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picket signs nailed at the Methodist
Center
& then to be jeered at with those crosses
by voices from the back of that passing
bus
yelled they didn't need no white boys'
help
would get even with him in a Mexican
jail
there to further a father's colonial dream
not hardly were only wanting those they
saw
unconcerned & unaware he had gotten
off
even to learn it later hard to swallow
could not then because had not even seen
the book where Barker has set it all
down

That passage gives some of the flavor and method of Oliphant's enterprise, moving from the sense of his own attempts to follow the scholarly footsteps of the diligent Austin, to his coincident memories of uncertain white student activism, back to Austin's own complicated attempts to fulfill his father's and his own dreams of a prosperous Texas colony. "Barker" is Eugene C. Barker, author of the Austin biography on which the poem most relies, and, in his determination to keep on with the work, is also a recurrent hero in the poem. For what is at stake here for Oliphant is also the continuation of a Texas/Southwestern tradition, and he sees Austin's determination and success against long odds and much skepticism as the model for his own efforts at recreation:

& had Estevan gone back can any have
cared
for certain not those who criticized most
their constant resentment reason enough
to have dropped the reins in ungrateful
laps
headed east & left them to fend for
themselves

always there are others to take one's
place
can what any man does not be done by
another
for suffering through where then is the
honor
why bother when fault is found with the
best
& in time a dozen at least may do it
better

though none can deny the performance
given
in success or failure the learning earned
never to be taken away nor ever replaced
by having remained so unchanged &
blame less
from fear too little or too much be said

IN THIS WAY, throughout the poem, Estevan's story, the story of Texas, Barker's story, and Oliphant's story become part of the same narrative, and the poem's most successful moments occur when these threads run together to become part of the same plane of events, of equal consequence. Oliphant, walking through the events and places of his own life in Austin, walks as well through the continuing presence of the past.

The most moving section is the briefest, "San Antonio," an elegy for a fellow poet and friend who once taught at St. Austin's school, located at San Antonio and 21st Street. Oliphant interweaves her early death with those of the martyrs of Goliad — it is a risky combination, and yet it works because he has made us believe that all these lives run together in his own mind and, therefore, in the poem's actual world. [See poem, p. 21.]

We are already awash in the verbiage and commercialized patriotism of the Texas sesquicentennial, and it will be many months before we see the end of it. Drowning in Micheners and politicians, few of us are likely to notice a book-length poem in a meditative mode which examines one man's history and plays it against, in complex and intricate fashion, the history of his city and state. It is not always easy going — the narrative is fragmentary and highly personal, and the poem's various rhythmic forms too often return to a fairly prosaic, jagged line that Oliphant takes as the frame of his own thoughts. But *Austin* takes its place alongside Albert Goldbarth's *Different Fleshes* as a long poem in a modernist mode which makes an enduring contribution to the literature of its place, time, and country. And that's a great deal for any city to be proud of. □

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