

# S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

---

3:1 2017

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

---

*Founded by Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri.*

General Editors	Guido Avezzù (Executive Editor), Silvia Bigliuzzi.
Editorial Board	Simona Brunetti, Lisanna Calvi, Nicola Pasqualicchio, Gherardo Ugolini.
Managing Editor	Lisanna Calvi.
Assistant Managing Editor	Francesco Lupi.
Copyeditors	Francesco Dall'Olio, Marco Duranti, Antonietta Provenza, Carlo Vareschi.
Layout Editor	Alex Zanutto.
Advisory Board	Anna Maria Belardinelli, Anton Bierl, Enoch Brater, Jean-Christophe Cavallin, Marco De Marinis, Tobias Döring, Pavel Drábek, Paul Edmondson, Keir Douglas Elam, Ewan Fernie, Patrick Finglass, Enrico Giaccherini, Mark Griffith, Stephen Halliwell, Robert Henke, Pierre Judet de la Combe, Eric Nicholson, Guido Paduano, Franco Perrelli, Didier Plassard, Donna Shalev, Susanne Wofford.

Copyright © 2017 SKENÈ  
All rights reserved.  
ISSN 2421-4353

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means  
without permission from the publisher.  
SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies  
<http://www.skenejournal.it>  
[info@skenejournal.it](mailto:info@skenejournal.it)

ROBERT WILLIAM HAYNES\*

## Hymnological Dramaturgy as Escape from Ideology in Horton Foote

### Abstract

In the 1960s in the United States, ideas often became formulas or slogans, and, as such stripped down ideas tend to do, some of these abstracted ideas, simplified by abbreviation, took on not only the convenience of brevity but also the fatal charm of oversimplification, as though complex issues could be divested of some of their essential internal contradictoriness or the requirement that they be considered properly not only from the basis of selective logic but also from that of experience. In Horton Foote's plays, screenplays, and teleplays, a central characteristic is the writer's aversion to such kinds of simplification. Foote's own background gave him a more philosophic attitude than is compatible with mere intellectual convenience. His rejection of easy rationalization and ill-grounded aesthetic speculation sprang from his impulse to dissociate art from empty abstractions, an impulse particularly manifested in Foote's frequent invocation of hymns, the simple songs of ordinary people whose spiritual need for comfort is at the heart of this music and its unsophisticated honesty. This article makes a case for the significance of what can be called 'hymnological dramaturgy' in Foote's work. The influence of composer Charles Ives and that of dancer Martha Graham helped shape this author's artistic purpose, but so, undeniably, did his involvement in the church music of the Texas cotton town in which blacks and whites found common ground in an art quite alien to slogans and superficial cleverness.

KEYWORDS: Horton Foote, hymn, *The Trip to Bountiful*, *Tender Mercies*, ideology, dramaturgy, spirituality

Equality, I spoke the word,  
As if a wedding vow,  
Ah, but I was so much older then;  
I'm younger than that now.  
Bob Dylan, *My Back Pages*

Horton Foote grew up in Wharton, a small Texas town devoted to cotton farming. His great-great-grandfather had been a major plantation owner in *ante-bellum* Texas, a man whose adventurous career had taken him from his Georgia birthplace through an interval in Alabama political life to en-

\* Texas A&M International University - dustiest@gmail.com

agement in Texas's military struggle with Mexico. An owner of extensive acreage of land and of many slaves at the beginning of the Civil War, Albert Clinton Horton lost most of his assets before dying in 1865.<sup>1</sup> Though some of his descendants retained only the memory of Mr Horton's reputation, that was a significant factor for them, as they thus had a notable connection to the state's first elected lieutenant governor and a commander of a frontier cavalry troop. As a figure from Texas' legendary past, A.C. Horton cast a long shadow. His great-great-grandson Horton Foote's lifelong interest in the sometimes-bloody but nearly always contentious history of Texas and of his family shaped Foote's dramaturgic career and led to his finest artistic achievements.

In order to appreciate this writer's perspective, it helps to consider certain specific facts of his background. Aside from his extensive family connections in southeastern Texas, a region in which the defeat of the Confederacy was still a bitter memory in the early twentieth century, one must keep in mind that Foote left home at seventeen to attend drama school at the Pasadena Playhouse in California, and, though he would often return to Wharton, he actually made New York City the centre of his creative life, even as he drew on small-town Texas for his characters and plots. Unlike his fellow Southerners William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, he found creative sustenance in a region with highly developed artistic institutions, and, from the time of his five-year period as struggling actor to his first stage play in 1940, on through the war years and his four years of teaching drama in Washington, to his return to New York as television writer for the decade of the 1950s, and onward through productive decades to 2009 and the end of his life that year in Hartford, Connecticut, his residence in Texas was imaginative rather than physical much of the time.

As Foote's long career developed, significant social changes occurred in the United States, particularly in the South. When he left Texas for California in 1933, the nation was afflicted by the Depression, and life was economically difficult almost everywhere. Little or no attention was paid to civil rights in his home region, though Foote himself was briefly radicalized when he arrived in New York in 1935 and was thrilled by revolutionary hopes of the kind embodied in Clifford Odets's play *Waiting for Lefty*. Though his views moderated fairly soon, his experience in the culturally diverse environment of the city gave him a valuable perspective on the place of his origin and enabled him to recognize the socially debilitating effects of prejudice. As he came to know the theatre of Odets and that of Paul Green, who sought to incorporate the culture of poor African Americans

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of A.C. Horton's career, see Ellenberger 1985 and, for his conduct as slave-owner, Mattison 1861: 30-5.

in his dramatic art, he developed an understanding of where the theatre stands, actually or potentially, in relation to pressing social issues. In one much-needed acting job he secured in 1936, Foote played a non-speaking part in a kind of stage extravaganza, director Max Reinhardt's *The Eternal Road* (1937), with script by Franz Werfel and music by Kurt Weill. This show was, as Marion Castleberry notes, "a response to Adolf Hitler's persecution of the Jews in Europe" (2014: 78). In this drama, Foote not only earned several months of regular pay but also developed diversity in his onstage skills. As Castleberry explains: "He, along with the rest of the ensemble, was cast in more than one scene; sometimes he played an Egyptian, and at other times a Hebrew" (ibid.). One incidental result of this role was that it gave Foote a chance to adjust to life in the city and to take advantage of opportunities to build connections and explore new possibilities for his acting career. As an actor, no doubt he had mixed emotions about the non-speaking aspect of his part, but he must also have been pleased with the opportunity to participate in a project associated with distinguished figures in the theatre, especially one which sought to celebrate spirituality as a response to political cruelty.

Foote was also studying when possible with the Russian teachers at Madame Daykarhanova's School for the Stage, developing acting techniques grounded in the teaching of Constantin Stanislavski. At this point it would seem that he had left his Texas background far behind; however, in late 1939 or early 1940, when it was suggested to him that he try his hand at writing a play, he quickly prepared a script based upon his own experience as high school party-goer in Texas. His friends in a theatrical group, the American Actors Company, liked the piece, and the play was staged in April 1940, marking the first of some eighty (at least) plays by Horton Foote. This short drama drew on memory and established a pattern that remained essential through nearly seventy years of playwriting focused on Wharton, Texas, a town the author would soon be including in his works as 'Harrison'. Foote would often face the issue of how to deal with bias, especially the kind of prejudice that resists reason and cordiality, generates intolerance, and shapes a dehumanizing, abstract ideology. As a small-town Texan, he recognized that many residents of Wharton held resentments against 'Yankees', blacks, Jews, and Catholics. As a New York playwright, he knew that Northern urbanites often viewed rural Southerners with disdain, an attitude not always opposed even by Southern writers, as shown by Erskine Caldwell's very successful work *Tobacco Road* (novel 1932, dramatic version by Jack Kirkland 1933). Such forms of bias, both the Southern and the Northern varieties, follow the pattern which led in the nineteenth century to the Civil War, but there are other patterns of prejudice which have little to do with geography, notably the attitudes characterized by the respective sides

in the permanent struggle between haves and have-nots. In all such ideological alignments of prejudice, a simplistic formula tends to usurp the role of rational fairness, and hostility thrives and is perpetuated by such perspectives, which are often no more than self-serving rationalizations.

In Horton Foote's plays, screenplays, and teleplays, a fundamental characteristic is the writer's aversion to such kinds of simplification. His own background, first as small-town Texas schoolboy and then as New York playwright and Academy Award winning screenwriter (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1962, and *Tender Mercies*, 1983), ensured that he developed a more comprehensive philosophic attitude than is compatible with the shake-and-bake mentality the main motive of which is convenience. The impulse to dissociate art from such a mentality, particularly as it is expressed in simplistic slogans, pseudo-laconic boasts, and polemical sophistry, is manifested in Foote's frequent invocation of hymns, the simple songs of ordinary people whose spiritual need for comfort is at the heart of this music and its unsophisticated honesty. When a stage version of Foote's play *The Trip to Bountiful*, featuring African Americans in the main roles, was presented in 2015 in New York City, some critics were surprised when audience members joined in with the leading character Mrs Watts as she sang the hymn that gave her comfort in her grave anxiety (Grimes 2013: A1). I do not think that Mr Foote would have been surprised. He often explained that his work was neither formulaic nor didactic, yet his distaste for specious assessments of the great human problems remains clear. Though he went through a radical phase in his own early life in 1930s New York, he had both conservative and liberal friends and tended to keep his own counsel in political matters rather than to endeavour to impose his perspective on others. Foote remained a committed Democrat as his father had been, but in the United States before the 1960s that affiliation in itself meant little, as many key Democrats were, by twenty-first century standards, very conservative. There were also in those days, *mirabile dictu*, liberal Republicans in public life. Foote was an FDR (liberal) Democrat.

Here I will make a case for the significance of what I am calling 'hymnological dramaturgy' in Horton Foote's work. The influence of composer Charles Ives and that of dancer Martha Graham helped shape this author's artistic purpose, but so, undeniably, did his involvement in the church music of the Texas cotton town in which blacks and whites found common ground in an art quite alien to ideological slogans and superficial cleverness.<sup>2</sup> In his "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered in Washington, D.C. on August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King concluded his oration with a quota-

<sup>2</sup> Though Rebekah Clinkscale (2009) discusses the role of popular songs in Foote's nine-play *Orphans' Home Cycle*, her analysis does not consider the playwright's affinity for the hymn.

tion from the patriotic standard hymn *My Country, 'Tis of Thee*, followed by words from a different song, the chorus of the spiritual *Free at Last*, a song originating in poverty and oppression which celebrates the hope of release from both. King's invocation of a song from each of two cultures expresses his conviction that his fellow citizens could and would be brought to agreement on the need for compassionate correction of an unfair political system, and the tremendous effect of his sermonic address still resonates. King sought to persuade those he addressed that the ideology of racial segregation and discrimination should give way before reason and understanding sympathy. Horton Foote had received his Academy Award for the screenplay of *To Kill a Mockingbird* earlier in this same year, and, despite the fearful climate of opposition to civil rights, other gifted writers at that time were continuing to produce works sympathetic to the movement led by King.

In 1963, ten years had passed since Foote's teleplay *The Trip to Bountiful* had shown executives in the young industry of television the theatrical power the new medium could exert (Krampner 1997: 61). In that play, Lillian Gish had developed the character of Carrie Watts, an aging Southern lady whose role would be revisited notably in later years by actresses Geraldine Page, Lois Smith, and Cicely Tyson, among others.<sup>3</sup> Mrs Watts, whose life as rural outsider in the confusing urban world of mid-century Houston has become intolerable, escapes the virtual imprisonment of her son's apartment and embarks upon a bucolic odyssey to her old home in the ghost town of Bountiful. Confronted by external obstacles and weakened by a heart condition, Mrs Watts finds strength in singing hymns. She is neither Puritan nor Philistine, but she feels intimately connected to a nature which is alienated in the city, and her spiritual being yearns always for a comfort promised by the traditional music that has resonated through her life. Her daughter-in-law Jessie Mae, a selfish and vindictive woman who loves beauty shops and movie magazines, makes her miserable, demanding, among other annoying habits, that Mrs Watts not sing hymns in her presence. Jessie Mae feels threatened by spirituality and by the comfort her mother-in-law derives from singing old songs. It is as though the world invoked by hymns reproaches her superficiality and pettiness, and, of course, it does.

In the original teleplay of 1953, the hymn Mrs Watts would sing from time to time was one titled *No, Not One*, less formally known by a line from its chorus: "There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus" (Oatman 1953: 220).

<sup>3</sup> Page won an Academy Award as Mrs Watts in the 1985 film *The Trip to Bountiful*, and Smith's role in the stage play earned an Obie along with other awards. Tyson won a Tony for her stage performance and was nominated for several awards for the television movie version.

This rather homely and unpretentious song focuses upon the isolation of the individual and the consequent importance of divine love in life's numerous struggles. Its message is less evangelical than a reminder that loneliness and human betrayal need not afflict those who depend upon the friendship of Jesus for consolation and comfort. It bears some resemblance to the classical Stoic attitude, and, in fact, Mrs Watts soon confesses to a young woman she meets that she has lived with heartbreak for many years since her father intervened between her and the man she loved. Yet despite all the grief and deprivation and labour she has known, she remains a loving, sympathetic, and, when allowed to be so, a cheerful person.

Foote's character Carrie Watts has become familiar on the American stage as well as in film and on television, and her honest simplicity still does much to remind audiences of those who suffer in silence, those whose decent strength and honesty empower those around them, and those for whom abstract ethical complexities have no significance whatever. Her resort to the music of the hymn is an intellectual engagement with a world of harmony in which selfless love is paradigmatic, and the kinetic energy of the musical flow is both spiritual refreshment and devout self-correction, a form of thought that is at its essence philosophical. In his creation of this kind, diligent, and unselfish countrywoman, Foote invoked human gifts which should be honoured, one sign of which is Mrs Watts' reverence for her own deepest belief in a providence she praises in song. Surely Martin Luther King's decision to conclude his tremendous speech with invocations of two hymns, one from the dominant national culture and one from a tradition originating in slavery, drew upon a similar inspiration, speaking to shared faith and the better nature of all who recognize their common humanity.

The Western literary tradition holds a long conversation with the author of the biblical Psalms, whose works – if we accept them as they were historically understood – often embody devotion and praise. The courageous shepherd David, slayer of the tyrannical bully Goliath as well as of various beasts threatening his sheep, was in his youth an admirable example of the inspired poet, and if in his later days he stumbled grievously, that has not cancelled the literary power of his compositions or the freshness of his vision. A shepherd noble by nature, he left a paradigm that would be conflated with Greek pastoral poetry and subsequent Roman pastorals so as to intrigue Edmund Spenser and his contemporaries with the poetic possibilities of this combination of inspired innocence and rhapsodic love of wisdom. Translations and imitations of the Psalms still offer opportunities to combine devotion with inspiration, as, in more recent American literature, the Psalms continue to exert their power. Though the manifestations of that association are notably different from those of four centuries ago, David's



psalmic pleasures and setbacks retain their immediacy. Horton Foote drew on that tradition in his 1983 film *Tender Mercies*.

The departures in this film from the character and situation of the Old Testament singer are evident enough to make the connection between the film and its biblical antecedent at first glance obscure, but some reflection will suffice to clarify it. The story of David is itself a kind of reversal of the ordinary scheme of life. One tends to expect an individual to sow wild oats in youth and then, as appetites flame out and vigour diminishes, the rakish inclinations succumb to duller tastes, and eventually, in middle age or late life, the individual achieves virtue by default. As William Blake rather insensitively points out, "Prudence is a rich, ugly, old maid courted by Incapacity" (1790). But, for David, the situation is the opposite. In youth he is brave, honourable, and otherwise virtuous. It is when he becomes king that he cannot subdue his lust for Bathsheba, and his scurrilous murder of her husband is the worst deed he ever commits.

In Horton Foote's film, the pattern returns to something like normal. Mac Sledge, the country singer whose life and career have hit bottom in rural Texas, has drunk himself into near mindlessness as he wakes up in a cheap motel by the highway. Unlike the rhapsodic young David, Mac is an aging veteran of two failed marriages. He was once famous, but drunkenness and violence have ruined his career, and, as he offers to pay his motel bill by working on the place, his modest skills of repair and maintenance seem to be his only gifts. The attractive young widow who owns the motel deals patiently with him, and soon one feels that Mac belongs in this place. His abilities are needed, and his quiet respect and admiration for his employer is reinforced by the growing affection between Mac and her young son. As Mac sobers up and routines establish themselves around him, we witness what must be one of the least dramatic marriage proposals on film, and soon Mac is incorporated fully into the little society headquartered at the Mariposa Motel. He will face grave crises yet, as consequences of his past life catch up with him, there seems to be peace gathering about him as he gradually develops his new role as husband and father and begins to recover the inspiration that once had brought him fame as singer and song-writer.

Mac's recovery from personal chaos embodies the "tender mercies" of the film's title, and in his recovery he brings strength and resources to his new wife and her son. It is characteristic of Horton Foote that the title's Scriptural phrase is indirectly linked to the film's narrative, and this link is likely to be missed by those who do not examine the script. When, after one wrenching crisis, Rosa Lee, Mac's wife, fears he has gone off to resume his drunken life, she waits quietly for him and then goes to bed alone. She says her prayers, and the words she speaks are from Psalms 25:4-5. Her prayer is interrupted by the sound of Mac's truck arriving, and she and her

husband begin a conversation as he enters. If she had continued with the Psalm, which she does not, she would have said: "Remember, O Lord, thy tender mercies and thy loving-kindnesses; for they have been ever of old".<sup>4</sup> The moment of Mac's return is an anxious one, as he has been driving furiously and has bought a bottle of whiskey, so it seems likely that he will be intoxicated, but there is a special instance of tender mercy here for Rosa Lee when Mac announces that he is sober and has poured out the whiskey he bought.

Mac has been attending the local church with Rosa Lee and Sonny, singing the hymns with the congregation while his wife sings in the choir. During the first scene in the church, the hymn sung is the vigorous *Jesus Saves* (Foote 1989: 93). Later, after Mac's near-return to drinking, the congregation sings *Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me* (133) as Sonny and Mac are baptized. As time passes, Mac regains confidence in his ability to write songs and begins teaching Sonny how to play the guitar. Sought out by a group of young musicians in a country band, Mac begins performing and the band cuts a record of one of his songs. As his situation improves, however, he receives news that his daughter, who has recently paid him a visit, has died in a car accident. During her visit, she had asked her father to sing a song she remembered, a song titled *The Wings of a Dove*, and Mac had told her he did not remember the song. As soon as his daughter left, however, he softly sang the song to himself. After learning of her death, he sings the song again. This song is an actual country hit which, though a gospel song, reached number one in popularity on the country charts in 1960 (it also reached number twelve on the pop music charts). It relates Christ's baptism and the signs of hope provided to persons of faith. Mac's refusal to acknowledge to his daughter that he knows the song shows his desire to reject his former drunken self, but the news of her death brings bitter regret for his not having granted her wish to hear him sing it. As the film draws to a close, Mac sings the song again. Since he sang it earlier, he has himself been baptized and has lost his daughter, and his formerly terse and world-weary attitude, once seemingly indicative of spiritual fatigue and accustomed disappointment, has taken on, in Robert Duvall's interpretation of the dramatic part, a new character. Mac, though battered by adversity, has developed a kind of magnitude of spirit. He has returned to the garden, and, when Sonny runs out with the new football Mac has bought him, Mac joins the boy in throwing the ball, as Rosa Lee, an enigmatic, meditative expression on her face, watches Mac and Sonny at play.

This film is full of music, and in fact Robert Duvall wrote some of the song lyrics himself, yet there is an engagement here with spirituality that

<sup>4</sup> For more discussion of this moment in the film, see Haynes 2016: 229.

echoes Mrs Watts' devotion to hymns which can reconcile her to the sometimes fearsome obstacles life offers her. Mac Sledge has been through a whole range of human experience, from abject drunken prostration to fame and wealth as a singer and songwriter, yet he has found no steadying force in his life until the quiet and dignified woman who owns the Mariposa Motel gently directs his abilities and enables him to recognize that the life of the spirit is redemptive and that the homely tasks of familial life are privileges which constitute "tender mercies". Just as the David of the Old Testament betrayed his own conscience and was punished by the loss of his favourite son, so Mac's waste of his talent and his violent, irrational behaviour, which included an effort to kill his second wife, suggests a parallel as he faces the loss of a daughter who has eloped with a drunken musician much resembling his former self. But Mac's personal trajectory is not tragic, and he will return to his guitar and to the garden he works with Rosa Lee, and he will, one believes, be a good father to the child into whose life he has stumbled.

The power of Horton Foote's plays and screenplays has often been described by critics as mysterious. A classic formulation is that articulated by Reynolds Price in his introduction to Foote's *Courtship, Valentine's Day, 1918: Three Plays from The Orphans' Home Cycle* (1987). Often quoted in discussions of Foote, it should for convenience be cited here as well. Price begins, "simplicity of means and lucidity of results may not be the universal aims of art throughout the world, but they're very nearly so" (ix). He goes on, noting the difficulties critics face in dealing with works characterized by such lucidity and simplicity, "yet how to describe, or discuss, any such masterpiece? . . . It's a famous and lamentable limitation of modern aesthetic criticism . . . that it has proved generally helpless in the presence of apparent 'simplicity,' the illusory purity of means and ends toward universally comprehensible results" (ix-x). He concludes that "the mechanistic methods of modern critics require complexity of means before their intricate gears can begin to grind" (x), and turns to a consideration of Foote: "Were you as deeply moved as I was by his *Tender Mercies* (1983)? Then can you tell me why? Explain to me how actors – even as perfect as those he found, even so resourceful a director – could employ so few and such rhetorically uncomplicated speeches toward the flawless achievement of such a calmly profound and memorable face-to-face contemplation of human degradation and regeneration" (x-xi). Price's words are often mentioned in criticism of this author because they describe a dilemma familiar to those who practice academic criticism and find that Foote poses a special problem. One recalls that Foote himself was always diffident about pitching his work to others. As a rising star in early 1950s television writing, Foote, reluctant to elaborate, told his boss Fred Coe that he had an idea for a teleplay "about

an old woman who wanted to get back to her hometown” (qtd in Castleberry 2014: 158). Coe’s intuition was that Foote had something substantial in mind, and he approved the project, which of course turned out to be *The Trip to Bountiful*, a dramatic work still vigorously alive in expanded or adapted versions well into the twenty-first century.

Alas, the critic cannot survive in the academic piranha tank by describing literary works in such sparse language, even if his words partake of oracular qualities, but Horton Foote’s drama does not call for gush or sophistry, the clever insinuation of political bias, or supercilious posturing. Nor does it on the other hand deserve reduction to the equivocal realm of religious fundamentalism or to the province of knee-jerk reaction, although certain politically-oriented parties have briefly tried to conscript this Texas writer before realizing that he is neither a Baptist, nor an agrarian fugitive. Foote was indeed a dear friend of the brilliant drama critic and *I’ll Take My Stand* contributor Stark Young, but his favourite Presidents were Franklin D. Roosevelt and Bill Clinton. He was a Christian, but no one was more aware of the shortcomings and at least occasional hypocrisy of much Southern fundamentalism than he. So the dilemma of how to write about Foote’s plays, teleplays, and screenplays requires judicious mental adjustment on the critic’s part. Reynolds Price’s insight gives us a first step, and the critical contributions of Gerald C. Wood, who argues convincingly for Foote’s “personal theater of intimacy” (1999: 8), and of Crystal Brian, whose article “Horton Foote: Mystic of the American Theatre” (2002) maintains that Foote’s drama is transcendental art, exemplify approaches which direct themselves toward understanding rather than toward the often sophisticated objectives of academic writing.

In the works of Flannery O’Connor, a writer highly regarded by Foote, the connection of the author’s theological perspective has often lent critics a mechanism for management. In a passage which suggests a parallel between this Georgia writer and Foote, Robert Fitzgerald comments:

She was a girl who started with a gift for cartooning and satire, and found in herself a far greater gift, unique in her time and place, a marvel. She kept going deeper (this is a phrase she used) until making up stories became, for her, a way of testing and defining and conveying that superior knowledge that must be called religious. It must be called religious but with no false note in our voices, because her writing will make any false note that is applied to it very clear indeed. (1965: vii)

Fitzgerald’s words constitute something of an instruction for critics, and if it has sometimes fallen upon deaf ears surely O’Connor would not have been surprised by that. Fitzgerald adds:

We had better let our awareness of the knowledge in her stories grow quietly without forcing it, for nothing could be worse than to treat them straight off as problems for exegesis or texts to preach on. (viii)

O'Connor, who lived the rural Southern life familiar to Foote, was unable herself to omit hymns or gospel music from her representation of this society, even though her perspective offers much less sympathy than that explicit in *Tender Mercies*. O'Connor's gospel singers, or ex-gospel singers, include The Misfit, the diabolical murderer from *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and Tom T. Shiftlet, if that is his name, from *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* (1983b). Both of these stories are collected in her volume titled *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1983a). In *Revelation*, a story from O'Connor's collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965), the main character Ruby Turpin listens with complacent pleasure to a radio performance of *When I looked up and He looked down*, and inwardly sings along with the refrain "And wona these days I know I'll we-eara crown" (194).<sup>5</sup> Since the next line of the story reads, "Without appearing to, Mrs. Turpin always noticed people's feet" (ibid.), it does not appear that Ruby looks up as often as she may think she does. These instances show that hypocrisy is often to be associated with such music and with the commercial activity that produces it, and certainly Horton Foote was quite aware that in his own home state with its rich musical heritage there were examples of almost everything imaginable, including the exploitation of religious faith.

Unlike O'Connor, however, Foote led a creative life that was collaborative. He had been an actor himself before turning in his mid-twenties to writing, and all of his significant achievements as writer developed from the world of theatre and of television and of cinema. His modest efforts to write fiction, which were encouraged by others, were unsuccessful, and even his two valuable volumes of autobiography are mainly records of the collaborative life characteristic of a man of the theatre. His early dream of being an actor involved the commercial aspect of being paid to perform on-stage, to gain a living by pleasing an audience, and in fact that consideration accompanied his entire career, as can be appreciated from a review of the extensive financial negotiations and other documents preserved by his faithful agent Lucy Kroll. If Mac Sledge resumes writing songs to seek a better life for his new family, he is preceded in this necessity by a whole tradition of entertainers of whom Homer and Shakespeare are conspicuous examples, and certainly Horton Foote's writing was given urgency by the financial challenges he faced as husband and father.

<sup>5</sup> This song was written by Albert E. Brumley, Sr (1905-77), one of the leading gospel songwriters and author of such much-recorded songs as *I'll Fly Away* and *Jesus, Hold My Hand*.

Mac Sledge's audience is no highbrow crowd, but the matter his songs deal with is itself essential to most people's lives: emotional connections, the pains, pleasures and hopes of everyday life, and the inescapable value of honesty. As a reformed drinker and brawler, he is in his lucid moments burdened in conscience, but if one reflects upon the conscience of the pressured but never improper Carrie Watts one also sees a similar burden as she constantly weighs the significance of her failed love and of her marriage to a man she did not love. Surely bitter experience is a threat to peace of mind, and its poisonous effects are not easily neutralized by rationalization or by glib applications of convenient ethical formulas. In the crisis of chaos in which Mac Sledge appears, as well as in the intolerable nastiness of the claustrophobic apartment in which Carrie Watts has found herself, the urgent necessity of spiritual liberation is the moving force of the drama, and the representative medium of that force is music, not the music whose mode engages the dance but that which lifts the understanding to an acceptance of a state of being defined by mortality and shaped between anxieties of pain and confusion, on the one hand, and a tranquil activity of comprehension on the other. In the Southern society Foote knew, that music was practically everywhere, for churches were and are everywhere in the American South, and each church had and has its musicians and its singers.

The nineteenth century had also been a period of nearly universal Christian worship in the United States, and a strong connection between church hymns and the anti-slavery movement was particularly influential before the Civil War. Horton Foote's distant relative Harriet Beecher Stowe made hymns essential to the message of her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), in which the novel's hero responds to the brutality of Simon Legree by singing *Amazing Grace* and dies quoting another hymn as well as a scriptural passage. Stowe was herself, incidentally, a writer of hymns. Emily Dickinson, of course, shaped her poetry on the metrical patterns of familiar church hymns. It was the hymn which gave harmony to the often troubled lives of generations preceding the developments of modern life, and hymns still retain great importance in many lives, especially in their ability to empower a commonality of feeling which has a moderating or healing effect upon the anxiety generated by both normal and extraordinary challenges. The moment in which one sings or reflects upon a hymn is an engagement with tradition and with one's companions in the common journey through life. Even when Carrie Watts sings the hymn which maintains that human friendship is much less significant than that of Jesus, she is connecting to friends, known or unknown, who sing the same song with devoted attention to breath, pitch, and meaning. In the film version of *Bountiful*, in which this hymn is replaced first by another titled *Softly and*

*Tenderly* and later by *Blessed Assurance*, Mrs Watts' love of hymns conveys her desire to connect with others, a desire sorely frustrated by her daughter-in-law Jessie Mae's rude efforts to silence her. Mrs Watts recruits Thelma, the kind-hearted young woman she gets to know on the bus to Harrison, to join her in singing, thus emphasizing by contrast Jessie Mae's selfish attitude and rejection of anything spiritual.

For Mac Sledge, the return to church, where he seems to know the songs already, accords with his return to sane life. Despite his years of destructive behaviour, he somehow finds a way to regain dignity and self-respect as he learns to appreciate the kindness, wisdom, and strength of Rosa Lee. As he realizes as well that he can contribute to her and her son's happiness, his sense of the priority of his own values as solitary individual diminishes, and those values evolve accordingly. As Rosa Lee and Sonny's happiness becomes essential to Mac, he is both humbled and strengthened. Rejoining sane society is not completely pleasant, but just as he finds in moments of singing together with others a joy and comfort that restores his spirit and refreshes his inspiration so he also finds in the simple pleasures of life as husband and father a bewildered satisfaction that has lifted him above his previous life of pointless struggle. He tells Rosa Lee that he does not trust happiness, but in the moment he does so he has located himself in a place where he belongs and where he can share his strength with persons who appreciate it. In Wallace Stevens's poem *Le Monocle de Mon Oncle*, where we read the lines "The honey of heaven may or may not come, / But that of earth both comes and goes at once" (1923: 15), a similar view is suggested, though in Mac's case a conviction that his life is governed by a power he cannot altogether understand constitutes a reinforcement of the hard-won, unpretentious wisdom that has come to him at last.

Thus Horton Foote's drama, like the communally-experienced music of the hymn, extends its artistic power with plainness and without empty sophistication. Just as one of Foote's heroes Samuel Clemens once referred to his novel *Tom Sawyer* as a hymn, so might this writer claim that in his unique dramatic works such as *Bountiful*, *Tender Mercies*, *The Orphans' Home Cycle*, and many others he draws upon the communal force that empowers the hymn and illuminates both individual and family and the conflicts and reconciliations that occupy our time. In the Bob Dylan quotation used as epigraph for this paper, the speaker confesses that his former wisdom has turned out sadly mistaken, a recognition that in Socratic terms would be the possible beginning of wisdom, and which bears a kind of resemblance to the opening lines of what may be the most famous of English hymns: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, / That saved a wretch like me. / I once was lost but now am found / Was blind but now I see". Foote's dramatic insight is grounded in a humility that respects his characters and

the predicaments they face, and this respect is one of the reasons he never intrudes into the realm of the sensational. Just as he was known to avoid staging plays based on the lives of living people who might be offended or hurt by the publication of private information, so he turns his creative attention to those whose stories might never otherwise attract attention. I suggest that this dramaturgy, motivated by respect for the spirit and the hopes of both characters onstage and members of the audience, gravitates toward the effects of hymnology and thus gives us reason to see in Foote's drama a teleology that is both musical and technically distinct from that of other American playwrights.

The success of his plays in the years since his death in 2009 certainly suggests that these works' unique character is of increasing interest on all levels of the American theatre, and as more of his archived work is brought to public attention the artistic contribution of this major dramatic writer will be more widely recognized. For actors, those artists who deliver drama to audiences onstage or in film, Foote's scripts are known to enable their work and to open new avenues of achievement. A former actor himself, the playwright had walked the Depression streets of New York City seeking desperately for parts; he had been paralysed with stage fright during a try-out for a play; he had worked weeks in a spectacular programme in a silent part; he had had a local success in a lead role played in blackface; and he had almost accidentally become a playwright while working to develop his acting skills. His love of actors and their profession, a love that many actors have recognized, was deeply set in his being, and it was shown in Foote's habit of encouraging them to make his characters their own onstage.

Notable testimony about Foote's special relationship to actors is that of Robert Duvall, whose admiration for his friend has often been acknowledged, and that of Geraldine Page, whose tribute to Foote at the time of her receiving an Oscar for *Bountiful* is on *YouTube*. A 2011 volume *Farewell: Remembering Horton Foote 1916-2009* includes appreciations of the writer by actors Elizabeth Ashley, Betty Buckley, Ellen Burstyn, Frank Girardeau, Carol Goodheart, David Margulies, Roberta Maxwell, Matthew Modine, Joyce O'Connor, Rochelle Oliver, Wendy Phillips, Lois Smith, Jean Stapleton, Cameron Watson, Margot White, and Harris Yulin, in all of whose statements one is reminded that Foote's work as artist was intimately connected to his own generosity of character and his respect for the acting profession. His sense of the theatre as community reflected a larger sense of human community, and his objective of excellence in the theatre was a natural manifestation of a devotion to the quest for excellence in life. If Foote's dramaturgy is hymnological, that accords well with what we know of the origins of the theatre, for in the Athenian theatre the best seat in the house was that of the priest of Dionysus, and a due reverence for inspira-



tion gave life then to the development of this medium of artistic revelation as it must continue to do.

## Works Cited

- Blake, William (1790), "Proverbs of Hell", in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, The William Blake Archive, <http://bit.ly/2gIZ7d3> (last access 30 November 2016).
- Brian, Crystal (2002), "Horton Foote: Mystic of the American Theatre", in Joan Herrington (ed.), *The Playwright's Muse*, New York: Routledge: 181-206.
- Castleberry, Marion (2014), *Blessed Assurance: The Life and Art of Horton Foote*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.
- Castleberry, Marion and Susan Christensen (eds) (2011), *Farewell: Remembering Horton Foote 1916-2009*, Dallas, TX: DeGolyer Library.
- Clinkscale, Rebekah (2009), "Music of a Kind": Character and Song in *The Orphans' Home Cycle*", *The Horton Foote Review*, 2: 4-15.
- Dylan, Bob (1964), "My Back Pages", in *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, Columbia Records.
- Ellenberger, Matthew (1985), "Illuminating the Lesser Lights: Notes on the Life of Albert Clinton Horton", *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 88 (4): 363-86.
- Fitzgerald, Robert (1965), "Introduction", in Flannery O'Connor, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: vii-xxxiv.
- Foote, Horton (1962), *To Kill a Mockingbird*, [screenplay]. Dir. Robert Mulligan. Prod. Alan J. Pakula. Perf. Gregory Peck: Universal.
- (1983), *Tender Mercies*, [screenplay]. Dir. Bruce Beresford. Perf. Robert Duvall: EMI.
- (1985), *The Trip to Bountiful*, [screenplay]. Dir. Peter Masterson. Perf. Geraldine Page: Island.
- (1987), *Courtship, Valentine's Day, 1918: Three Plays from The Orphans' Home Cycle*, New York: Grove Press.
- (1989), *The Orphans' Home Cycle*, New York: Grove Press.
- (1989), *To Kill a Mockingbird, Tender Mercies, and The Trip to Bountiful: Three Screenplays by Horton Foote*, New York: Grove Press.
- (1993), *The Trip to Bountiful*, in Barbara Moore and David G. Yellin (eds), *Horton Foote's Three Trips to Bountiful*, Dallas: Southern Methodist UP.
- (1996), *Collected Plays (The Trip to Bountiful, The Chase, The Traveling Lady, The Roads to Home)*, ed. by Robert Ellerman, Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, vol. 2.
- (2001), *Beginnings: A Memoir*, New York: Scribner.
- Grimes, William (2013), "Something Happened on the Way to Bountiful: Everyone Sang Along", *The New York Times*, May 28: A1.
- Haynes, Robert W. (2016), "The Sane Face of Texas: Pursuing the Decent Life in Horton Foote's Films", in Robert Haynes (ed.), *Critical Insights: Horton Foote*, Ipswich, MA: Salem Press: 224-37.
- Krampner, Jon (1997), *The Man in the Shadows: Fred Coe and the Golden Age of Television*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Mattison, Hiram (1861), *Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon: Or Inside Views of Southern*

- Domestic Life*, New York: Published by the Author, Nos. 5 & 7, Mercer Street.  
Electronic edition (2003), *Documenting the American South*, Chapel Hill:  
University of North Carolina Press.
- Oatman, Johnson and George C. Hugg (1953), "No, Not One", in *Tabernacle Hymns: Number Four*, Chicago: Tabernacle Publishing Company.
- O'Connor, Flannery (1965), "Revelation", in Flannery O'Connor *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 191-218.
- (1983a) [1955], "A Good Man Is Hard to Find", in Flannery O'Connor *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*, San Diego: Harcourt: 9-29.
- (1983b) [1955], "The Life You Save May Be Your Own", in Flannery O'Connor *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*, San Diego: Harcourt: 53-68.
- Price, Reynolds (1987), "Introduction", in Horton Foote, *Courtship, Valentine's Day, 1918: Three Plays from The Orphans' Home Cycle*, New York: Grove Press.
- Stevens, Wallace (1923), "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle", in *Harmonium*, New York: Knopf.
- Wood, Gerald C. (1999), *Horton Foote and the Theater of Intimacy*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.