

Forrest Spirits: Oral Echoes in Leon Forrest's Prose

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Contemporary American fiction writers often are experimenters—but in different ways. The early John Hawkes (in his later writing he grew more intricately ornate) and Walter Abish—whimsical and often dark subjects aside—are fond of telegraphic fragment sentences. Meredith Steinbach and Edmund White share this fascination with dark whimsicality, cloaking their narratives in a magical realism. Kathy Acker, often combining two telegraphic fragments in an agrammatical run-on, is fond of imaginary and historical personae: for instance an imaginative Toulouse Latrec, or Vincent Van Gogh, or the young Janis Joplin. Toni Morrison challenges the reader with scrambled chronology and voice. All in their own way highlight their language, reminding the reader that a fiction is in progress. In this way they are descendants of James Joyce, even Nabakov (neither of whom was American, of course), and of Gertrude Stein. And contemporary writers are not content to comprise their works with the narrative conventions of past storytelling: they have demanded that more be understood, that their readers be familiar with popular songs, with the style of the television sitcom, and with the expressive level of street speech. Spike Lee has as much to say to us as does John Dryden. William Goldman likens Doc Levy's struggle with the assassin not with Gilgamesh versus Enkidu, but with Earl Monroe versus Walt Frazier.

If these disparate writers were to be grouped succinctly, it would be according to the self-reflexive character of their prose, which consciously foregrounds its own artifice, which constantly reminds the reader that an artificial verbal structure has been set out in print, that we are not engaged with a verbatim report of reality; metanarrativists, particularly Robert Coover, do so explicitly. Contemporary writers force the awareness that we are looking at chemically treated wood pulp, that a pseudo-reality is being purposefully constructed (the experiments of Coover and others with "Hypertext" makes this artificial medium an electronic screen). This fiction

continually draws attention to itself as artifact. Its writers have done for prose narrative what Annie Liebovitz has done for portraiture.

Chicago-based novelist Leon Forrest shares this experimental spirit, but his is a traditional, folkloric mode. Many contemporary experimentalists are by intention innovative, consciously ignoring or violating extant traditions. Forrest's inventiveness lies in his use of traditional materials, though ones not often found in written narrative: his narratives frequently incorporate the spontaneously composed and performed folk sermons of the American South. His novels reproduce the style and the tone of contemporary life, avoiding what Milman Parry and Albert Lord called a special narrative vocabulary, syntax, or verbal structure (he has his own "special" syntax and vocabulary). Like many of today's writers, Forrest recreates the world of his imagination in all its nuances of sound and sense, of tone and texture. Nothing in the writers' lives (or ours) is inappropriate. They want us to experience life as they did. Meaning is carried by Rap music, by the spy novel; sadness is evoked by Country-and-Westerns and *Bambi* as well as by *Othello*.

Leon Forrest's fiction achieves much of its muscle by encapsulating within its narrative texture not only those other genres, but the energy and the emotional and spiritual force of the folk sermon. He is particularly sensitive to the sermons and oratorical style of black preachers: the Reverends C. L. Franklin, Morris Harrison Tynes, Wilbur N. Daniel, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesse Jackson. That is one of his contributions to the timbre of the contemporary novel. This sermon form, orally composed and spontaneously performed, in the main chanted or sung, is found most commonly in the United States today in African-American churches.¹ Many who have heard these sermons performed in their authentic settings feel their emotive strength, their potency; unknowingly, many urban white Americans have heard them, though in secular contexts and with social or political content, and so have not properly recognized them as sermons—or as being derived from them. When they have been accurately identified, they have often been—for reasons unrelated to their aesthetic and spiritual qualities—disregarded. We remember Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech; how many recall his "I Have Been to the Mountaintop" sermon?

¹ For further discussion of the structure and context of these sermons, see Rosenberg 1970, 1986, 1987.

Forrest's prose is multigeneric, more thoroughly so than that of most of his novelist contemporaries; it incorporates several generically stylistic levels of social and intellectual modes simultaneously. The novels are a salad of conventional narrative, black folk sermon, popular song and Spiritual, street slang, and idiom. Not only do his characters speak the language of common people (in ways never dreamed of by Wordsworth), but Forrest's narrator does also, interspersed with the author's high style together with an astonishing playfulness. His structures are not a matter of one genre encapsulated within a frame, as authors since Chaucer have done. Forrest disregards the conventional understanding of social impropriety. Blues, folk sermons, the salient events of contemporary history, street jive are all the media of serious expression for him, and all collaborate to produce his dramatic effects. By this technique, he manages to tap into the varied strengths of several forms, extracting from each of those components what will reinforce the whole. His novels are thus more than novels. Part song, part spiritual, part record of oral performances, part sermon, part street speech—they exceed all of these constituents. Reader alert: to understand the texture of this fiction, one has to be familiar with more than the monuments of the Great Tradition. Memorizing T. S. Eliot will not be enough. The Bible is not enough. Ice Cube is not something dropped into Ice-T. In the biographical sketch of him for *Contemporary Authors*, Forrest commented that “the Black church, the Negro spiritual, gospel music, sermons, the blues, and jazz” were both “the railroad tracks and the wings for my imagination and the migrating train . . . of my sagas” (1987b:30).

In an age seldom moved by religious expression, and casual in its attitude toward religious forms, the sermon's evocative power has been largely muted. When sermons have appeared in literature, they have been verbal events often merely tangential to the main thrust of the narrative. This is the role of the Rev. Mapple's sermon early in *Moby Dick*; in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; even in Hurston and in Ellison. *The Sound and the Fury* includes a careful imitation of black oral preaching by Faulkner; the sermon is given prominence in the narrative's totality, but it is still not the central focus of the novel. More importantly, Rev. Shegog's sermon is stylistically set apart from the rest of Faulkner's prose, so that the reader is aware of reading a literate description of an oral performance that is quite distinct, situationally and stylistically, from the voice and the presence of the character—it is Rev. Shegog speaking. Faulkner's style is not that of his character.

The folk sermon described here—and as known by Forrest—begins in an Apollonian mode, and gradually drifts towards the Dionysian. The preacher, too, is caught up in the frenzy that his own performance has generated. Forrest-as-novelist does not have this luxury; like nearly all writers, he must remain contemplative throughout, recollecting great emotion in tranquility; only his words and his character's emotional state that they describe pass from oratory to chant, from the reasoned to the emotional, from the dispassionately logical to the engaged passionate. The preacher and many of the church will experience an altered psychological state. The preacher reinvents life.

Forrest invokes the form and emotional drive of the oral folk sermon within his narrative, as a rendering of the sermons delivered by his characters (who are often preachers). He recreates the folk preaching mode, what the preachers themselves call the “spiritual sermon” (a re-creation such as Faulkner did in *The Sound and the Fury*); and Forrest does frequent replications of the Rev. C. L. Frankl'n's rhetorical asides. In fact, the author of *The Bloodworth Orphans* (1987a) has written to me that he has been unashamedly influenced by the late Rev. Franklin, whose style he recreates in his own work (ascribing it to a preacher of his own imagination); he thinks of it as being “quite close to the grain of oral tradition” (personal correspondence, 4/19/1991). Punctuating his sermons in *The Bloodworth Orphans*, as Rev. Franklin did with his Detroit congregation, Forrest's preacher exclaims to his flock, “I don't believe you see what I'm talking about this night, Church” (30), or “I don't believe you see what I'm talking about (32) (or its near variant, “I don't believe you see what I'm getting at” [33]), and “Church, you ain't praying with me” (35), or “Help me, Church, pray with me, if you please” (36).

Throughout, Rev. Franklin's rhythmic delivery and singing predominated: his sonorous voice, the arresting rhythms of his oratory, these brought structure to his sermons, they caught up the congregation in their music. They gave a compelling aesthetic quality to his message. His audiences were involved passionately as well as rationally, captured by the magnetic compulsion of his voice. Aretha is his daughter; she learned much from him. The family never wanted for musical expression.

The context for these exclamations is the actual sermon in performance; Rev. Franklin used them to enliven his audience when their enthusiasm—their Spirits—were flagging, to encourage them to further participate in the holy service (see espec. Titon 1989). Intensity is all.

This kind of folk preacher must quickly involve his congregation, must gain their assent, at the moment of performance, to be successful. Success means conveying to them, instilling in them, the Spirit of the Lord. The performative situation is not that of the leader apart and distinct from the led; rather, the preacher attempts to achieve a close, simultaneous, symbiotic commitment to the Spirit. Is the singer distinct from his song? The preacher's ostensible purpose is to gain the congregation's assent, serving as God's spokesperson; it is through the preacher's ministrations that the congregation achieves their divine union. Analytically, the congregation does not commit to the preacher, who is God's agent; and as many of them have confided to me during interviews (see Rosenberg 1970), while they are preaching they are merely lending their lips and their tongues and their throats to God. They are speaking God's words, and they aspire to do His will; He is speaking through them; they are at such moments merely His instruments.

Rev. Franklin often punctuated his sermons with (rhetorical?) appeals to his congregation to "pray with me," or would chide them for not "praying with me"; when they were listless he chastised them for not seeing what he was "talking about" or "getting at." For the preacher these memorized and automatic exclamations are "pauses on the highway," they give a moment's rest when thoughts can be gathered for the lines to come. For the congregation such interruptions ("I don't think there's anybody praying with me") are not put-downs but signals to them to get with it more completely, to become involved; they constitute incitements to the spiritually apathetic to embrace deeper involvements.

Written and literarily composed, Forrest's conscious recreation of these sacred performances give his sermons a convincing authenticity, as though they were the verbatim records of actual oral performances. His fictional Rev. Packwood adopts the rhythms and some of the rhetoric (and consequently much of the strength) of Rev. C. L. Franklin. Forrest is the intermediary, transmuting—recreating—Franklin into Packwood. Forrest's prose sounds as though he were speaking to us, as if we were reading the transcript of a story he were relating. His voice recreates his narrative for us.

"One of the literary constants of African-American literature," he says in the *Contemporary Authors* biography, "is the reinvention of life" (1987b:31). His fiction expresses more than a simulation of the folk preacher in performance, more than the glorification of the oratorical skills

of a gifted speaker. That has been done. Forrest recalls, in this capsule biography, that while still at the University of Chicago he perceived the sermon “as a seminal source [for his own] fledgling art” (23).

Forrest’s literary voice compels with the magnetism of the spoken word. When someone speaks to us, face-to-face, we listen. This sound—the resonance of human speech—is immediate and compelling. It is holistic. It tells us that a human encounter is taking place. We cannot switch off another person’s speech—at least not easily, not without offending the person whose extension it is—as we can turn off a radio or a television. A phonograph record can be interrupted, a CD performance cancelled by pushing a button. But someone speaking to me cannot be so effortlessly silenced; and his or her address will demand a reply, and then an interaction. Electronic sound waves by themselves have no such force. We will usually not brusquely terminate even an unsolicited telemarketing message.

People who hang up on us are rude. By their act they have made a meaningful statement. A human, encountered live, merits a response that the mechanically reproduced sound does not. Some people talk to the screen at the movies, true, but that response is voluntary and, by the receiver, unrecorded. If a tree falls in a desolate forest, has a sound been made? In human communication another human being is present, speaking, demanding attention, demanding to be treated with the courtesy our cultural mores require, and his or her words compel attention—and response. When we respond we become active participants in the communicative transaction. No mechanical voice simulation, however faithfully it reproduces the human voice, has this power.

Forrest’s prose nearly has it. We can close his book, of course, and terminate our transaction with him, but when his characters are speaking, when he is speaking, we are less inclined to do so. Rudeness is not the point; we cannot so simply close off a speaker’s address to us. We do not want to. When we read Forrest we will not likely terminate the story he is relating in its midst; we are being spoken to, we are interested to hear what is being said, we want to know what is going to be said next. He wins us over, so that we willingly give him our assent, and in that manner he can work his way into the fabric of the narrative. We follow.

The orally composed and performed sermon is not limited to the repertoire of nonliterate. Chanted sermons by learned preachers demonstrate that the same men can speak (preach?) in either style, that each

mode is dependent upon the “message” the speaker wants to communicate, appropriate to the audience. Notable examples include Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Washington Monument exhortation; his indoor speech on passive resistance; Rev. Jesse Jackson at the 1988 Democratic National Convention; Charlottesville, Va., preacher Lockett (who wrote out his sermon in prose but several minutes into his performance began to chant—his natural mode of pulpit oratory). No matter how the performance is transcribed on the page, the prose is unmistakably prose; poetic traits are almost as obvious to the reader as to the listener (rhythmic performances are not revealed because of formatting)—that is a function of literacy, of the printed page.

The folk sermon—in the form it is folkloric as well as Scriptural as preached in many black fundamentalist churches—has a structurally complex fluidity that helps make it an emotionally moving performance: as Forrest has it, “the structure of a black Baptist sermon is orchestrated, with highly associative links to group memory, the Bible, Afro-American folklore, Negro spirituals, secular blues phrases, politics, and personal testimonial” (1985:131). Thus it taps into several high intensity veins: social, cultural, intellectual, religious, racial, and so forth. The sermon conveys a holistic, unifying message, gaining strength from the union of its several components: “. . . and then one night the Word of God came beautiful, flaming, chariot-swinging sweet and low unto her ears” (1987a:34). Forrest uses sermons in several ways—in the recorded utterances of preachers and in the congregation’s prayers and testimonies. Sermon oratory is also a part of the everyday speech of certain of his characters. He says as much in his condensed autobiography (1987a:23):

as a writer who comes out of a culture steeped in the eloquence of the Oral Tradition, I’ve come to see the Negro preacher as the Bard of our race; and throughout my novels, that rich lodestone of eloquence has provided me with an important springboard.

These sermons have the power to effectively generate deeply felt emotions; they are guided by gradually intensifying rhythms—of the preacher’s speech, of the music, of the implicit rhythm in the congregation’s reception of the sermon message (1985:135):

It is the force of the music—the obsessive and repetitive rhythm—tied to lyrics suggesting a reordering out of chaos that leads one from a state of self-possession to a momentary state of blessed assurance, when you can

“take hold of your life through Jesus Christ.”

Further, he observes (130):

The question at every turn in the service is how to keep the fire and zeal up-tempo, how to let neither the body nor the soul cool off. The service is always bound up in a keening relationship between great solemnity and the furious rhythms of body and soul.

Rev. Packwood’s sermon in *The Bloodworth Orphans* (1987a:29-40) is, in its early moments, not consistently rhythmical, though the last portions of it are broken into tight metrical units (as printed on a page) divided by virgules.² Rachel Flowers’ response is similarly regular: “I’m running on, I’m running on / I done left this world behind / I done crossed the separating line / I done left this world behind” (39). The exclamations of the congregation, an important part of the performance’s dynamics, are not neglected. Rev. Packwood’s sermon and Rachel Flowers’ chanted prayer (70-74) are punctuated with traditional exclamatory words and phrases: “Lord,” “Lord what a garment-ain’t He good?,” “Oh Holy God,” “my God,” “Witness,” “church” [an address to the congregation], “stand by me.” Forrest listened when he went to church. Repetition is also in the form of metonymically related series: “her name, her honor, her stride, her station, her soul, her crown, her patched-up riddled wings, her gospel shoes filled with holes, her ashy long white robe” (29-30); or related nouns in sequence: “you moving like a tot through a half-mad train of thieves, gamblers, adulterers, liars, abominators, for your victory” (37). Or in apposition (73):

BE his floor mat, his watchwoman, His footstool, His Light-Bearer, His Messenger, His anchor to the world, His tambourine, His drum, His garment-servant, His body-servant, in the eternal clemency of the warning news about Salvation and Sacrifice. . . .

Images from the Bible are rendered metrically (38):

For my Father is a rainmaker. Didn’t he arise in a Windstorm? And He’s gonna return. Return in a storm. Gonna be royal and radiant with hair like lamb’s wool: eyes like balls of fire. Gonna have a rainbow like a scarf

² As was done in Rosenberg 1970.

about His shoulders. Gonna set upon a *Rock* and these here storms ain't gonna be able to move you. . . .

Forrest probably imitates Rev. C. L. Franklin, whose recordings (at least) he has heard. And he gives to Rev. Packwood an anaphoric passage, addressed to a God with whom he is on intimate terms (39):

Why-er heard you promise Hosea you would ransom them from the grave; heard you, Father, promise Moses you would stand by your people in the rages of their bondage; heard you reveal the meaning of the ladder to Jacob of a soul-collecting Nation; heard you stir the intelligence and faith to Ezekiel's tongue to know that dry bones can live. . . .

The preacher, the man of words, is a potent force in black communities. Or used to be. Forrest has called the Rev. Wilbur N. Daniel “an Awesome anchor” to his people. Words—particularly the preacher's words—have the power to move and to persuade men, to induce the Holy Ghost to work on the earth, to walk on the earth. As the Rev. Morris Harrison Tynes told Leon (1985:131),

I think that each man's historical perspective determines his response to this divine encounter. There is something in his life that exalts him to great inspiration. Take Handel writing the *Messiah* in less than thirty days. He must have ascended to heaven! ...I think the same thing happens in preaching at its zenith; and, yes, I do think it is the moment of a miracle.

Forrest gives this power to his characters; by making them more forceful and dynamic, he energizes his novels. How powerful is the effect of the preached folk sermon? Rev. King in Washington or Rev. Jackson at the Democratic convention supply the answer. They gradually engaged their audiences, heightening involvement on an emotional plane as well as on a rational one, gradually turning up the intensity until the audience was theirs, rocking to their rhythm, all the while assenting to their message.³ In *There is a Tree More Ancient than Eden* (1988a), the last dying words of M. C. Browne are—by Forrest's intention—a “sermonette,” beginning with “I done found jesus *ohohoh*, at *last*... at last, amen this morning i come to *know* him, mother-dear, and grandma dear-dear and little nathan, i found our jesus, you all, this morning on the altar of my heart...” (11). In a

³ See espec. the analysis in Rosenberg 1986.

chapter entitled “The Dream,” Nathaniel cries out to Aunt Breedlove: “Oh but auntie breedy how can I be a prophet in a strange land, where we’ve been stripped bare to the bone?” (87). In a section called “The Vision,” the visionary sees the crucifixion in gospel song / vernacular / alliterative terms (119-20):

...and I could see the man upon the slab of the tree go quaking, his mouth trembling and quivering (although he did utter a mumbling word) as this soldier (bent now over the man’s right hand with the same kind of precision), his liquid eyes sparkling like those of a jeweler inspecting the fairest pearl of his horde of preciously purloined gems), now hammering the nail into the unshaken right hand....

In what Forrest called “a literary sermon as eulogy” (personal correspondence, 4/19/91), Rev. Pompey c.j. Browne, another preacher from *There is a Tree More Ancient than Eden*, remembers and laments Martin Luther King, Jr., at The Crossroads Rooster Tavern in a verbally pyrotechnic declamation drawing from street slang, history, the Bible, and literature, described by the author (205) as “something of a transformation of Adam Clayton Powell, Martin Luther King, Leon Sullivan, and Richard Pryor.” Here is a sample (208):

And Mister Jefferson, that juggler sucks a slave’s breast (the declaration up his snuff-box); enlightened when in the course of Pandora’s box: a test case for Niggers’ apartheid, shake that chain and drop your ass. To perish out of this world backwards: Lords of the land, tongues coiling, counselled by Lucifer’s fruit. Fear is shot through the eye-teeth of men’s rage as an inherited whirlwind. Oh the bugger-baron snorts on his rip van winkling Twilight manufactured FABULOUS behind the sanctuary chariot cadillac like a circus clown with a monkey on his back.

Faulkner, Melville, and others incorporated preachers’ sermons as distinct and discrete entities within the narrative, separate from the voice of the narrator. But not only do several of Forrest’s characters preach, his narrative persona itself preaches, so that oratorical strength is not only that of one of the characters, but of the narrator himself. Rev. Shegog was a man of moving words; Leon Forrest’s voice has similar power in that it is composed not merely of those of his characters; consequently his story, his narrative gains strength and emotive compulsion. Not that the entire economy of the novels depends on sermons; only where the situation

requires highlighting. Preachers are important in black culture, and they are very important characters in the novels. The voice of the narrator is often that of a verbally talented folk preacher, a man with the gift of words (a black Thomas Pynchon or even a James Joyce). Forrest is no mere player of word games; although he can pun with anyone writing today and has mastered the allusions ploy, these trivial pursuits are not what his novels are about.

The comparison with Joyce is easy, and has been made by the critics; it is implicit (sometimes even explicit) in much of Forrest's prose (1988b:132):

and now the young man Nathaniel felt in his pocket for the prayer cloth, that the blind singing-choir directress and prophetess Sister Rachel had given him; still carrying it, starched now, in his pocket and thinking suddenly how a simple prayer cloth could be turned into a snot rag (ah, mighty Joyce); or to drive the Moor mad; or to cover the hand in the basket of Aunty Foisty; or dipped in the Lamb's blood, or used to wipe the face of the bedraggled, falling and rising Redeemer's face of glory to the world, forever and ever; or to wipe the tears and then the blood from his feet... His feet.

His popular / folk / colloquial / learned / loutish / high-serious / casual register style invites comparison with contemporaries Pynchon and Barth, Hawkes and Coover, with Acker (less most of the profanity), with Vonnegut, and in Europe, Grass. Yet, despite Forrest's humor, despite his careful attention to the spoken word, he has not been found to be as accessible as they (perhaps because of that virtuosity that greatly complicates and thickens his prose). He has taken folklore and popular modes and genres seriously. And he has become one of those writers who have enlarged our concept of what is "mainstream." He is, of course, a "black writer." But he is more than that, as Graham Greene was more than a "Catholic writer." Partly by his own talents Forrest has widened the currents so that they now include his writing. Indeed, his most recent novel, *Divine Days*, transports African-American traditions to a big city.

As Forrest has said at one point, "I wanted to be a singer of the language—in the tradition of her majestic self [Mahalia Jackson] and the Negro Preacher" (1987b:34). Singer he is, and astute listener too. Faulkner had a great ear for people's speech. Like Angus Wilson, like Gloria Naylor, Forrest listened to the speech of his peers until he got it right, listened hard enough until it flowed from his pen with authenticity.

In this connection it should be noted that he is an extraordinary reader of his own writing, performing it with a preacher's histrionic skill: intonation, gesture, expression, eye contact are all active. His own sensibility is extraordinarily complex, loaded with allusions to literature, allusions to the Bible and to popular culture, expressed in a folk religious mode, in an intricate exploitation of his language's semantic and phonological complexity, in his Chicago-educated elegant, formal style, and with a whimsical playfulness. Forrest's awareness and recording of contemporary life is encyclopedic. Like Mahalia's, Leon's song is difficult; and like hers too, his performances are ultimately rewarding.

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