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COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS AND MARJORIE KINNAN RAWLINGS'S *THE SOJOURNER*

ASHLEY ANDREWS LEAR

The epigraph for Rawlings's *The Sojourner* quotes I Chronicles 29:15, "For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were our fathers: our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding." This opening image is one of many hints to the cosmic consciousness that Rawlings writes into her narratives. She visualizes that the image of the earth in its entirety with a shadow passing over it and departing signifies our daily lives and the passing of countless generations as the earth continues its grander cosmic path. In some ways, her move to Florida in 1928 rekindled an understanding of the cosmos that Rawlings most likely felt initially when staying at her father's rural property in Virginia or just dancing by the light of the moon as a young girl. This can be seen in the title of her first published novel, *South Moon Under*. The connection of the Cracker community to the cosmos is every bit as important as its connection to the land, just as every issue of the *Farmer's Almanac* contains details about viewing planets or meteor showers. While Rawlings includes cosmic descriptions in all her works, she made a discovery while working on her final published novel, *The Sojourner*, that compelled her to center the lives and conflicts of the characters throughout that book on the shifting astronomical observations and heightened cosmic

consciousness, primarily of the protagonist, Ase Linden, fashioned after her maternal grandfather.

Rawlings's mother, Ida Traphagen Kinnan, grew up with her parents in southern Michigan, and Rawlings occasionally spent summers on their farm. Living close to the land on her father's farm outside of Washington, D.C., and on her grandparents' farm in southern Michigan, "planted deep in her a love of the soil, the crops, the seasons and a sense of kinship with men and women everywhere who live close to the soil" (Tarr and Kinser 343). She idealized Abe and Fanny Traphagen's life to the point at which she wrote: "I think perhaps men and women are no longer willing to work as hard [...] We talk now of hours and wages, and do not give ourselves with quite the uncalculating fervor to living" (Tarr and Kinser 264). Writing about Abe and Fanny Traphagen's life permitted Rawlings not only an escape from Florida, but also an understanding of a heritage for which she longed but with which she could not quite identify. She explains this need most clearly: "I wrote 'The Sojourner' because I was haunted by a grandfather I had not known. I was never to know him, and I was obliged to create another man and another life, that may or may not have resembled his own, but which I came to know as well as I know myself" (Tarr and Kinser 346). In the end, Rawlings remarks, "I was so identified with Ase that I felt the same soaring release that came to him. I realize now that subconsciously this was what I had always intended" (Tarr and Kinser 347). Concluding the novel just before her own premature death allowed Rawlings to come full circle by embracing the heritage denied to her in her younger years.

When researching her grandparents' lives for *The Sojourner*, Rawlings learned that they were not exactly as she had imagined them. Her maternal grandmother and her sister both wrote poetry, mostly religious, "but very vivid" (*Max & Marjorie* 550). Her maternal grandfather, better educated and more articulate than she had imagined, had a passion for the violin that his religious mother discouraged. Most importantly, in her work toward completing *The Sojourner*, Rawlings found a receipt for a book on astronomy that she

imagined her grandfather had read in detail. It became a reference text for what was to be her final novel and helped shape the way in which Rawlings constructed characters in *The Sojourner* so that they had qualities of tortured artists thinking “along cosmic lines” (*Max and Marjorie* 550).

The first key to discovering this astronomical text comes from Rawlings’s correspondence. Rawlings wrote a letter to Max Perkins, dated 2 August 1943, that may be found in the Scribners Archive at Princeton University and was reprinted in Rodger Tarr’s *Max and Marjorie: The Correspondence between Maxwell E. Perkins and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings*. In this letter, she writes:

You will remember that one of the keynotes of my book was to be the consciousness of the principal character of the cosmic set-up. I all but fainted when I found a receipt among my great-grandfather’s accounts for a book on astronomy, which my grandfather must have read in detail. I am putting in an order with the Argus Bookshop (Chicago), which has gotten me many rare books, for this one, for it will give me just the slant I want on the principal character’s thoughts along cosmic lines. It does seem a strange coincidence, doesn’t it? I feel more than ever that what I want to do is “a natural.” Yet I know that my bones will have to go through a duck-press to squeeze out the essence of the thing I want to do. (*Max & Marjorie* 550)

This discovery solidified Rawlings’s stubborn pursuit of a narrative that often seemed torturous to the successful novelist.

Nowhere in Rawlings’s letters to Perkins or Baskin does she mention this book. A clue, though, can be found in Rawlings’s affiliation with the Argus Bookshop, a book dealer who provided services to many acclaimed authors and political figures of Rawlings’s day. The owner of Argus Bookshop in Chicago, Ben Abramson (Ben also being the name of the prodigal brother in *The Sojourner*), retained numerous records on all his correspondence with esteemed writers of the period, many of whom connected with one another through Abramson to provide autographed copies of books to one

another. These records are all located at Yale University in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, including a folder with close to 40 pages of correspondence between Abramson and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. In one of these letters sent from her Crescent Beach home, dated 13 August 1943, Rawlings asked Abramson whether he could find a copy of "Smith's Illustrated Astronomy and Poetical Geography." She knew that the publisher or agent was W.S. Hall and that it was sold by subscription in 1861. She explained in this letter to Abramson, "I have no other information on it, except that my great-grandfather, who lived about 50 miles west of Detroit, Michigan, subscribed to a copy, so one might be located in that area." From the remaining correspondence, it can be seen that Abramson continued to advertise for the book but had difficulty locating a copy. There is no indication of whether Rawlings was able to purchase the book, but its influence may be seen throughout the astronomical details she includes in *The Sojourner* and the names that Rawlings chose for the main characters: Ben (the name of the Argus book dealer) and Ase, short for Asahel (the name of the author/illustrator of the astronomical textbook, Asa Smith).

The Sojourner was clearly a passion project for Rawlings, one she struggled to complete through numerous upheavals in her life. At one point she was so dissatisfied with her work on *The Sojourner* that she "tore it all into irretrievable shreds" after finishing "a quarter" of the book's length (Bigelow and Monti 275). The book was delayed in its completion by several conflicts in Rawlings's life during its composition: worry over her brother's shaky financial state and failed third marriage, not to mention his custody battle over his son from that marriage; concern for her husband Norton Baskin during WWII; and strain over the invasion-of-privacy lawsuit filed by Zelma Cason. While she continued to produce shorter works during this time, eleven years passed between the publication of *Cross Creek* in 1942 and *The Sojourner* in 1953. After Baskin left on his deployment overseas during WWII, Rawlings moved back to Cross Creek for the winter, hoping to calm her mind and work on *The Sojourner*. Instead, she

spent most of her time responding to overseas correspondence from servicemen, many of whom read the special editions of *Cross Creek* that were included in their promotional reading materials from American publishing companies during the war.

In addition, her experiences with her brother Arthur also colored Rawlings's writing of *The Sojourner*. Arthur had absconded with his young son after a bitter divorce and visited Norton Baskin in Florida with the boy before heading to New York, where Rawlings was staying while working on the novel. After leaving Arthur to find lodging for himself and his young son in Syracuse and going on to Rochester for a time by herself, Rawlings returned feeling like "Ase Linden going into Benjamin's slum room to find her lost brother" (*The Private Marjorie* 653–55). To complete the novel, Rawlings had decided to move away from Norton Baskin, after finally being reunited with him following the war. She secluded herself at a home she purchased in Van Hornesville, New York, to complete the book.

The Sojourner was also the first and only book, except for her children's book *The Secret River*, to be completed after the death of Max Perkins, the editor who helped Rawlings to hone her craft. The absence of his editorial influence is clearly seen in the novel, which was not as well received as her Florida books. Many reviewers considered *The Sojourner* to be her most sentimental novel, commenting that it was "often sentimental, often beautiful, sometimes profound." Other reviewers claimed that women, especially, would love the novel for its sentimental qualities, describing it as "a pastoral novel with a dark thread." Her final novel and the only one not set in Florida, it related the farming lifestyle to the rhythm of the narrative, as the changes of the seasons and the farmers' reliance on that pacing bled into the narrative, giving it a slow, lyrical feel. Reviewers compared it to works by Thomas Hardy and John Steinbeck, with the main difference being that Steinbeck more accurately develops his unfavored characters into violent ones. Ase Linden is compared to Abraham Lincoln and Job. Biblically, his struggles are compared to

those of Cain and Abel or to Eden with its serpent. None of the reviewers then or now have commented on the exaggerated use of astronomical observations as the background for the novel's major conflicts and a touchstone for Ase Linden, its protagonist.

Smith's Illustrated Astronomy is illustrated with "numerous original diagrams" by Asa Smith, the Principal of Public School Number 12 in New York City (Smith 5). As mentioned earlier, the main character of *The Sojourner*, Ase Linden, short for Asahel, bears a remarkably similar name. This illustrated textbook was considered the most popular American astronomical guide of the 19th century. It demonstrates planetary movements, orbits, and other features; describes astronomical phenomena, such as Kepler's Laws and Parallax; and includes numerous sections on the moon and constellations, including the Zodiac. An original copy of this manuscript currently sells for around \$1000, but, fortunately, the entire manuscript has been digitized and is available through the Library of Congress website for viewing and downloading. An original copy of the manuscript may also be seen in the Baldwin Library of Historical Children's Literature at the University of Florida.

Rawlings uses concepts from the book throughout *The Sojourner* to establish Ase's relationship not only with the earth he farms but can never own but also with his understanding of the cosmos and his small place in it. While Ase is denied the education afforded his overly indulged brother, he does not complain. Instead, he studies on his own using his brother's books. The reader first sees the astronomy book Rawlings sought at the end of Chapter 12 in the novel when Ase steps outside after helping the red heifer birth her calf:

He longed to know the relationship of the planets, the stars, the earth, one to another. His book on astronomy was surely inadequate. There must be another book somewhere that would tell him all he must know of the revolving of these various strange masses. He read the Bible constantly, for its profound study of men in trouble and in joy, for the relation of human living to

other living, for the possibility of a man's reaching into the outer space for a comfort the earth did not provide. He was still dissatisfied. (72)

This direct reference to the astronomy book comes after Rawlings has established Ase's character as a cosmic being. Along with his mother and brother, he is one of "three cold stones pendulous in space" (2). The narrator characterizes Ase by stating, "Those who knew [Ase] would have been terrified by his consorting with the stars" (4). His relationship with his friends, drawn to him by gravity, include Mink Fisher to whom he attributes "an amplification of the earth he knew and [...] nourishment in the stars" (19). Mink is later described as having "taken [Ase] by the hand and led him barefoot across the Milky Way, at home among the meteors and planets" (76). In all these scenes, Ase derives his identity from his place within the cosmos, both on his farm and beyond it. He maintains his small part of the vast solar system while solemnly revering its expansive presence around him.

In his understanding of the cosmos, Ase experiences a profound sense of self and place that exceeds the limitations of his earthly home and resonates with spirituality and the locating of a divine place among the stars. One Christmas Eve after once again checking on the red heifer and administering medicine to a sick ewe, Ase finds himself alone under the stars and comes to grips with his own cosmic consciousness and the spiritual existence he has found tending land that may never belong to him, if it ever belonged to anyone in the first place. Rawlings writes:

He thought he had never seen so many twinkling stars. They were not moving, he thought, but were bound to cosmic stakes, from which they struggled to be free. The earth must look so to a night-watcher on another planet, tugging at its tethers. He wondered what force held each one in its appointed place. He had read in the astronomy book that the earth revolved around the sun, the moon around the earth, and that these three were part of a larger stellar system. And how far did that system extend, and how many other such systems were there, and was there any end to them and any end

to man? He had read in fascination in Ben's Academy books of what was called the force of gravity, which pinned men down to earth so that they did not fly off into space, kept each one dancing up and down on one spot. If a larger eye, God, for instance, watched them, men too might appear to be struggling against invisible deep-set stakes.

And was God there among the stars, Himself the gravity, Himself the great inter-revolving, or was He, as the preachers said, only an omnipotent human, white-bearded, stern and harsh as Asahel's own father, with an odd capacity for watching critically every man's thoughts and actions, disapproving particularly of fornication and of the theft of property? The still night was so bright that Ase blew out his lantern. He stared upward. Whatever the truth, he found himself drawn to those outer spaces. It seemed to him that he must perish if he could not make some sort of communication, back and forth, just as he was desolate because he had lost touch with his brother. He found himself denying this so-called force of gravity. It could not be what tied men to earth. It was a heavy weight, an unendurable pressure from the outer-land, and if a man could once break through it, soar high like a bird, he would be free, would meet, would join, something greater than he, and be complete at last. (94)

In this passage, Ase projects his own experiences upon the stars to make a connection between his observations of the stars and his psychological state. He sees the stars as bound, struggling to be free. He considers the perspective of looking at earth from another planet, well before Carl Sagan's poetic description of that "Pale Blue Dot" from *Voyager*. Next, Ase considers the vastness of space, extending beyond our solar system as far as one can imagine. Lastly, he uses his ponderings to contemplate the nature of God and concludes that God must be more than the bearded man who hates theft and fornication. Instead, God must exist as the truth among the stars, the gravity holding us to earth. To break free of the weight that confines us to earth is to reach God and "be complete at last" (94). Eternal life and unity with God require

breaking free of earthly bondage, including, but not limited to, the force of gravity

Ultimately, Ase concludes that this astronomical textbook, to which he returns repeatedly in his attempts to understand his place in the cosmos, does not give him the answers he is seeking because what he wants to know is the meaning and purpose behind the existence of the planets and stars, the cosmos and humanity. He tries to find these answers through his relationships with his friends, work on the farm, and lifelong love of his prodigal brother, Ben. In each of these attempts, Ase invokes a mixture of cosmic and Biblical language to describe his experiences. Rawlings finally chooses to resolve Ase's lifelong pursuit of cosmic consciousness in a jarring scene placing the erstwhile rural protagonist on the most modern of technological inventions in the early 1950s, an airplane. After seeing his brother for the last time, bidding him goodbye on his deathbed, receiving the deed, at last, to the family farm, and then boarding the airplane to bring Ben's body home for burial; Ase has his ultimate realization. The plane allows him to escape, momentarily, earth's gravity, and this, in turn, opens the final door to his sublime understanding of human existence:

A group of strangers, boxed together, was rocketing toward the sun, the stars. Most of them were frightened. Ase felt a surge of joy. It was of the purity of his boyhood, when with Mink Fisher he had imagined himself walking barefoot across the Milky Way. The consciousness of flight was so powerful that he lifted his hands from his safety belt and held them stretched before him, like an angel on the wing [...] Some hunger, some obscure instinct, was assuaged by this swift reaching into space [...] He longed to have the half hour last for half a millennium, to keep on and on, higher and higher, farther and farther, to the core of the cosmos [...] Dear earth, place once of my abiding. It had been so brief a sojourn, not even a full century. He had been a guest in a mansion and he was not ungrateful. He was at once exhausted and refreshed. His stay was ended. Now he must gather up the shabby impedimenta of his mind and body and

be on his way again. (312–13)

In this last scene in the novel, Ase imagines a joyous appreciation for the earth, even as he sees himself moving beyond it into the cosmos and re-entering his place among the stars. As Carl Sagan would later explain in his own *Cosmos* series, “We are made of star-stuff.” [citation?]

While *The Sojourner* has often been criticized as Rawlings’s least successful novel, the reason that this last novel took so long and at times feels so incomplete is because its story is so large. In the novel, Rawlings uses one man to encapsulate the great cosmic narrative of humanity and her own relationship with the grandparents who came before her and left her with a genetic predisposition for loving the land and the arts. This enormous feat was bound to be an impossible one. Rawlings may have never fully realized a cosmic narrative, but then again, who among us could? Her attempt at such a novel once again highlights the courage and bravado of a pioneering writer who takes on the cosmos in the same way she survives the Florida scrub.

END NOTES

- ¹ Copies of scrapbook of book reviews: *Sojourner*, 1952–1954, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.
- ² Ibid.

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