

# Reynolds Price 'Makes Sense': Pleasure and Pain in *Kate Vaiden* and *Roxanna Slade*

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*The beginning of human knowledge is through the senses.*

Flannery O'Connor

O'Connor's epistemological observation highlights the importance of sense impressions for all mental activity, it is an adage that not least art has lived by and it is still one of its fundamental constitutives. The sense impressions embodied in art works shock into new awareness, bring about a new understanding of being. A central area of the complexity of sense impressions is the experience of pleasure and pain, both physical and mental. Exposure to sunlight, we know, can both be pleasurable and – if the sun is glaringly bright – painful. Pleasure and pain can estrange us from the body, we may experience the body as an "other" and seem to be 'guests in our bodies, not subjects in charge. Then it is not "me" who breathes but "breath draws through me," as Michael Cuddihy expresses the experience of estrangement from the body in his poem called "This Body" (1980).<sup>1</sup> Are sense impressions and the ensuing feelings of pleasure or pain something we have to endure or are we able to work with them and build a richer life upon them?

In the following I shall argue that awareness of the body, consciousness of the senses causing pleasure and pain in body and soul are striking

1. Hamill, Sam, ed., *The Gift of Tongues*, Copper Canyon Press, Port Townsend, Washington, 1996, 73.

features in the works of Reynolds Price, internationally acclaimed Southern writer and Professor of English at Duke University. Typical for Price as a Southerner is his infatuation with the experience of the pain of defeat, which he finds expressed in the last line of Emily Dickinson's poem no. 67 "Success is counted sweetest." In a recent interview with R.T. Smith he said: "I think I felt like that man at the end of the poem: 'Defeated, dying.' ... I had a big hunger to learn from other people who had suffered."<sup>2</sup> In his memoirs *Clear Pictures* Price more generally acknowledges his indebtedness to Dickinson's lyrics, every one of which to him was "a true copy of a brave life's understanding" (211). The importance of the physical and mental aspects of pleasure and pain in Price's works was pointed out by Constance Rooke in her Price monograph: Price's "language is generally highly charged, the sentences are elaborate, the metaphors are often startling, and the precise description of all action (whether physical or emotional) often slows us down. Price would not object to that, however: his goal is to force the reader, to shock him into recognition, to create a physical immediacy."<sup>3</sup>

One of the most fascinating features of Price's prose is the physicality of his innovative use of striking sense images for the depiction of pleasure and pain which I should like to exemplify through a detailed analysis of sense impressions as presented in physically and psychologically highly concrete ways in Price's two "diary" novels *Kate Vaiden*<sup>4</sup> (1986) and *Roxanna Slade*<sup>5</sup> (1998). The concrete representation of characters and their stories is one of Price's fundamental beliefs as a writer. In "Dodo, Phoenix or Tough Old Cock" he wrote: "The world must remain an observable world, one that human eyes and ears can bear to study, can conceive reasons for wishing to portray, a world that will hold pose long enough."<sup>6</sup> We hear and tell stories about the world and our life in it as our "second most important need after nutrition,"<sup>7</sup> "absolutely necessary for survival of the human race as human" and narratives "may even be our

2. Interview with R.T. Smith, *Meridian*, no. 3, 1999, 13/14.

3. Constance Rooke, *Reynolds Price*, Boston, 1983, 12.

4. Reynolds Price, *Kate Vaiden*, Simon & Schuster, 1998. Hereafter cited in the text as KV.

5. Reynolds Price, *Roxanna Slade*, Simon & Schuster, 1998. Hereafter cited in the text as RS.

6. Reynolds Price, *Things Themselves: Essays & Scenes*, Atheneum, N.Y., 1972, 175.

7. Susan Ketchin, "Interview with Reynolds Price," *The Christ-Haunted Landscape: Faith and Doubt in Southern Fiction*, Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1994, 87.

ultimate salvation." In the two novels Price has chosen Kate and Roxanna as similar first person female narrator-protagonists, "sojourners who live their lives on the margins of society," as Susan Ketchin calls Price's preferred characters.<sup>8</sup> They tell us the ups and downs of their dramatic life stories set in the author's native North Carolina of the thirties through the eighties with focus on Henderson, Greensboro, Raleigh, and Macon, sites close to the Roanoke River.

The chosen narrative first-person point-of-view allows the author to move freely between past, present – and future experiences of his protagonists, between detailed sense impressions of the exterior and the interior worlds, of nature and the body and it allows for generalizing, sometimes moralizing, observations based on contrasts between the lifestyles, morals and social struggles of the narrated periods and the narrators' own present. In the narrative present Kate, b. June 1927, is 57 years old and the latest date indicated in the text is 1984 (287). Roxanna, b. October 8, 1900, is in her nineties, which means that the narrative present is the early 1990s, though this is not made clear in the text. In both novels – though quantitatively more so in *Roxanna Slade* – the reader is kept aware of the different time layers through references to contemporary events such as WWII and by means of a number of time indicators such as: "in those days" (KV 77 times; RS 22 times), "back then" (KV 3 times; RS 19 times) or more personalized phrases such as "in my day" (RS 82), "in our time" (RS 168), and "in our world" (RS 219). Though the narrators are critical of the typically Southern shortcomings of life in the narrated periods, a far more critical attitude to their present shines through in their copious comments. It seems to me a sign of Price's increasing criticism of the contemporary South that Roxanna's narrative is larded with authorial comments about the "new fall" of the South, a fall from earlier customs, morality and genteel behavior, a moralizing technique which disturbs – intentionally so – the flow of the reading process.

In many ways the novels are similar in structure and technique, which can be exemplified through Price's handling of suspense. Kate's comments on the occasion of her young cousin Taswell's death, for example, foreshadow what is to come: "I felt [a kind of steady *silent whistle* in the air] from the moment I entered the room where Taswell lay, and it wasn't

8. For the last three quotes see Susan Ketchin, "Saintly Outlaws," op. cit., 57.

till my own mother's funeral on the Monday that I guessed the sound was a natural companion to early wasteful death" (14). The paradox in the auditory image "silent whistle" emphatically enhances the reader's awareness of the importance of the disconcerting sound impression. Similarly, when Roxanna Dane celebrates her 20th birthday with the Slades, she feels that something tragic will happen: "In the face of the shock and grief that were near at hand [i.e. Larkin Slade's death by drowning], it would take me days to recall the new boy's [Larkin's] words and to realize that somehow he and [my brother] Fern had planned this escapade ... and that Fern had filled Larkin with the expectation of meeting a lovely possible bride" (15). It is characteristic that Price prepares his protagonists – and his readers – for a shocking experience or a heavy emotional blow through a striking and deeply meaningful sense impression. A good example of this is Kate, who on the day before her mother Frances' violent death, is given her "Penny Show" of flowers in the garden or "Buried Garden" as Frances' own mother had called it. "I watched Frances slowly choose a mass of fine blooms – carnations, glads, roses – ... With her hand she'd already scooped out a bowl in the ground at the foot of the hickory and was lining it with flowers. Then she set the pane flat like a window on the deep bowl and scraped soft dirt all back across it.... Then with the same hand she swept back the loose dirt over the glass. There underground was a tight nest of flowers so fresh that they already were breathing on the glass. ... it looked like a miracle. I expected it to move and offer me something" (KV 18-19). The arrangement of the Penny Show like a small flower-adorned grave symbolically foreshadows not only Frances' own impending funeral but also the source of strength and consolation it becomes for Kate in her later life.

In Kate and Roxanna, Price has drawn two highly authentic and moving protagonists – *malgré elles* – with whom the reader lives through a number of similar experiences and one could therefore fear a decreasing degree of interest in the reading of the second narrative, but the rich texture and the easy flow of the episodes keep the reader from noticing the numerous parallels. For example both narrators are orphans, a life experience that had riddled and haunted Price since his own mother had lost both her parents in early childhood. They find peace and solace in the large families that house them: Kate Vaiden's Aunt Caroline lives with her husband Holt in Macon and her warm protective home is the solid rock

upon which Kate can build her life after her parents' death. Similarly the large house of cold "dictatorial" Olivia Slade, whose character is based on Price's mother's relative Ida Lee Rodwell and whom he called "the safest refuge of my childhood" (Clear Pictures 53), is the only stable element in the fluctuations of Roxanna's life. We also find parallels in characters and character relationships: Kate and Roxanna experience guilt complexes in relation to their family members, there is a latent lack of cooperation between sons and fathers (Kate's father Dan was at war with his father and Roxanna's brother Fern left his father's shop). As to race relations there is the always sympathetic treatment of the helpful and self-effacing blacks in the two large households (Noony in KV, and Coy and later Mally in RS) and the fact that both narrators are painfully aware of the injustices blacks suffer – even up to the narrative present –, though this consciousness is more prominent in Roxanna Slade, where Roxanna acknowledges that "my eyes were very slow to open on the full extent of black people's suffering and the dreadful poison of our neglect" (RS 54). To me it is obvious that Price comes down on the side of the unjustly or even mal-treated blacks, though his moral indignation shines through more clearly in *Roxanna Slade*. In *Clear Pictures* Price dedicated an entire chapter "Black Help" (83-119) to a warm description of the blacks in his life. But he was not blind to the fact that the Southern system could also be detrimental to whites: "With all the deep numb evil of the system (numb for whites) – slavery and servitude did at least as much enduring damage to whites as to blacks – those domestic relations were astonishingly good-natured and trusting, so decorous that neither side began to explore or understand the other's hidden needs" (19).

In both narratives Price excels in remarkably precise and detailed descriptions of perceptions through the senses, of sexual experiences and of the body at large, and the consequences of pleasure and pain. Against all odds both protagonists search for meaning, yearn for pleasure, but in this they only succeed for short spells of time. In spite of their appetite for life the resulting feelings of pain and even ennui become more and more outspoken. I have already mentioned Price's feeling of congeniality with Emily Dickinson whose view on life is epitomized in her poem 536, where she gives a concise outline of the human experience of pleasure and pain, which I see mirrored in the life stories of Kate and Roxanna and which I consider centrally placed in Price's work:

The Heart asks Pleasure – first –  
 And then – Excuse from Pain –  
 And then – those Little Anodynes  
 That deaden suffering –

And then – to go to sleep –  
 And then – if it should be  
 the will of its Inquisitor  
 The privilege to die –

We move with Kate and Roxanna through this entire register of feelings, with Roxanna to the death-wish of attempted suicide and with Kate's awakening of her motherly conscience when she herself is confronted with cancer – as was Price while writing *Kate Vaiden*.

Right from the beginning of the novel Kate Vaiden is presented physically. She describes herself as "nothing but a real middle-sized white woman that has kept on going with strong eyes and teeth for fifty-seven years. You can touch me; I answer." She adduces two reasons for writing down major events of her life at this particular moment, because for one thing members of her family don't live long and because "last week I found somebody I'd lost or thrown away. ... I'm his natural mother; he's almost forty and has got on without me" (3), thus creating suspense as to the identity of this "somebody." In a similar manner Roxanna describes herself: "In the mild light my face shocked me. Till that bleak moment [Larkin's death] I'd thought of myself as average-looking with trustworthy brown eyes, a good-sized straight mouth, firm jaw and clear skin but nobody's beauty by any means. Tonight though, high in this sad old house, a whole new fire had lit inside me and was striking as foxtire. I rubbed both my dry hands over my eyes and down to my neck" (39). In both examples Price focuses on the description of the narrators' face and eyes, a focus that tells us about the revelatory quality with which Price endows face and eyes. He seems to indicate that a character's story must be visible in his/her face and that this should elicit reactions of pain or pleasure also in the reader. Kate looking at her Cousin Swift says: "The shock was seeing how much older he looked. His hair was still its natural curious cinnamon-brown, and it bristled on his collar. But the kind of hunger that had lit his face like a high gas lamp seemed gone out now. He was thirty-three and his strong jaw had slackened already and would slide. His eyes had always been his best feature, weak as they were"

(111). It was these features Kate's mother Frances had been taken in by when Swift was young and now Kate can see early aging and decline in them. Similarly Roxanna is able to read her brother Fern's story of narcotic addiction in the "paper thin" (103) skin of his face. Later, shortly before his premature death, "Fern looked on the edge of total exhaustion. Every cell of his face, on the backs of his worn hands, seemed to be silently calling for care" (148-49). While the features of a face in most cases allow the narrator or reader to look behind the often unconscious façade, Price also presents instances where a character can consciously compose a face to hide feelings, if the situation demands it. Upon the announcement, on Roxanna and Palmer's wedding day, of Palmer's father, Major Slade's death, Roxanna says: "I figured we weren't meant to show any sorrow. I'd got my eyes under control" (93). The pain of family fates can also be revealed by the composition of a face, as Roxanna states about her son August who "could spend whole hours – if he'd ever hold still – selecting the parts of his honest face which the Slade blood had formed and which came to him from my family, the Danes" (172).

In his memoirs we learn about Price's early interest in drawing and painting. As late as 1950 he painted "a moving and spiritual" portrait of actress Ethel Waters. Rooke writes about his childhood and adolescence that "he supposed then that he would become a painter. Again, the sharply pictorial quality of his fiction may be seen as deriving from that early and continuing interest" (Reynolds Price 2). In his interview with R.T. Smith Price said: "I find myself most held by pictures that seem to have a strong narrative element and especially by pictures in which the narrative element is by no means obvious" (11). In keeping with Price's 'interest in painting his prose shows a predilection for striking visual images and he places special emphasis on characters' eyes: they are described in their physical appearance, and the reader is allowed to see the world through the characters' eyes, even experience "visions" of a spiritual kind. Of Miss Olivia's eyes we are told: her "old-ivory eyes (which had seen five of her own children die) follow Dinah's swelling form through a room and then boil down their ebony pupils to coal-dust-black in sheer contentment to know that she might be an old woman with agonized bones but leaving behind this piece of herself and – inside Dinah – a still younger piece on its way toward daylight" (RS 254). Not

only do we have details of her eyes described through the strikingly descriptive epithets of "ivory", "ebony" and "coal-dust-black," their sequencing also compresses the life stories of four generations. If Olivia's eyes are terrifying and a "challenge to every atom of your being" (RS 266), Price also uses eyes to describe in a gentle touch states of wordless joy as when Kate's solitary Uncle Fob Foster's "eyes had filled, and I suddenly wanted to spare him pain" (KV 56). During her period of deep depression Roxanna's eyes had been dry, but when she finally came back to life, she felt her "eyes were brimming for the first time in years. What felt like relief came on me so strongly that it tasted like a rupture, as if some wall had suddenly collapsed in my heart and was spilling its long-held all-but-frozen contents" (197). The last quote is a fine example of Price's synesthetic technique of enhancing one sense impression even to the point of rupture by combining it with simultaneous perceptions by other senses, in this case gustatory and tactile perceptions. Since visual impressions are of such crucial importance for Price's description of the world, lack of sight must be seen as highly debilitating. Nevertheless, when Kate meets her husband Douglas' blind employer Whitfield Eller for the first time, she feels warmth and peace: "What stopped me was a high run of happiness, all through me. This room felt ready to fold me in. This blind man, all but helpless as [her son] Lee, felt like a deep port or a tough wondrous creature I should learn to touch" (KV 236). On the other hand blindness can cause utter pain or be the result of a painful experience as when Roxanna heard about her husband's unfaithfulness "the first symptom that stunned me was blindness. Actual blindness came on me" (155), which later changed into a "total dim gray *blank*" (199), which immobilizes Roxanna completely for a long painful period of emotional separation from her husband.

At the other end of the scale Price's protagonists' sight goes sometimes beyond the mere physical. Roxanna says at one point: "My body had a kind of vision of its own. No pictures or sounds and nothing I've ever known how to describe in words alone but since I'm aiming for the whole truth now (so far as I've encountered it) I can say it amounted to the fullest pleasure my skin and mind had ever felt till that moment" (48). This is an instance where the body without any stimulus from the outside world seems to create its own visual and auditory images, which again give utmost physical and mental pleasure, an experience that does not fail



to appeal strongly to the empathic sense of the reader. Sometimes Price even allows his protagonists visions of metaphysical dimensions, which are, however, technically rendered in the most simple prose. They occur at crucial points in their lives where they either need support or a warning. Shortly prior to conceiving her child with Douglas, Kate experiences Christmas togetherness of which she is in utter need: "Mary was laying on strong-smelling straw. Her long dress was bunched around her waist. Her bare knees were up, and the Baby's head was coming out slow as cold used oil – his wet hair black. The only noise was her hard breathing, and nobody else was nearby to help her. But once I could see the Baby's face – that it was not deformed or bruised – I held my own right hand out toward them. Then they faded off" (143). Similarly Roxanna, who is deeply afraid of what might happen to her daughter, has as a premonition, what she calls a Judgement-Day-related audition: "The thing that came on Christmas night 1945 was – what? – more like an *audition* I guess. No satisfactory word exists. I stood on there in my young daughter's doorway and heard – just beyond her narrow bed between her and the window as if that were all the remainder of space – the individual voices of the damned" (200). Price's use of the word *audition*, italicized to catch the reader's eye, is a brilliant example of his characteristic struggle to find the right expression. Roxanna has a vision, but what strikes her most is the auditory impression of the voices of the damned. By creating this new connotation of the word "audition" Price almost melts visual and auditory impressions synesthetically into one word. But the typically post-modern break in the narrative, where the narrator comments on her own choice of words, also shows how Price can blend ironic distance into an otherwise serious flow of argument.

Price's interest in music dates back to the age of ten, when he asked for "piano lessons" and later became "a competent sight-reader of printed music" (*Clear Pictures* 190). Not surprisingly, therefore, Price proves also to have an ear for auditory perceptions in his prose. They prevail in the sequences that involve the blind musician Whitfield. He recognizes Kate, whom he had never met before, on the basis of her voice: "'I knew you,' he said. 'Doug described your voice.' I'd never heard Douglas called Doug before, but I thought how he'd said he liked my voice [cp. 216]. It made me shy to speak; I might spoil the hopes of someone who lived on voice alone. Still I said 'It's nothing but a homegrown voice.

When have you seen Douglas?" (with blind people, most of us flaunt the word see)" (230). Kate is aware of the pain she could cause by disappointing Whitfield's expectations, yet again Kate's playful post-modern self-reflexive remark about the awkwardness of visual expressions in the presence of blind people shows how a light tone enhances a very tense situation through a kind of comic relief. Both Kate and Roxanna have a predilection for the pleasing effect that male voices have on them. Kate says: "I take a long time to listen for the sound. The men I've loved give off a kind of bass-note, soft but steady enough to ride on" (273). The reassuring sound of a male voice is also highly appreciated by Roxanna who with relish remembers her sister Leela's son Wilton: "Since he was fourteen he'd had a bass speaking voice, not a froggy boom but a dark walnut sound that I still love" (217). The sequencing of vowels and consonants in "dark walnut sound" supports Roxanna's statement.

Whenever Price describes disgusting and harrowing psychic experiences, he tends to turn to detailed gustatory impressions. Kate reminisces the moment when she as a child – on the occasion of the message about her mother and father's untimely deaths – had been left alone in the dark garden with her Penny Show: "I've been in some fairly black alleys since then, but none of them matched this hour for pure thick hopelessness. It poured up against my lips like tar till I doubted every breath, but I held my ground" (25). The image of the taste of tar is particularly well-chosen, since it causes both pain and disgust, but young Kate shows already then that she does not give in to pain. The absence of a beloved person creates a bitter taste also in Roxanna who felt "a grievous surge" in her throat, "the bitterest taste she'd known" (71).

The most prominent sphere of pleasure and pain in Price's narratives is related to the wide range of tactile impressions. Both protagonists are longing for the warmth of acceptance, of physical closeness, yet once they have found it, the experience is short and always threatened by the fear of impending pain. Thus two hands touching can signal emotional closeness or distance: Shortly before their deaths Kate sees her mother Frances withdraw her hand from her father Dan: Frances "took back the hand that had stayed near Dan" (11), signaling the imminent disaster of their violent deaths. On the other hand Roxanna experiences the otherwise reserved Olivia's unmistakable sign of sympathy as follows: "Her left hand was laid down near me on the table. It moved to cover it. She

drew it back from me but slowly, not as if I'd burned her" (114). Both narrators, having been brought up in a Southern environment of what they later recognized as characterized by a restrictive and prudish fear of the functions of the body, not least of its procreative functions, share with the reader in highly concrete ways the pleasures and pains of their awakening awareness of their female bodies. They knew very little about their bodies and their "dangers" (81) and as narrators they blame the surrounding society for their ignorance. When Noony, Caroline's cook, asked Kate if she and her boyfriend Gaston, who seems to be drawn upon Price's close friend Macon Thornton,<sup>9</sup> were taking precautions, Kate comments: "(remember, every magazine back in those days didn't show monthly pictures of sperms and eggs, not to mention whole bodies laid out like cans of tuna). I'd assumed that Gaston was seeing to that, but next time I said 'Noony asked me were you careful.' He thought and said 'Careful as a hummingbird in daylight.' I knew even less about what that meant" (81). The parenthesis is a good example of the narrator's/author's adhortative comments frequently found in *Roxanna Slade* for the good of the modern reader. The form of these comments is nearly always the same: in hindsight the narrator is both critical of the prudery of her own childhood and at the same time of the unrestrained freedom of the narrative present. Price's choice of the hyperbolic image of "whole bodies laid out like cans of tuna" shows unmistakably his own criticism of contemporary moral standards. I find the frequency of this form of outspoken comment in Roxanna's narrative disturbing in the reading process since these authorial interpolations leave little freedom to the reader.

After her body-awakening experience with Gaston, Kate, who had been warned by her school nuns against the "idol-worship" of the body, remembers with joy the pleasures of touching: "I thought they were warning us against body-touch, ourselves and others. Touching myself has never meant much to me ...; but God (if nobody else alive) knew I'd touched Gaston Stegall many glad times. *Glad* for me" (134). Price lets twelve-year-old Kate wonder why people have sex, if they don't want any children. "The main word everybody used was *seed* – 'He gives her

9. Macon Thornton hunted "for absolute answers to the mysteries he watched – pleasure, pain, madness and horse sense: the outer limits of human reach in a world he must have known was tragic but never accused." *Clear Pictures*, 149.

the seed.' Nobody my age could tell me what the seed was ... But then there were the times they didn't want babies but still sought it out. What troubled me to wonder was *Why people do it when they don't want babies?* Why chase it down through pain and shame and public laughter?" (37). Similarly old Roxanna wonders whether sex is "anything more than a game, a dance or a private inexpensive pleasure trip?" (239). In spite of their "spinster-prudish" views both narrators share with the reader their memories of the pleasure and – mostly – "no small pain" (KV 76) of their first sexual encounters. Roxanna remembers in her nineties: "The first few minutes hurt, yes, a lot. It may have hurt well beyond the start, but pain has never been frightening to me" (69). She gladly reports how – to her own surprise – even the "legal transactions of sex" after the wedding "prove delightful" (83) and she takes her "own sweet pleasure in that" (143). Pregnancy comes as a shock to both women and both of them live through the pain and joy of giving birth: "'Now there's one thing that won't ever leave me,' [says Kate] and happiness seeped all through me like a stain. Never crossed my mind that I would leave *him*" (173). The fact that Kate describes her baby Lee as a "thing" and that she would leave him hurts her, and in retrospect she defends her feelings with the following explanations: "All I could think then, and all I understood, was *I did not want him*" (264). The pain of having "lost or thrown away" her son for "almost forty" years has been nagging Kate throughout her life, and only when she had "found" him was she able to narrate the re-view of her life.

Price not only lets his narrators go through the physical and mental processes related to the beginning of life, illness, depression, aging, and death are also part of their experience of pain. Roxanna feels bad about having harmed her body by jumping out of a moving car in her attempt at suicide and she describes – seasoned with Price's distancing irony – the painful period of recovery: "Medicine back then largely consisted of your lying down, being fed bland food and taking naps till you'd either died or your jellyfish body produced an imitation of Life sufficient to cause your doctor and kinfolk to raise you gently to your rubber legs and beg you to walk" (208).

The experience of the death of close relatives haunts both narrators. Price describes the physicality of dead bodies through the tactile sense. Roxanna is informed about the deaths of her husband Palmer and of

Olivia in the following ways: "Palmer's cool to the touch" (234) and "I touched [Olivia] too. Lord, cold as scissors" (269). In *Clear Pictures* Price describes the close intimacy and the deep meaning for the rest of his life of having held his dying father's hand (294). Death is a natural part of the stories Price tells and this is in keeping with the dark view of life that prevails in many of his works, where the search for light never fully succeeds.

Price's two protagonists are drawn realistically and movingly as self-willed individuals, who become aware of the fact that their choices will at times have serious consequences, but they are also shown as victims of the period and region they grew up in and of the familial and societal circumstances beyond their power to change. Their lives and their fates are Price's fictionalized comments on his own society with its prejudices and shortcomings. But as in his other works, Price's two narratives show in a deeply moving way his insight into human destiny. He succeeds in taking the reader into his imaginative universe through the use of a highly concrete language and the creation of new and striking images of sense impressions. He creates a universe that is recognizably a personalized version of a large section of 20th century North Carolinian history but much wider in its relevant descriptions of human pleasure and pain. For both protagonists the drama of their lives starts with an experience of violent pain caused by human relations. Kate had already in her school days learned to "take what comes" (9) and she wondered how long it would take "all this family pain" (48) to kill her Aunt Caroline. Kate wanted to keep the ones she loves from pain and for her own life she hoped – again and again – that she could "live now and bury old pain" (122), but she came to realize that she continually strewed "more pain behind" her (179). Kate gets to know that her father shot her mother and then committed suicide, and Roxanna sees the man who had just proposed to her drown in the Roanoke. Price uses Kate and Roxanna's life stories to shed light on the most central forms of human relations: married lives disturbed by extramarital relations; homoerotic friendships; protective friendships between an older man or woman and the protagonists; friendly relations between blacks and whites. All these relations with their joys and pains contribute to the protagonists' maturing process. Both single when they enter upon the project of their narratives, Kate and Roxanna live to take on responsibility for their children: Kate is finally

able to be there for her forty-year-old son Lee and Roxanna lives to support her daughter Dinah. After turbulent lives they have reached a point of self-critical serenity, they have tried to exculpate themselves through their narratives and can now face themselves. In *Kate and Roxanna*, Price has drawn two enticing portraits in which we can perceive his message: pain becomes pleasure in the telling.