa finds a place for herself and Will Mayfield

dies, as he tells us, "in peace and contentment." But this happiness is made possible by particular circumstances, and there is no defense against the debilitating and sometimes brutalizing changes that time brings.

There is no defense but there are some momentary stays against confusion. While the community exists, it is possible and comforting to take a place in it. Religion offers no final answers for Foote's stricken searchers, no final security, but it does give a steady solace, some part of which is social in nature. The best attitude to take seems that of Mac Sledge in *Tender Mercies*, whose quizzical Christian stoicism puts more than a measure of faith in human relationships and none at all in worldly circumstance. "You see," he says, "I don't trust happiness. I never did. I never will."

Mac's outlook appears cheerless, but he understands it—as Foote seems to

understand it—as reality. Yet, if there is little coziness in his philosophy, there is never the kind of heartbreak in it that Phil Massey discovers in his fantasies. *The Land of the Astronauts* is a one-act play of 1988 and depicts Foote's familiar Texas landscape as having changed into a Disneyland where dreams of the luminous future can addle a man like Massey, deceive him into believing that happiness is just barely beyond his outstretched fingers.

Massey describes his longing and frustration with these words: "I work in a restaurant and I go to school at night. Day after day. Year after year. And nothing happens. I go to Houston to look for work and nothing happens and nothing is going to happen and I want something to happen. Is that too much to ask? I want something for once to happen to me. Why can't I go up into space and leave this earth and all its troubles and frustrations behind?"

His wife Lorena makes a reply that embodies Horton Foote's deepest con-

victions. "Well, even if you went, you would have to come back down sometime, or you would die. Come on home with me now."

Fred Chappell's latest book, due this fall from St. Martin's, is Brighten the Corner Where You Are. His long poem, Midquest, has just been reprinted by Louisiana State University Press.

The Twenty Years' War

by Joseph Adelson

The IQ Controversy, the Media,
and Public Policy

by Mark Snyderman and
Stanley Rothman

New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction
Books; 192 pp., \$24.95



"Intelligence" may offer the clearest example we have of how ideology can corrupt social science. Although the topic has been politicized by both left and right, during the last generation the ideological pressures have come almost entirely from the left, and along these lines: that intelligence is essentially the product of experience—above all, the nature of the child's environment—the genes having little to do with it; group differences in test performance are spurious, contrived to favor the socially privileged; the meaning of intelligence is in any case unclear; and the methods of measuring it inadequate and likely to be prejudicial.

This indictment reflects a more general aversion towards heredity, intelligence being only one of a large number of qualities where a genetic influence is denied. Until recently, schizophrenia was thought to be produced by pathological childrearing, despite much evidence for a significant biological influence. When the infantile autism disorder (the "Rain Man" syndrome) was diagnosed in the 1940's, it was also taken to be the result of a disturbed upbringing—in this case, by a "refrigerator mother." This assumption, especially, illustrates vividly the power of dogma over observation, as significant features of the syndrome point to a

strictly neurological explanation.

Although fierce environmentalism has given way where severe mental disorder is concerned, it remains stubbornly in place regarding intelligence. It is not hard to see why: measured intelligence is highly correlated with both social class and class origin. Professionals (and their children) score higher than skilled tradesmen (and theirs) who, in turn, score higher than unskilled laborers and their offspring. While this tells us little about the genetics of intelligence, nevertheless it is sometimes taken quite seriously indeed: environmentalists argue that the class-IQ linkage demonstrates that the socially-favored pass on their social advantages; hereditarians hold that genetic merit is rewarded economically. The argument is intensified by the black-white disparity in tested intelligence. As the authors of this excellent study tell us, observed racial difference is at the heart of the modern IQ controversy, where it has produced a resistance to "rational public discussion." Are those differences due to test bias, or the outcome of deprivation? If not—what then?

There is another element in the dispute—the struggle to dominate public opinion. Many environmentalists are willing to acknowledge some hereditary contribution to intelligence, as long as it is kept out of sight. They fear that ordinary citizens, not grasping the subtleties of the argument, will find their bigotry toward members of social and racial minorities confirmed, a result that would reduce support for special efforts intended to benefit the deprived. In short, the IQ controversy involves much more than an argument about the "facts"; it concerns equally how facts are to be understood.

All these issues and many more are covered in this exemplary work. Snyderman and Rothman have given us a remarkably complete account of the controversy, its history, and current status. That is a considerable achievement, since it comprises a large number of smaller disputes, some of them highly technical. We have here a balanced, accessible, and accurate appraisal of the evidence, subordinated to an ingenious format that combines discussions of the central questions with a survey of expert opinion. Over six hundred scholars, chosen for their competence in testing and education, were questioned on

such issues as the definition of intelligence, its measurement, its relation to later success, the plausibility of group differences, and its heritability. We learn that these specialists "share a common view of the most important components of intelligence, and are convinced that it can be measured with some degree of accuracy." They "also believe that individual genetic inheritance contributes to variations in I.Q. within the white community," a somewhat smaller majority expressing "the same view about Black-White and SES (socioeconomic status) differences in I.Q."

Should these conclusions come as a surprise to you, the reason is probably the discrepancy between them and what you've gathered from television and the better newspapers. The pivotal part of this book examines how the subject of intelligence has been covered by the media, through content analyses of news reports carried by the major news magazines, the television networks and the most influential national newspapers. These reports, the authors found, were both wanting in their grasp of the complexities of the subject and affected by a tendency to reduce, simplify, and dramatize them. Those are sins generic to journalism, of course, and to that degree they can be understood, if not quite forgiven; far more troubling is the frequency of serious error. For example, such significant figures as Arthur Jensen and Richard Herrnstein were reported to hold views they would not entertain for a minute. Most troubling of all, as you might guess, is the consistency and pervasiveness of comfortably biased assumptions: that IQ is a myth, that intelligence is hard to define and measure, that IQ tests are racist and sexist and don't predict much of anything anyway, and that heredity has almost nothing to do with intelligence. The media offers a topsy-turvy view of reality, in which mainstream scholarly opinion is represented as deviant while genuinely deviant views, such as those espoused by Leon Kamin, are treated as widely accepted conclusions. The explanation is that the media have been free to determine who is and who is not an expert, what is and is not the truth, and have elevated scholarly views they find ideologically acceptable above those they consider "reactionary" and unacceptable.