

ANALYSIS

Honey in the Horn (1935)



H. L. Davis

(1896-1960)

In his introductory note, Davis separates himself from the Marxist politics then in ascendancy during the Great Depression: “There is no intention anywhere in the book of offering social criticism or suggesting social reform.” Transcending politics in art is a characteristic of Modernism. Underlying his aesthetic is a view of human nature that makes Davis cynical about “social reform.” H. L. Davis, figuratively speaking, was one of the cowboys in the saloon--like the brothel he depicts near the end of the novel in the steamboat port of The Dalles where he grew up--playing poker with a cigarette drooping from his lip, not one of the ladies or churchmen marching outside with signs demanding Prohibition.

On his title page Davis quotes lines from a square dance folk tune that identify his perspective with common rural people and promise that a boy will meet a girl in his story. The tune evokes the sweet life offered by the land in frontier Oregon with the image of honey in the horn, the cornucopia from Greek mythology. The sweetness of sexual fulfillment is also among the implications of the metaphor. The traditional western square dance teaches “balance” in relation to “partners”: Partnerships are formed, people give each other a hand, circular movement is recurrent, squares turn into circles and the dance becomes a kaleidoscope of mandalas in motion. The square dance is a ritual enacting perfect social union, the communal dream in the utopian tradition beginning with the New England Puritans (who did not dance) and continued by the westward movement as expressed in the Edenic myth of the Garden in the West. As a goal of the westward movement, Oregon extends and to some extent fulfills the dream of America as a promised land of milk and honey.

The novel opens at an old toll bridge station in Shoestring Valley, where people must pay to move on, a metaphor of life and a literal feature of crossings started by Indians when the white settlers began rolling west in covered wagons. The location is near Oakridge in the foothills on the west side of the Cascade

Mountains. This is after “the stampeding days.” The first pioneers here in southern Oregon are old now and the station had “a whole lot more space than there was any use for; and so had the country beyond it.” Unlike elsewhere in the country, here in Oregon there is plenty of room for both white settlers and Indians. The first paragraph ends by prefiguring the plot, with a reference to the forested mountains where “young men sometimes hid to keep from being jailed.” The plot begins before the novel does, when the owner of the toll bridge Uncle Preston Shiveley becomes too self-absorbed to manage the bridge or his two sons. He did not require his sons to pay for anything they did growing up and he allowed them to move on as “quarrel-picking drunks and community nuisances.”

The population of Oregon by 1906-08 was roughly half a million, of whom only several thousand were Indians, survivors of the disease epidemics that began centuries before when Spaniards arrived by ship and world trade began. Most of the best agricultural land had been claimed. White farmers had settled the Willamette Valley, establishing stable communities centered around churches, and populations were growing in the towns along the Valley, especially Portland. This novel is about the people outside the wide Willamette Valley where conditions remained much as they were throughout the homesteading period since 1843 and especially since the Civil War, with whites and Indians mingling and living off the land. Narrow little Shoestring Valley is out of the mainstream, an insular place where people get by on a shoestring. The narrative avoids the towns except for episodes in the wild steamboat port of The Dalles, making the novel more representative of the whole pioneering period.

The second paragraph is all natural description of Shoestring Valley including a catalogue of flowers and other plants in a style conversational and colloquial—“It was well-watered--too blamed well in the muddy season”--with original natural metaphors such as pioneers “cockleburred themselves onto the country” and “he was beginning to crawfish.” Catalogues in the novel emphasize natural abundance: Davis packs some dinner tables high with an incredible variety and quantity of food: “The country fed well, what with wild game and livestock and gardens, milk and butter and orchards and wild fruits and no man was ever liable to starve in it unless his digestion broke down from overstrain.” There are “elk and ducks and wild hogs.” Quail are available “by the hundreds all the year round.” Smelt “could be thrown ashore with a shovel...speckled trout by the cartload.” White settlers here have no practical sense of business “probably because living came so easy that they had never needed to develop one.” These whites are like the Coast Indians who are lazy because they can pick up salmon off the beach: “thirty and fifty pounds apiece, and they came in at the rate of about one every ten minutes.”

Uncle Preston Shiveley acquired the toll station by marriage but is too preoccupied to manage it. He is an intellectual disdainful of capitalism, a writer of romance who has the power of “charming away warts.” Shiveley considers himself the scholar of the community and is “full of tall principles of justice about human rights,” yet is too busy writing his memoirs to save his herd of sheep from drowning in a storm. Completely out of touch with reality crashing down around him, he is absorbed in his pioneer memories, “one of Uncle Preston’s excuses to keep busy when he should have been licking lambs and midwifing ewes.” And when he should have been parenting his two sons, who display their indifference to human rights by using a squaw “until they swapped her to a sheep-shearing crew for a second-hand pistol.”

Uncle Preston is a recluse from the real world, like a number of characters in Faulkner: “Preston sat locked in an old upstairs bedroom writing his history”--he “wrote fiercely to get done before the apple-tree fell in on the roof.” Davis mocks him for living completely in his own head, for being irresponsible to others by ignoring reality, for being a pretentious mediocrity, for being a sanctimonious hypocrite, for being a deadly influence on the young, for romanticizing Indians and for writing “a considerable raft of poetry” even worse than Emmeline Grangerford’s tripe in *Huckleberry Finn*. Uncle Preston represents the literary establishment that Davis attacked directly in *Rerum* and his ensuing story of young Clay Calvert is his rejoinder in the form of art.

Uncle Preston sees his adopted son Clay, an orphan, as a “drip-nosed youth of about sixteen”—“a hard-mouthed young hellfry.” Preston the supposed idealist is indifferent to his herd of eight hundred sheep, whereas Clay is a good shepherd in the storm and saves as many as he can from drowning in a flood. As an intellectual dissociated from Nature, Preston has held himself aloof from the life around him. He did not know that “the traditions of pioneer times in that country required him to be not merely a chronicler of

history, but a partaker in it." When he does decide to get involved after one of his sons by blood kills the other, Preston the supposed defender of human rights tries to murder his son Wade. That effort turns out like his experiments with native herbs: he "discovered several that would make him sick, though none that would cure anything."

Clay compares Preston's sons the Shiveley brothers to wild hogs and sees his part in Preston's plan to get Wade shot as merely killing a wild animal. That both Clay and Wade are like wild animals is implied when, after he passes the useless pistol to Wade in the jail, Clay uses Wade's hideout, taking his place as a hunted animal. Clay's early life is determined as in *Naturalism*. Fortunately, like Huck Finn, he is saved by a good heart under a rough exterior: Saving the sheep is pastoral, countering the selfish puritanical regime of Uncle Preston. Clay matures through experiences in the wilderness, attains an understanding of his past mistakes and through his partnership with the girl Luce he transcends determinism and individuates toward wholeness, an archetypal pattern characteristic of Modernism. The literary roots of the novel extend deeper in time to the Romantic period when Clay is found by the Indian boy who helped him save the sheep and becomes his companion in the American tradition of trans-ethnic male bonding: Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, Pym and Dirk Peters, Ishmael and Queequeg, Huck and Jim.

Clay and the Indian boy are more alike than any of the preceding pairs, an indication that to some extent the westward movement integrated and equalized the races in accord with the national metaphor of the melting pot that prevailed until the 1960s in America. They are depicted as equals, except that the Indian has "crippled hands" and speaks with a heavy accent. Together they hunt and kill a deer too heavy for them to carry, a symbolic burden. Davis is so far from romanticizing that he soon breaks up the pair after an argument over theology: "Underneath they pulled in entirely different directions, and it made understanding and sympathy impossible. The Indian boy pulled to his own people": "I findin' reservation across the mountain to live on. This ain't good people here."

First they stop at the Flem Simmons place. The name Flem is evocative and Faulkner used it a few years later for Flem Snopes. Here the style most resembles Mark Twain, with farcical tall tales and the humorous antics of eccentrics. Then the style becomes vividly Impressionist: "The air itself was too clear to take color from the sun, but it moved as it always does about dawn, and little blades of frozen vapor drifted through it from the creek, glittering as the light struck through their facets with light red and hard blue and fire-yellow that hurt the eyes. Black shadows laced out against the powdery snow, and the bare fruit-tree twigs turned from dead black to a metallic blue like the burnish of fire-tempered steel. There was no warmth in the new sun. It gave only light, and it knocked blinding little rainbows out of the frost-beaded cobwebs in the currant-bushes without thawing them even at the edges."

Clay meets Luce in the mountains, an elevated place. Ironically, for a spiritual exemplar, she is the daughter of a swindler and a weakling, a horse trader who keeps moving to escape his victims. Luce, or Luz, "is the Mexican word for light." To be with her, Clay joins "the homeless, dissatisfied wagon-campers who went eternally cruising around the country, looking for a place to light without ever finding one." Luce becomes his guiding light intermittently, a light obscured by the undergrowth of her fears and inhibitions. Clay has trouble interpreting her, loses sight of her and often moves in the wrong direction. In the end, though, she will light him toward a place to light. In this traditional role as a spiritual guide, Luce is no Victorian lady. She appears to be the opposite of an angel in the house, except in being shy, though she surprises Clay with her "housekeeping fervor." She is a frontier woman--versatile, strong, adventurous, independent, resourceful and a crack shot who turns out, in an ironic surprise, to be a killer.

We learn that what Luce values in a man (Clay is a teenager) are courage, independence of spirit and "openness of character"--straightforward honesty: "Any woman was entitled to expect them of the man she set her mind on." Yet both Clay and Luce conceal crimes from each other and their independent natures make their relationship unstable. Luce confesses to having a secret fear that distances her from Clay emotionally. "It seemed unjust, since he had got his own conscience out of the way so successfully, to have Luce come bothering him with hers." While they are working in the hop fields, Clay meets another woman who plays a guitar and urges him to sing folk songs, including one with a reference to Cumberland Gap, the route of Daniel Boone moving west, identifying Clay with the same restless spirit. He is a realistic pioneer

in contrast to the romantic Natty Bumppo of Cooper and late in the book he meets a fellow who summarizes *The Deerslayer* in the belief that it really happened.

Escaping the law--society--Clay rides west across the Willamette Valley into the Coast Range. He tells long lies like Huck Finn but he is less convincing and almost every man he meets accuses him—"You stole this horse, boy." The farmers in the Valley "looked too substantial and pious to be capable of lying themselves, but they were on full cock to catch anybody else doing it." Clay is in love with Luce but is leaving her behind and heading west, as many young men did, in a masculine phase of development, asserting his independence: "It was better not to have companions, to be alone and unworried by what anybody else felt or thought or believed, to be free to enjoy the road and take an interest in the scenery." Davis is using the road as a metaphor of the quest, as in Walt Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*.

Davis equalizes the races by making some whites savages: Orlando Geary "not only brought back all the horses, but also the Indian chief's liver, which he ate raw as a sort of caution to the surviving redskins not to do that again." In the hayfields, "One of the best drivers was supposed to have got his start by chewing a man's ear off in a fight and swallowing it." Whites and Indians are equally human, equally inclined to be ridiculous and disgusting. The Coast Indians are no worse than the French: "All were fat, and their faces had the same combination of stupidity and covetousness that one sees among the peasants of Normandy." Clay is advised to avoid them. They will ferry a white man across the river for free, then kill him and steal his money. "They hung their dead people in trees so a man sauntering in the brush near their village could never be sure whether his top-hair was being bedewed with a refreshing rain or the disintegrating remnants of somebody's great-grandmother." Once a "great people," they have grown decadent and hopeless from living easy: "They seemed never to have been bothered by white invasions...Not many people in the world managed to live so easily and so entirely to suit themselves. But...nobody who ever saw them would have wanted to trade places with them."

Clay has reached the ocean, as far west as he can go, and he has seen the decadent Eden of the Coast Indians. Now he can only turn inward, feeling alone. At this moment, to our surprise, Luce appears, coming toward him leading her horse "through a dropped place in the fence." She too has reached the end of a quest, leaving no fence between them. We feel glad to see her, and impressed. At the same time, Clay confronts another corrupt authority in her father the swindler, who echoes Uncle Preston when he snaps, "Quit jumpin' on me when I'm workin'."

Clay and Luce go off by themselves like Adam and Eve at the beach. Their domestic life combines equality with complementary traits that are implicitly natural: "She could herd, harness, and skin a team and ride as well as he could, and here she was talking about scrubbing and cooking and fruit-canning as whole-heartedly as if she had never ventured foot outside the scullery. She was downright exultant about discovering a case of empty fruit-jars on an overhead shelf." For women on the frontier, domesticity is luxury. Luce also hunts and gathers in abundance. Contrary to stereotype she proves to be a better rider, a much better shot and even a better provider than Clay.

Both still retain "a shadow of distrust," the weather in this place is dismal in the winter and Luce feels like she is mildewing. In the Spring they join a group of settlers who want to raise cattle and set out for eastern Oregon--eastward out of Eden—"where there was open country and a dry climate." Davis depicts them in words that apply as well to the Pilgrims and to the entire westward movement throughout American history: "that this was no longer merely a head-of-the-creek community on the move through restlessness, but an entire people, a whole division of society, gathering to tackle a new country rather than live as peons in an old one, gave him a feeling of dignity and strength that, though miles beyond his own reach was his because he belonged to these people."

Over the Cascades to the east, in the Looking Glass Valley the white settlers encounter members of another decadent Indian tribe: "Once they had been a powerful set of people...But that had all gone to pieces, a few light waves of casual philanthropy from the white race having proved more destructive in sixty-odd years than outright hostility from the red had in centuries." These Indians have become multicultural, interbreeding with Frenchmen, Hawaiians, Chinese, Mexicans, gypsies and blacks: "All was

accomplished in the name of peace, friendship, religion, and racial understanding, and the result was these cattle-drivers, of whom the men were all thieves and the women all prostitutes.” In this case Davis laments the disintegration of cultural integrity in the ethnic melting pot. Another tribe, more hardworking, is prosperous: “Wandering had kept them from getting dull and stupid, as the Coast Indians were.”

Luce, like Eve, eats a forbidden fruit “out of contrariness”—unripened wild gooseberries—leading to a miscarriage. She and Clay are separated when he rides off to get help. Independently thereafter, they each continue to individuate in the wilderness: “A man paid for what he got, he paid all it was worth, and he was lucky if he didn't pay more and in a different coin than he had bargained for. She had learned it too.” Adversity made Indian tribes stronger, easy lives degraded them. According to Davis, humans are at their best when rising to a challenge. “Prosperity brought out everything in them that was childish and pompous and ridiculous and wasteful. But adversity brought them down to cases; it made even the simplest of them get in together and get work done.”

In the end, ready by now to settle down, Clay and Luce join another wagon train as partners “on the road” to a new life where people “could start fresh without being at a disadvantage on account of poverty and prejudice.” Like Walt Whitman and Willa Cather, transcending his inclination to cynicism Davis celebrates the pioneers as inspirational Americans: “They were worth belonging to....Once enough of them had taken to the road all at once, and they had conquered half the continent.” This faith in Americans was inspirational in 1935 during the Great Depression. Faith in our ability to overcome adversity soon was essential to national mobilization and the fighting of World War II. The cry of wagon masters during the westward movement still resounds, as it did on Flight 93 on 9/11—“*Let's roll!*”

Michael Hollister (2015)