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Review

Shelton, Allen: *Dreamworlds of Alabama*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. xxv + 197 p. \$22.95, ISBN 0816650349.

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A Dandy in Alabama

Before starting to read *Dreamworlds of Alabama*, I located Jacksonville, Alabama on Google Earth. The town sits between Birmingham and Atlanta right next to the Talladega National Forest. I zoomed in as much as I could and saw the roofs of houses, streets, and forests. Had I had a stronger zoom I could have seen the particularities of the vegetation and the habitat. Had I zoomed in even more, I would have been able to look into people's houses, into their boxes, chests, and cupboards. I could have seen that "just under a thin layer of grass the ground is clogged with rocks" (8). Perhaps I would have seen *doodlebugs* (which the *Audubon Field Guide* describes as larvae with "oversized heads with long spiny jaws, short legs, and bristles all over their bodies") (11). Had I used an even stronger zoom the perceptive experience would have turned into a dream leaving me swimming in a liquid space mixed with juxtaposed time in which the surroundings no longer mattered, neither Birmingham nor Atlanta (except when you stand on a hill and see airplanes landing on the ninety miles away Atlanta airport). Walter Benjamin, in his Arcades Project, found that in the window displays of Parisian arcades "combs swim about, frog-green and coral-red, as in an aquarium; trumpets turn to conches, ocarinas to umbrella handles; and lying in the fixative pans from a photographer's darkroom is birdseed" (54). Shelton's book is not about early Twentieth Century Parisian glass and iron shopping districts but about a valley next to Jacksonville, Alabama. The result is amazingly similar. Through Shelton's zoom the valley becomes a sort of mind, an unconscious Freudian empire, which "retains its past, even as the new debris accumulates, sending shivers across the surface of the skin" (23) until it appears as a labyrinth of subterranean mental tunnels deeply dug by climate, joy, suffering, and loneliness.

Shelton poses as a sort of Georges Perec (who is frequently quoted) with an obsession for non-linear history; a Walker Evans using a distorted lens, or a junk-yard architect from the South

like Samuel Mockbee working with words and sentences instead of with junk. More than once the book reminds us of Daniel Wallace's *Big Fish*, especially in passages like: "I dreamed I saw my grandfather floating underwater in the big lake with the Amur, the grass eating carp from Vietnam, cruising alongside him. These are torpedo-shaped seventy-pound fish. A clump of algae was curled around his foot. The surface of the lake was sealed with see-through Tupperware cover" (12).

It is Freud who posits the city as a metaphor for the mind (110) and "the garden acts for me as Rome did for Freud or Paris did for Walter Benjamin" says Shelton (25). By enchainning random memories, the book tells the "story" of the Shanadoah valley in northern Alabama crystallizing what is distinctive about people, mules, dogs, handblown window panes, fire hydrants sticking out of grass covered cemeteries, THE GARDEN, and (not to forget) the ghosts, or simply what is so distinctive about Southern distinctiveness. Today, in this valley, the property values are booming (4). But this is a book about a "wereworld."

The characters are, almost all of them, extremely strong and Faulknerian, yet there is no attempt to write a story. All we have is a surrealistic picture of kudzu-overgrown Alabama. When Shelton says, "the slave quarters have melted into the ground," we are tempted to understand it literally rather than metaphorically. Sometimes there are fragments of a narrative like the – rather good – ironical account of youthful experiences with Born Again Christians from the Faith Temple telling young Shelton that "sociology is the devil" and "you must burn all your books" (80-98).

It goes without saying that this is a world without cellphones or computers. Electronic devices cannot grasp the meaning of scars in landscapes anyway. Instead, there is a lot of digging and burying going on in this book. Google Earth shows you roads, but how can you know that Satanists used these roads for their rituals? That they would bury the initiates alive in shallow graves or baptisms? This is actually not true. In reality it has been an Indian burial ground dating to AD 1 at the foot of the mountain (66-70).

Even the book's structure seems to follow the digging principle; underground (in the endnotes) another story develops like a rhizome: the question about how Freud has been dressed on different occasions, how his body behaved in relation to his clothes... Here, like everywhere else, words adopt an obsessive character: swallowing, disintegrating, distancing, working like

spades. Shelton is the gardener-flâneur walking around in a textual valley. And is that not what every good writer should be like? Benjamin held that the dandy is able to provide his own space, which is usually that of the city. Shelton chooses an Alabamian garden. Somebody has said that “*flânerie* enters its decline when it loses its connection with the city.”¹ Obviously, this is wrong. Shelton shows very well that Weber is dry and Proust is wet because as a gardener he must know. The whole project is not about ideas anyway but about objects. Which is not unusual either: even Karl Marx wrestled in a long footnote “with the question of why mules were the dominant draft animal in the South” (66).

A central sentence in the book might be “I was given a chance to do my own Arcades project when my mother died” (42). Another central sentence might be this one: “My relation’s death in the Shanadoah Valley refigured Benjamin’s hard arcades into something softer—emphasizing the ephemeral, things that rot, things that formed momentarily in the snow as an externalization of a hybrid unconscious...” (52). Until I read this book, I had been unable to associate the dandy with something stranger than surfing. Now I know that a dandy can also be a digger. Shelton’s words dig into the ground, and even when they become blunt like old spades he frantically continues to excavate the Being of the valley, of his family, of himself. One would not be surprised if he finds in one of these Appalachian graves the Heideggerian peasant shoes exactly as they have been painted by van Gogh.

The willful confrontation of the intellectual and the bodily calls to mind the word “authenticity.” The interweaving of Poe and Marx is reminiscent of Derrida. Other things are reminiscent of nothing. Into what category can interesting sentences like “a garden is a monumental corpse made of foliage and dirt, a breathing, eating statue...” (13) actually be scheduled? Call it ethnographic dreamworlds, ecopoetics, cultural studies, historical sociology, semiotics of the organic, or simply “general thought on an infinite regression” (which would be literature, I guess). All we can see is that here words are digging like drunken moles into a valley in order to make sense of something that most probably cannot be grasped. “Perec finds the hint of a larger meaning, almost a conspiracy of objects,” writes Shelton (73). What Perec finds,

¹ Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (1994): “The *Flâneur* on and off the Streets of Paris” in K. Tester (ed.), *The Flâneur*. New York: Routledge, p. 23.

Shelton finds it too, though comparing Perec with Shelton is rather like comparing a lightweight Parisian Renault 4 with an Alabamian pickup truck.

This might be a new literary genre, a sort of narrative imploding inward towards its own theorization instead of unfolding like a story. Or an explosion of earthlike metaphors that is impressive at many instants. However, there is nothing crooked in this text and the fascination is entirely sustained by honesty. In spite of its weird connection of poetry and theory, the writing is never technical but leaves an aftertaste of something almost sentimental. Here an author did well what he could do even if it is not what authors are normally expected to do.