The Achievement of William Humphrey

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At the climactic point of his autobiographical narrative Farther Off from Heaven (1977), William Humphrey (1924-1997) comes back to his hometown of Clarksville, Texas, after many years' absence. Struck by the transformation he sees, Humphrey writes:

[1] In a move that reverses Texas history, a move totally opposite to what I knew in my childhood, one which all but turns the world upside down, which makes the sun set in the East, Red River County has ceased to be Old South and become Far West. I who for years had had to set my Northern friends straight by pointing out that I was a Southerner not a Westerner, and that I had never seen a cowboy or for that matter a beefcow any more than they had, found myself in the Texas of legend and the popular image which when I was a child had seemed more romantic to me than to a boy of New England precisely because it was closer to me than to him and yet still worlds away. Gone from the square were the bib overalls of my childhood when the farmers came to town on Saturday. Ranchers now, they came in high-heeled boots and rolled-brim hats, a costume that would have provoked as much surprise, and even more derision, there, in my time, as it would on Manhattan's Madison Avenue.

What is significant here is not just the town's transformation but the sense of wonder it evokes in Humphrey. His literary depictions of East Texas—whether Southern, Western, or a little bit of both—are invariably refracted through the prism of memory. Young Billy Humphrey left Clarksville at the age of thirteen and spent nearly his entire adult life in the Northeast. Beginning in the mid-sixties, he and his wife lived in Hudson, New York, a region more associated with Rip Van Winkle than with Quentin Compson or Pecos Bill. (He died there of cancer on August 20, 1997.) Although the little postage stamp of soil that William Humphrey claimed as his literary turf no longer existed outside his imagination, he fought the temptation to treat it elegiacally. He was at his best when he won that battle and at his worst when he succumbed to local color and sectional piety.

Although Humphrey was always a relatively private man, Farther Off from Heaven recalls his childhood in Clarksville. The opening section of eleven pages is set on July 4, 1937, and the rest of the book keeps returning to that pivotal date. After a festive day in town, young Billy is awakened in the middle of
The night with news that his father has been injured in a car wreck. As narrator, Humphrey withholds from us the fact that his father will die and that both his childhood and his own life in Clarksville will consequently come to an end. However, it is clearly the adult Humphrey looking back on this experience who says: “No wandering Jew ever carried with him a heavier freight of memories nor more of a sense of identification with a homeplace than I at thirteen, though unconfirmed in my faith, had already accumulated.”

The most vividly drawn character in *Farther Off from Heaven* is Humphrey’s father, Clarence. Born just as the frontier came to a close, he was a man out of his time. Unable to make a life for himself out of doors, Clarence fell in love with automobiles and channelled his restlessness into fast cars. At first his future wife shared Clarence’s spontaneity and love of adventure. His eagerness to fight for her she mistook as chivalry rather than natural pugnacity. She too enjoyed a good time and the power of a speeding automobile. But after several years as a wife and mother, Nell Humphrey settled down and expected her husband to do so as well. Instead, he turned increasingly to drink and to the arms of other women. As an auto mechanic, he was never out of work—not even during the Great Depression. Unfortunately, enough of his customers were destitute that their bills often went unpaid. At the time of his death, he possessed the affection of the town and a small fortune in worthless IOUs.

At the end of the book, Humphrey tells of the disposition of his father’s body (the July 4th car wreck had proved fatal) and his own refusal to attend the funeral. If July 4th marks the independence of the American nation from its mother country, that particular July 4th marks William Humphrey’s separation from the country of his childhood. After the death of his father, he and his mother leave Clarksville for Dallas. Not until thirty-two years later does he return (to buy a burial plot), only to find the Southern town of his youth transformed into the West of legend. Upon that return, which Humphrey compares to the instinct of the salmon to swim back to his spawning ground, he discovers that many of his childhood memories were misconceptions. He learns that he had been born in a different house than he had thought and that the real dwelling is a hovel his mother must have wanted to raze from her memory. The town clock, Old Red, does not really chime each quarter hour, and the statue of the Confederate soldier in the town plaza faces northeast, not southwest. “The town had shrunk, fit closer, like old clothes long outgrown. So much smaller now than when measured by my ten-, eleven-, twelve-year-old stride, and when, as Old Red told me then, I had all the time in the world.”

In these final pages, what might have been taken for a mere exercise in nostalgia becomes something more complex. By revealing himself to be that staple of modernist literature, the unreliable narrator, Humphrey casts doubt on the efficacy of memory itself. This theme is reinforced by the epigraph from Thomas Hood that precedes the narrative itself:

> I remember, I remember
> The fir trees dark and high;
> I used to think their slender tops were close against the sky:
> It was a childish ignorance.
> But now 'tis little joy
> To know I'm farther off from heaven
> Than when I was a boy.

After leaving Clarksville for Dallas, Humphrey attended public schools and Southern Methodist University, later transferring to the University of Texas. Although he had wanted to be a painter throughout his adolescence, he discov-
ered in early adulthood, when he took an examination to become a naval officer, that he was color-blind. At that point, Humphrey decided to become a playwright and went to New York with a five-act comedy about Benjamin Franklin, featuring a cast of 340. It was only then that he turned to fiction and began to publish stories in such prestigious magazines as Accent, the New Yorker, Harper’s Bazaar, and the Sewanee Review. His first book, The Last Husband and Other Stories (1953), was followed by his first and best known novel, Home from the Hill, in 1957. This one book established Humphrey as an important new presence in post-war American literature.

Over forty years later, one is still charmed by Humphrey’s descriptions of hunting and eating a wild boar (cooked in barbecue sauce applied with a kitchen mop), his sense of humor, and his ability to capture small-town life in East Texas. Unfortunately, these virtues cannot transcend the fact that Home from the Hill is fundamentally a sort of agrarian Peyton Place. (Vicente Minnelli made it into a successful motion picture starring Robert Mitchum and George Hamilton.) The story begins in 1954, when a Roll Royce hearse mysteriously appears in Clarksville, Texas. It is carrying the corpse of Hannah Hunnicutt, whose husband Wade and son Theron had both died fifteen years earlier. One of the townspeople, speaking in the first-person plural, then proceeds to narrate the tragedy of the Hunnicutt family. Captain Wade is a gentleman farmer who hunts in the Sulphur Bottom when he is not bedding the sex-starved matrons of the town. Hannah does not learn of her husband’s compulsive tomcatting until after they marry and produce young Theron. From that point on, she devotes her life to her son. The product of her nurture, Theron grows up to be a more innocent and dimwitted version of his father.

Even admirers of Home from the Hill must be troubled by the number of coincidences and improbabilities that move the plot toward the end of the novel. It is easy to believe that Thomas Hardy is one of Humphrey’s favorite novelists. However, even at his most preposterous, Hardy handled his material with a conviction that Humphrey lacks. One technical feature that accentuates the other flaws of Home from the Hill is Humphrey’s point of view. His shifts between the narrative “we” and omniscient narration are handled smoothly enough. The problem is not who is telling the story but why. When a communal narrator is used, it is usually so that the author can emphasize the shallowness of conventional wisdom. But Humphrey does little to exploit the ironic distance between what is commonly believed and what is really true. On the other hand, the omniscient narrative simply calls attention to the heavy hand of authorial manipulation. Finally, Humphrey’s pseudo-Faulknerian prose style simply illustrates the suffocating effect Faulkner’s influence could have on writers who tried too hard to sound like the master. As Flannery O’Connor sagely observed, when you see the Dixie Special coming, the best thing to do is get off the tracks.

Humphrey’s second novel, The Ordways, was published in 1965, while he was living in Europe with the money he made on Home from the Hill. Much more than the earlier novel, this work reveals the tension between Southern and Western regionalism in East Texas. The narrator is Tom Ordway, a modern man with an intense interest in the past—a kind of sane Quentin Compson. His narration begins on graveyard day, a ritual occasion we already have seen in Home from the Hill. As he joins the rest of the townspeople in caring for the graves of their ancestors, Tom recalls the story of his great-grandfather. The original Thomas Ordway was a blinded Confederate veteran, who moved west from Tennessee.
just after the Civil War. This migration, however, constitutes little more than a fourth of Humphrey’s novel. Fully forty per cent of the text involves the attempt of Thomas Ordway’s son, and young Tom’s grandfather, Sam Ordway, to recover his offspring, little Ned, stolen by neighbors who were caring for him while the rest of the family was shopping in town one Saturday. It is in the quest for the lost Ned, over a wide expanse of East Texas, that *The Ordways* becomes a fully Western novel.

In *The Ordways*, Humphrey has expelled the manipulative authorial presence that so weakened *Home from the Hill*. On first reading, however, it seems that he may have gone too far in the other direction and given us brilliantly realized fragments that finally add up to less than the sum of their parts. Leaving aside for a moment the overall structure of the novel, Sam Ordway’s quest itself often seems mere pretext for a series of memorable vignettes. His search for his son lacks the urgency necessary to make it convincing, and his abandonment of that search is a bit too arbitrary to satisfy the reader who has been accompanying him all this time. But, on closer reading, we begin to suspect that the pointlessness of Sam’s quest may itself be Humphrey’s point. At best, Sam is a reluctant knight-errant. He has waited until after harvest to begin his quest and pursues the already cold trail in a haphazard manner. The Confederate pistol he takes with him seems more an absurd antique than an instrument of revenge.

The tension that Humphrey sees between Southern and Western regionalism lies in the contradiction of wanting to make a new start in life, free of the dead hand of the past, while at the same time maintaining fealty to tradition. The lost cause of the South nearly killed Thomas Ordway in both body and spirit; however, he is renewed by the decision to move to Texas. “The West is the one unfixed pole of the compass,” Humphrey writes. “It has moved with man, always retreating before him. What was once the West is now the East. The West lies on the other side of that last range of hills, where the day still lingers, where there is still another hour to correct one’s mistakes or begin a new project before nightfall.” But when Thomas goes west, he brings with him the bones of his ancestors, his own war wounds, and a code that becomes enshrined in a statue in the town square. In the next generation, that code becomes an imperative burden. Two generations after that, it is merely an object of aesthetic contemplation.

*The Ordways* does not end in conflict and contradiction, but with a resolution based more on fact than anything else in the novel. When Humphrey himself was four years old, a grown man showed up at his grandfather’s door and identified himself as the grandfather’s young son who had been stolen away so many years before. What followed was a family reunion involving a caravan from Clarksville to the long lost relative’s goat ranch near the Mexican border. An idyllic version of this journey occurs at the end of *The Ordways*. The kidnapper Will Vinson had told his adopted son the truth on his deathbed. Sam Ordway and little Ned, and indeed the entire extended family, have been reunited without bloodshed. Because Will Vinson had been good to Ned, Sam bears no final ill will toward his enemy. In fact, Will had eluded capture by taking the name of Ordway. Thus, the title of Humphrey’s novel can be seen as referring not just to four generations of biological kin but also to the man who claimed the family name through an excess of something like paternal love—an act that could never be excused, only forgiven.

In his third novel, *Proud Flesh* (1973), Humphrey combines the pseudo-Faulknerian melodrama of *Home from the Hill* with the structural chaos of *The
Ordways. The back-cover blurb of the paperback edition declares that the novel is about "The Renshaws—a Texas family bound together by fierce pride and driven by prodigious appetites...a clan famous for its loyalty and its ruthlessness in dealing with an intruding world." If the passions of the Hunnicutt family made Home from the Hill a popular success, then it seemed only reasonable that a book with a larger and even more eccentric clan would be that much more marketable. In this case the legendary parent is not the town satyr but a dying matriarch. As the end draws near for Edwina "Ma" Renshaw, three generations of offspring gather for a final vigil, as if sheer strength of numbers would keep the old lady alive a bit longer.

As thematically suggestive as it may be, Proud Flesh is not a particularly well-crafted novel. Whereas the digressions in The Ordways usually possess a charm or power of their own, those in the Renshaw saga too often seem inept. Also, we are never certain whose story this really is. Even if the point of view in Home from the Hill and The Ordways may have seemed problematic, it was at least handled with skill. In Proud Flesh, Humphrey presents Edwina Renshaw and her brood from a variety of perspectives. There is nothing theoretically wrong with such an approach. Certainly, in the hands of a Conrad or a Faulkner, it can weave an intricate narrative tapestry. Proud Flesh more closely resembles one of Emmeline Grangerford's unfinished masterpieces. Emmeline, we will recall, would paint a maiden in distress with one pair of arms folded over her breast, another stretched out in front, and a third raised in supplication. Emmeline's intention—thwarted by untimely death—was to rub out all but the pair she liked best.

Proud Flesh may be a rich canvas, but it is covered with false starts and extraneous arms. After far too many pages of tawdry sensationalism and missed opportunities—such as the unfulfilled promise to deal with miscegenation as human dilemma rather than as obsession or metaphor—the novel comes alive in its closing pages. Here the neurotically guilt-ridden daughter of "Ma" Renshaw—now deceased—locks herself in a storm cellar in penance for her imagined sins, while pilgrims congregate to confess their real sins to her through the culvert pipe. Without seeming unduly derivative, Humphrey achieves the blend of black humor and grotesque spirituality that we associate with Flannery O'Connor. The novel then concludes with two Renshaw sons searching for their errant brother, even though Ma has now been dispatched to the hereafter. Because someone thought he had seen the prodigal in New York City several years earlier, his brothers are looking for him there. When a message sent through skywriting fails to produce a response, the dutiful sons continue their quest door by door. "Son of a bitch if this goddamned town is going to make a monkey out of me," one says. Such moments, alas, are few and far between in Proud Flesh.

In 1968, five years before the publication of Proud Flesh, Humphrey brought out his second collection of short stories, A Time and a Place. Then, in 1985, a year after the appearance of his fourth novel, Hostages to Fortune, Delacorte issued an edition of Humphrey's collected stories. In this volume, we see many of the same virtues and shortcomings of Humphrey's early novels. The stories are best when describing a place—both geographical and social—or exploring the psychological subtleties of human relations. Too often, however, the effort to create a plot and a point of view from these materials proves unwieldy or unconvincing. Most of the stories that are not so slight as to be inconsequential elude Humphrey's technical control until they are "resolved" with a forced literary irony. Still, occasional moments of
brilliance suggest the presence of a talented writer.

Although "The Hardys" and "The Ballad of Jesse Neighbours" are probably Humphrey's two most acclaimed stories, my personal favorite is "The Human Fly." Here, the Depression-ridden community of New Jerusalem, Texas, gathers to see an itinerant daredevil climb the eight-story county courthouse, with the money raised divided between the daredevil and the town. Like marathon dancing, such an exhibition was a common amusement during the thirties. However, Humphrey is not interested in Depression-era sociology, any more than Horace McCoy was in his dance marathon novel They Shoot Horses, Don't They? (1935). In both cases, the author has stumbled on a found metaphor. For Humphrey, the spectacle of the human fly becomes an index of the length to which some people will go in order to escape small-town boredom. For the townspeople of New Jerusalem, the possibility that the Great Grippo will fall and break his neck makes his climb all the more exciting. This is emphasized by the fact that every once in a while a woman in the crowd insists that she be taken home without making a move in that direction.

The only person in New Jerusalem who seems to have enough character to stay away from this sick exhibition is the town malcontent Stan Reynolds. Called "California Stan" because of his oft-repeated desire to move to the golden land, Reynolds has never hidden his contempt for the town and its people. The careful reader might find it surprising that we see and hear so little of this singular individual before the focus of the story shifts to the climb of the human fly itself. The climb is described in such harrowing detail that we tend to forget about Stan Reynolds. It is only when the Great Grippo loses his balance and goggles part way up the courthouse wall that we see he actually is California Stan, desperate to make the money needed to fulfill his dream of moving to the region Theodore Roosevelt once called "west of the West." The risk and the difficulty of the climb are measures of Stan's desperation to escape permanently from his surroundings. Unfortunately, his quest is no more successful than that of Sisyphus. He falls before reaching the top of the tower, suffers a lifelong paralysis, and spends his last thirty-three years as a ward of the town he hates. During that time, he has to listen to the courthouse clock chime 10,571,358 times.

Over the years, Humphrey published a number of fine essays on hunting and fishing in such popular magazines as Sports Illustrated, Esquire, True, Life, and Town and Country. These were gathered in 1986, a year after the collected stories, in a book called Open Season. Taken as a whole, this volume belongs to a venerable tradition of contemplative literature, extending back at least to Izaak Walton's The Compleat Angler (1653) and including, in our own century, Hemingway's Green Hills of Africa (1935). The major narrative in Open Season, a tale called "The Spawning Run," is an amusing meditation on human sexuality disguised as a scientifically detailed discussion of the salmon's fatal instinct to reproduce himself in the waters from which he was hatched.

Early in the narrative—which is rendered as a series of diary excerpts—we see natural creatures interacting with the world of men. One day, Humphrey pulls his VW in between two new Bentleys in the parking lot of a fishing lodge in Wales. "An incensed peacock was pecking at himself in the hubcap of one of the Bentleys with brainless persistency," Humphrey writes. "When he had obliterated with spittle the rival in that hubcap he spread his tail proudly and went strutting to attack another Bentley hubcap, passing up those of my VW with lordly disdain." That night, and for several nights thereafter, Humphrey and his wife...
are both disturbed by what they take to be the screaming of a woman. When they finally inquire, they are told that this is the sound of a peahen. "'My God,' said my wife, 'What does her mate do to her to make her scream like that?' 'Or not do to make her scream like that,' said the other lady, 'Vain, self-infatuated creature; had you thought, my dear, of that?'

"The Spawning Run" is rich with literary allusions. Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Walton's *The Compleat Angler*, Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, and the Bible are all referred to explicitly. Also, at the beginning of his stay in Britain, Humphrey meets a parking lot attendant in Dorchester, who had been a driver for the illustrious Hardy. The attendant recalls that Hardy owned one of the first automobiles in the town, that he was in love with speed, and that he built some of the finest houses in the region. Puzzled to learn all of this new information about one of his literary heroes, Humphrey added: "What's more important, ... he wrote some of the best novels and some of the most beautiful poems in the language." It is only then that Humphrey realizes that the parking lot attendant has been talking about Henry Hardy, Thomas's brother. Such is the fleeting nature of literary fame.

Given Humphrey's love of the sport, it is not surprising that fishing eventually would become a crucial activity and a fishing lodge the primary setting of one of his novels. What is surprising is that the charm and whimsicality of these fishing essays is totally absent from Humphrey's *Hostages to Fortune* (1984). Nothing that its author had written previously would prepare a reader for the emotional catharsis of this extraordinarily harrowing book. For one thing, *Hostages to Fortune* is Humphrey's only novel to be set entirely outside of Texas. Because the experiences that inspired the tale occurred in the Northeast, Humphrey places it there. But its real setting is the mind of its protagonist Ben Curtis. Focusing his narrative perspective on a single character, Humphrey achieves a unity and intensity lacking in his earlier novels. Because Ben is a believable person whom we are made to care about, the strategy works.

The author of *Home from the Hill* could not have written *Hostages to Fortune*. In the earlier novel, Humphrey's insistence on tying up loose ends produced a work in which the behavior of characters was driven by the needs of plot. Such an effect would have been disastrous in this novel, because Ben Curtis's situation is the stuff of which maudlin tearjerkers are made. Haunting Ben's past are the suicides of his goddaughter, his best friend—who is the girl's father—and his own son Anthony, as well as the breakup of his marriage. In the wake of these catastrophes, Ben tries unsuccessfully to take his own life but finds a measure of healing in the old fishing grounds. It is a tribute to Humphrey's honesty and conviction that this story produces empathy rather than bathos.

Humphrey's title comes from Francis Bacon's aphorism: "He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune." It is therefore not surprising that this novel, like *Home from the Hill*, deals largely with a relationship of father and son. But there the resemblance ends. Humphrey no longer needs to have the father serve as a masculine role model—although Ben is a competent angler, Anthony is the superior, or at least the more scientific, outdoorsman. Also Ben believes that, in committing suicide, Anthony has actually cuckolded him by alienating his wife's affections. This hastens Ben's slide into alcoholism and his own botched suicide attempt. Ben Curtis is at once a weaker and more admirable figure than Wade Hunnicutt.

*Hostages to Fortune* is Humphrey's most accomplished book because it represents the first time in his fiction that he
gains control of his materials without the semblance of manipulation. Even the occasional echoes of Hemingway seem unobtrusive, if anything adding to the pattern of allusiveness established by Ben’s habit of quoting from his favorite authors. A writer, according to an old saying that Ben recalls, “was somebody for whom writing was harder than it was for other people.” The problem with Humphrey’s early work is that it seems to have been too easily, or at least too facilely, written. *Hostages to Fortune* gives us not a world view asserted but a vision earned.

With his final novel—*No Resting Place* (1989)—Humphrey returned to his regional roots. Like the first section of *The Ordways*, this book deals with a journey from the Southeast to the area around Clarksville. Nevertheless, the differences between *No Resting Place* and Humphrey’s other Southwestern novels are far more profound than the similarities. This latest narrative is an historical novel, which depicts one of the most shameful chapters in the American past—the forced migration of the Cherokee Indians along the Trail of Tears. Although this story has been told many times in works of non-fiction, few imaginative writers have chosen to tackle it. Other than Humphrey’s book, we have only Kermit Hunter’s durable outdoor drama *Unto These Hills* (1950) and Denton R. Bedford’s novel *Tsali* (1972). Given the inherent pathos of the story and Humphrey’s own remarkable growth as a novelist, one brings high expectations to this work. Unfortunately, they are not met.

The third-person-limited point of view that served Humphrey so well in *Hostages to Fortune* is abandoned here for a confusing multiple perspective. The ostensible narrator is Amos Smith IV, a boy of Humphrey’s age who becomes interested in Texas history during the celebration of the state’s centennial in 1936. Rather than allow him to play the part of Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar in a school pageant, Amos’s father tells the boy an unsanctioned version of Texas history, one that had been passed on to him by his own grandfather, a mixed-blood Indian who had traveled the Trail of Tears. As we move back in time, young Amos’s voice is supplanted by that of an omniscient narrator who moves at will from place to place and from consciousness to consciousness.

Although all historical fiction that is not mere romance is also a commentary on the present, Humphrey’s main story and his narrative frame fail to illuminate each other. Since Humphrey knew nothing about his own paternal great-grandfather other than that he was an Indian, the author’s interest in oral history is biographically understandable. It just does not work aesthetically. To make the story of the Cherokees come alive as poetry rather than rhetoric, Humphrey needed to give us imaginative access to it. The novel’s protagonist—young Amos’s great grandfather—is unequal to the task. He is simply another literary half-breed whose adolescent identity crisis is exacerbated by racial schizophrenia.

In 1992, Humphrey published a collection of twenty new stories under the title *September Song*. None of these selections merits comparison with the author’s best earlier work. Humphrey’s greatest strengths as a writer include his ability to create people and evoke a sense of place. Unfortunately, too many of the stories in *September Song* are too short to allow a full development of character and setting. Situations that might be compelling in a novel seem contrived and unconvincing when realized in 3-4 or even 8-10 pages. Unlike Hemingway, Humphrey is not a master of the vignette. Perhaps the best story in Humphrey’s most recent collection is also the longest. In “Dead Weight,” an itinerant antique dealer becomes responsible for a friend named
Kelly, who finally accepts the dealer’s long-standing invitation to join him on the road. A few days into their trip, Kelly’s fragile health gives out. Prior to dying (while on the toilet in the dealer’s camper), Kelly had given his friend a sealed envelope, which contained a will making the dealer his sole heir. Knowing that he would be suspected of murder if the will were ever discovered, the dealer forsakes his inheritance. He also has to drive undetected from Texas to New York in order to return Kelly’s body to the family cemetery in his hometown. “Dead Weight” is a picaresque black comedy, which represents Humphrey at his best.

If writers can be said to “own” certain regions, William Humphrey has laid claim to East Texas. His Clarksville lives in the imagination as surely as does Winesburg, Ohio, or Spoon River. As John M. Grammer has noted, The Ordways, Home from the Hill, and Proud Flesh constitute a Clarksville trilogy that extends from the time of the Civil War to the present. (The publication of No Resting Place enlarges the saga into a quaternity that begins in the time of Andrew Jackson and includes the red man as well as the white.) If region is defined by period as well as locale, Home from the Hill, Farther Off from Heaven and a goodly number of his short stories suggest that Humphrey’s strongest claim may be not to East Texas as such, but to the East Texas of the 1930s.

The tension between individual freedom and corporate identity is at the heart of Humphrey’s four Western novels. The tragedy of Wade and Theron Hunnicutt lies in their adherence to a way of life that is entirely personal. Their beliefs and behavior make them icons for the community without ever being citizens of it. His admiration for the outdoor life notwithstanding, Faulkner always acknowledged the claim of domestic and social responsibilities and reserved his harshest judgment for those who ignored such obligations. If anything undercuts the moral vision of Humphrey’s novel, it is the fact that he has kept too much of the admiration and too little of the judgment. But the tale itself is instructive.

The same is true of Proud Flesh, although the false god here is not the myth of the hunter-aristocrat but the most perverted form of mother love since Oedipus. Both the code of the hunter-aristocrat and family loyalty have value within a properly functioning community. It is only when they become ends unto themselves that they are personally and socially destructive. For the Cherokees in No Resting Place, the situation is crucially different. Here, the corporate identity of the tribe is shattered by government policy, and the journey west becomes not just the occasion but the vehicle of their annihilation. Unlike the white pioneers, they never identify the West with freedom, nor are they ever bewitched by the siren call of untrammelled individualism.

It is in The Ordways that Humphrey strikes the most fitting balance between the needs of the individual and the demands of the group. In setting out after Little Ned, despite private misgivings, Sam Ordway affirms his loyalty to both Southern and Western codes of honor. But in eventually abandoning his quest, he affirms an even more fundamental obligation to the family he has left behind. The idyllic closing section creates a new community and an extended family—one that is large enough to include not only the newly recovered Ned but the recently deceased Will Vinson. Never out of mind is the spiritual presence of a blind Confederate soldier who found his life by heading West, and the memory of a bereaved father who found his soul by heading home.