

## THE NEW SOUTHERN NOVEL: A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ASSAY

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Any attempt to chronicle the contemporary southern novel is beset by troublesome, interlocking questions. Is the very existence of the genre presumptive? If not, does its tradition continue to instill a sectional awareness among writers flourishing in the last years of the twentieth century? If so, is it not the case that to read any literary text as a mimetic expression of a geographical region is to confine each to the other and to ignore the quiddity of both? The task of the chronicler is further beset by the tenets of recent literary theory, for a notion prevails that there are no essential differences between fiction and history and that the writings of literary theorists are not to be distinguished from literary texts — with implications that run amok in a historically and critically-haunted literature like that of the American South<sup>1</sup>. I am going to sidestep so much as possible all complications of theory in this bibliographical essay, not because they are unimportant — they are not — but because adequate attention to the canonical frames of analysis would leave no time for attention to the literature itself. And it is the contemporary southern novel to which I would attend: in its richness, in its evolution of forms and impulses, and in its outreach to a reality not only southern.

Perhaps the first thing to be noted about the contemporary southern novel is how little it is touched by postmodernism, the writings of John Barth and Ishmael Reed excepted. Barth remains basically faithful to the postmodernism that he did much to make popular in America, and he has continued to give us huge novels as

cerebral as they are bawdy in *LETTERS* (1979)<sup>2</sup>, an epistolary stew of characters from his various novels, and *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991), in which the central character entertains contemporaries of Sindbad with stories of twentieth-century experience. The American vogue for such epistemological extravaganzas is clearly passing, however, and the twinned novels *Sabbatical: A Romance* (1982) and *Tidewater Tales* (1987) defer to realism in ways that suggest Barth may be testing his own allegiance to the postmodern vaunt. Not so, San Francisco-based Ishmael Reed, who remains wholly faithful to his antic, disturbing, essentially postmodern depiction of American racism. Two of his most recent novels, *The Terrible Twos* (1982) and *The Terrible Threes* (1989) are pan-mythic performances that splice the legend of Santa Claus and his assistant Black Peter with the Voudoun myths of Rasta and Nicolaite. If neither Barth nor Reed is ordinarily described as a southern novelist, it is because both are so greatly identified with postmodernism: the parochialism of the southern literary establishment is such that those who align themselves with Yankee and European high-falutinness are generally denied entrance to the canon<sup>3</sup>. Except for the occasional experiment in postmodernism — George Garrett's *Poison Pen* (1986), Mary Lee Settle's *The Killing Ground* (1982) — few canonically southern writers have worked in the mode.<sup>4</sup>

As the energies of postmodernism have waned in America, the long adherence of southern novelists to traditional modes of storytelling has come to seem a defining strength, especially their adherence to a realistic, idiomatic voice, a strong sense of place, and a clean narrative line. Despite years of residence in Canada and Italy, Mississippi born-and-bred Elizabeth Spencer has continued to manifest those strengths over a long career, most recently in *The Salt Line* (1984) and *The Night Travelers* (1991). Those strengths are no less evident in a dazzling first novel by Louise Shivers, *Here to Get My Baby Out of Jail* (1983), a starkly poetic tale of adultery and murder among farm people in North Carolina. The South has had a successful formula in this respect for more than eighty years, of course. What tends to invigorate the formula anew is the New South of piney barrens, pick-up trucks, and tricky new racial and social balances — “hick chic” as it is referred to on the national scene.<sup>5</sup>

The preeminent voice of southern “hick chic” is Bobbie Ann Mason, whose first novel, *In Country* (1985), is brilliantly successful in capturing the voice and confusions of a teen-aged girl named Sam Hughes, whose mind is a swamp of brand-names, talk-show

profundities, and aspirations to visit the local shopping mall. But Sam also aspires to understand the Vietnam era in America (an era that ended before she was born) and to touch thereby a profounder, more affecting reality than is otherwise available to her. Like many other "crackers" in the New South novel, Sam has no sense of history and no real sense of community, for those traditional supports of the southern family have been eclipsed by the economic life of the cities. Sam is kin in this regard to Ruth Ann Boatright in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1991) and Garnet Laney in M.A. Harper's *For the Love of Robert E. Lee* (1992). She is kin on a different social level to all who suffer adolescent angst in Jill McCorkle's artful novels *The Cheer Leader* (1984), *July 7th* (1984), *Tending to Virginia* (1987), and *Ferris Beach* (1990), and to the extraordinary Simons Everson Manigault of Padgett Powell's first novel *Edisto* (1984). Powell's principal character is not at all "cracker" but disestablished gentry, the son of an eccentric, college-professor mother, who has given him a vocabulary and sophistication so much greater than his understanding that he seems kin not only to Mason's Sam Hughes but also to Salinger's Holden Caulfield. The numbing iteration of brand names and other trivia can seem easy satire in some of these New South novels, but the intensely imagined, pitch-perfect voices that tend to distinguish them turn the flow of trivia into something more: into an impoverished frame of discourse deeply moving *because* of its poverty.

A cornpone folksiness is the occasional appeal of "hick chic", but such an appeal often runs no deeper in a novel than its title, and *that*, one suspects, for commercial reasons. Indeed, what I have termed folksiness is perhaps no more than the regional face of a sweet-temperedness that is ascendant today everywhere in American literature as it reacts against postmodernism. One of the most engaging works in this mode is Allan Gurganus's *The Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All* (1989), a cornucopia of story narrated by Lucy Marsden, a ninety-nine-year-old resident of a North Carolina nursing home. As indifferent to her grammar as to the fact that she is assembling a mosaic of her own life, Lucy careens through memories of her husband, who was traumatized in the Civil War, of her nine children living and dead, and of her contemporaries black and white, and she does so with such feisty intelligence that she compels our attention for more than seven hundred pages — a major feat of storytelling. William Price Fox is a storyteller as inventive if not as prodigally extravagant as Gurganus, and in novels like *Dixiana Moon* (1981) he works a vein of moonshine humor sometimes confused with

mere folksiness. He deserves a more careful reading, for his hyperbole is a considerable art, with roots as deep in American culture as *Huckleberry Finn*. Clearly calculating in her appeal to folksiness is Fannie Flagg, in actuality the actress Patricia Neal, whose two novels are ill-served (except in sales) by impossibly cute titles: *Daisy Fay and the Miracle Man* (originally *Coming Attractions*, 1981), and *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (1987).

The sweet-temperedness of recent fiction seems to be modifying the long attachment of the southern novel to gothicism, conspicuously so in the work of Fred Chappell and Harry Crews. In the novels *I Am One of You Forever* (1985) and *Brighten the Corner Where You Are* (1989), Chappell has turned from the gothicism that he once linked to the decline of traditional southern society and has espoused a warm, funny vision of a South disengaged from the land. In Crews's recent novels *All We Need of Hell* (1987) and *Scar Lover* (1992), characters are offered redemption instead of the extravagantly gothic fates that Crews would once have arranged for them. Even the sombre, somewhat obsessive gothicism of Cormac McCarthy has been modified in his recent *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), a coming-of-age novel set in Texas and Mexico. Gothicism continues to erupt in the work of southern novelists, of course, if somewhat unpredictably. Doris Betts is not in any defining sense a gothicist, but her most ambitious novel to date, *Heading West* (1981), is the story of a librarian from North Carolina who is abducted during a vacation from consciousness by a man totally without conscience and taken to the Grand Canyon — a figure of the abyss that always yearns beneath the feet of gothic heroines. And with a wry humor that manages not to deflate his genre, Barry Hannah continues to give us macho-Romantic, ultimately gothic fictions like *The Tennis Handsome* (1983), *Boomerang* (1989), and *Never Say Die* (1991), which are crammed with perverse sex and gratuitous malignity. So long as southerners have a historical sense of themselves shaped in part by defeat in the Civil War, it seems that they will find a degree of imaginative truth in the glooms and horrors of the gothic.

Most of these strands of southern fiction come together today, as they have for many years, in what might be termed "family" novels, some of them generational sagas, some of them smaller, domestic tales, some of them New South accounts of quasi-familial units like the town, virtually all of them respectful of the family matrix that is opportunity for black humor and bitterness elsewhere in the house of fiction. A considerable number of southern novels are going-home stories in which family of whatever kind is a crucial context, and I



account them family novels as well. To say that the textuality's persistent attention to the family is *respectful* is to denote a quality of its focus rather than of its tone and is not to say that it celebrates uncritically a sociological unit whose viability is questioned today. As I have observed above, many "cracker" characters in the New South novel suffer a sense of lost context rooted in the decline of family, and the number of matriarchs who exercise unholy suzerainty in the southern novel is exceeded only by the number of their psychologically scarred progeny, even to the second and third generations. But families of all kind and of whatever dysfunction *count* in the southern novel rather more insistently than they count elsewhere. Family continues to be the stage on which the essential dramas of southern life are played.

No one has brought more distinction to the family novel — or to contemporary southern fiction, for that matter — than Reynolds Price. The chronicle of Rosacoke Mustian and Wesley Beavers that he began in his first novel, *A Long and Happy Life* (1962), that he continued in the story "A Chain of Love" (1963), and that he shunted sideways into the story of Rosacoke's brother Milo in *A Generous Man* (1966), has recently been revived in *Good Hearts* (1988), a novel in which Wesley leaves Rosacoke after twenty-eight years of marriage on a impulse that he does not really understand. And the story of the Mayfield clan, begun with the story of Forrest Mayfield and his son Robinson in *The Surface of Earth* (1975), has received a fine new installment in *The Source of Light* (1981), a story of the next generation in which Hutchins Mayfield, who has been raised single-handedly by Robinson, learns upon his father's death that he must go home again. The need to go home again in some sense or other tends to be Price's theme: in the greatly admired *Kate Vaiden* (1986), the title character must decide whether or not to make the acquaintance of the son she abandoned when she was seventeen; in *The Tongues of Angels* (1990), a gifted boy caught between childhood and adolescence must come to terms with the death of a parent; and in *Blue Calhoun* (1992), Price's ninth novel, a sixty-five-year-old man tries to win the affection of his granddaughter by narrating his life story. The precise and dangerous art of these novels is matched in contemporary American literature only in several works by William Maxwell, in the novella *So Long, See You Tomorrow* (1980) most notably. Like Maxwell, Price writes in a lyrical mode and permits his characters a laconic eloquence. And like his Illinois/New York cohort, Price entrusts to his characters a moral fastidiousness that transcends the vaguely sordid situations into which he plunges them.

Anne Tyler and Josephine Humphreys, both of whom studied with Price at Duke University, have also brought distinction to novels about the southern family. Indeed, Tyler is a considerable student of ramshackle cohabitations of all kinds, and without imitating in any way Price's lyricism, she achieves much the same effects of lucidity, intimacy, and large-hearted tolerance. In her best novels, realism is shot through with a distinctive whimsy. *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982) traces thirty-five years of the Tulls, an unhappy, working-class family whose simple dysfunctions grow into entertaining antagonisms; *The Accidental Tourist* (1985), her best novel to date, traces the very funny collapse and re-foundationing of domesticity in the life of an eccentric writer; *Breathing Lessons* (1988), a comparatively drab work, traces a twenty-eight year marriage as it stumbles one day on difficulties too long unacknowledged; and *Saint Maybe* (1991), traces the awkward efforts of a young man to help raise the orphaned children of his brother, for whose early death he feels responsible. The influence of Price is more marked upon Josephine Humphreys than upon Tyler, especially in Humphreys' use of language, but, like Tyler, Humphreys tends to narrow Price's large vision of family into domestic crises. *Dreams of Sleep* (1984) is the story of a woman who discovers she can rebuild her marriage even after her husband's infidelity; *Rich in Love* (1987) is a wonderfully witty novel about a perceptive adolescent coping with the breakup of her parents' marriage; and *The Fireman's Fair* (1991) is a folksy narrative about a middle-aged lawyer shocked to discover that his teen-age paramour cares as much about her independence as about him.

The return home after many years elsewhere tends in the southern novel to be an act of signal importance; it constitutes usually a confrontation with family demons, sometimes a reconciliation; it is almost always the occasion of coming to terms with who one is. In recent years, novelists who have explored the journey homeward include Peter Taylor, Ellen Gilchrist, Madison Jones, and Lisa Alther. Taylor's long-awaited opus *A Summons to Memphis* (1986) uses the familiar technique of his short stories (a repeated circling of the subject before alighting on its core of meaning) to tell of Phillip Carver's return from Manhattan to Memphis in order to deal with an aged father who intends to remarry. It is a self-recognition story of great subtlety, and Taylor proves himself once again a stylist of moment. Ellen Gilchrist is also, increasingly, a stylist: her careful, somewhat incantatory prose tends to heighten the eccentric contours of short stories and to fine-tune a balance of pathos and the long comic

view that is her distinctive note. Her novels are more sober than her tales, however: in *The Anna Papers* (1988), her second novel, she tells the story of Anna Hand, a famous writer who travels home to North Carolina, discovers that she has cancer, and chooses to drown herself amid kith and kin. The novel has links to the three novellas in *I Cannot Get You Close Enough* (1990), which are not so much sequel to *The Anna Papers* as an amplification of Anna's family matrix. Madison Jones has continued to write about southern themes without assuming postures self-consciously southern, and in *Last Things* (1989), his eighth novel, he puts an interesting spin on the novel of return via the story of a man who returns to his birthplace in the deep South to undertake graduate study, only to find himself involved in drug traffic. It is a thoroughly frightening tale. Regrettably, the return home to a dying mother that Lisa Alther imagined so successfully in *Kinflicks* (1976) is not equaled in *Original Sins* (1981), wherein four characters who return home for a funeral realize that they must endure the bitter disillusionments of their maturity. Alther's writing has vitality, certainly, but her vitality seems doggedness when her imagination flags.

Mary Lee Settle, Lee Smith, and Pat Conroy have been particularly influential in bringing a generational focus to novels of family, although Settle and Conroy seem recently to be softening that focus. Settle is best known for her Beulah Quintet, a sequence that she worked on for twenty-six years and that has as its subject the war over many generations between labor and capital in the coal-mining industry of West Virginia: *O Beulah Land* (1956); *Know Nothing* (1960); *Prisons* (1973), which is set in England; *The Scapegoat* (1980); and *The Killing Ground* (1982).<sup>6</sup> The last of these novels arrives at the contemporary period and even, appositely, at the postmodern aesthetic, for its protagonist is the putative author of the first four novels of the sequence. Lee Smith has written three family sagas in the past decade, all of them steeped in regional consciousness: *Oral History* (1983), a multi-generational and multi-voiced narrative that is widely acclaimed; *Family Linen* (1985), a chronicle of four generations; and *The Devil's Dream* (1992), which traces a family of rural musicians from Appalachia in the 1830s to Nashville in the 1970s. She is also the author of a fine epistolary novel entitled *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988), the letters of which begin when their writer is ten years old and which continue for sixty-five years a veritable history of Appalachia. Pat Conroy has shifted from the generational, father/son relationships of his early novels to horizontal relationships in his most recent writing. *The Lords of*

*Discipline* (1980) is an engrossing novel about friendships put to the test in a corrupt military academy, and *The Prince of Tides* (1986) is a novel in which a young man tries to help his twin sister, a successful poet, to recover from mental breakdown. Families continue to hide dark secrets in Conroy's tales, and children continue to suffer grievously the cruelties of their fathers, but the author brings to such potentially gothic material a firm realism and a considerable gift for plotting. If he slips occasionally into melodrama, he does so with élan.

Three first-time novelists whose work is well regarded have recently approached the generational novel through the same device of multiple points of view that Smith used with distinction in *Oral History*: Jayne Ann Phillips, Michael Lee West, and Emily Ellison. Phillips's *Machine Dreams* (1984) is a competent telling of one family's decline in the years between World War II and Vietnam, but it strikes no sparks, somehow, from its multi-voiced method. With livelier effect than Phillips, West uses six interlocking narratives in *Crazy Ladies* (1990), which is a chronicle of three generations of women, as the Depression, World War II, and Haight-Ashbury crash in successive waves over their family. In *The Picture Makers* (1990), Emily Ellison traces the fortunes of an Atlanta painter and her family over a period of twenty-five years. On a technical basis, Ellison's novel is far the most interesting of these three, for Ellison makes no attempt to distinguish her seven speakers with the startling effect of interiorizing their voices. One looks to her future work with interest.

Women writers seem particularly numerous among these novelists of the deep-rooted family. To the women already mentioned in this connection (Tyler, Humphreys, Gilchrist, Alther, Settle, Smith, Phillips, West, Ellison), one might add Gail Godwin, Beverly Lowry, and Robb Forman Dew. Godwin's *A Mother and Two Daughters* (1982) is a somewhat overlong tale hung on the peg of a funeral that brings together a widow and her daughters to ruminate on lives that involve bi-racial marriage, divorce, abortion, and other crises of contemporary experience. *A Southern Family* (1987) lingers more interestingly with each member of the Quick family and with several persons outside the family as they deal with a violent death and the visit of another family member from New York. Godwin follows in these works the pattern of her earlier novels in rendering expertly the many layers of human relationships without ever quite sounding psychological depths; it is a curious limitation of her oeuvre. Like Godwin's, Beverly Lowry's interest is the psychological portrait hung deep in family shadows. The suggestively entitled *Daddy's Gift* (1981) is about a woman who maintains separate identities as widow

and mother, as country-blues singer, and songwriter; *The Perfect Sonya* (1987) is about a woman's struggles to overcome the debilitating influence of her parents upon her erotic life; and *Breaking Gentle* (1988) is a Godwinesque tale about a family of four, each of whose minds is probed detailedly but without satisfying psychological depth. Robb Forman Dew's tales of contemporary family relationships have greater depth than those of Godwin and Lowry. *The Time of Her Life* (1984) is a novel about the harm a couple does to their eleven-year-old daughter, and *Dale Loves Sophie to Death* (1981) is about a husband and wife shaken first by infidelity and then by the death of a son. They find themselves, to their surprise, a durable unit. In a sequel to *Dale Loves Sophie to Death* entitled *Fortunate Lives* (1992), the same couple suffers an analogous loss of still another son as he leaves for college, and they learn once again hard lessons of marital continuance.

Any number of southern novelists write the occasional family novel without making the genre a preoccupation of their oeuvres. In the wake of *Hardcastle* (1980), a novel about coal miners in the rural South, and the estimable *Toots in Solitude* (1983), which is very nearly a country ballad, John Yount fabricated such a novel in *Thief of Dreams* (1991), a short, sad story about a family that endures a series of wrenching experiences. And Paul Hamphill gave us such a novel in *The Sixkiller Chronicles* (1985), a three-generational story about a family leaving the mountains and then returning there again. Such is not at all the mode of Hamphill's most recent novel, *King of the Road* (1989), which is an intimate father/son picaresque. Ellen Douglas (Josephine Haxton) accommodated the tradition of family stories in her first four novels only to break tentatively with the genre in *A Lifetime Burning* (1982), which is a series of passionate, miscellaneous reflections on failed marriage by a sixty-five-year-old woman. And Douglas has abandoned wholly the novel of family in *Can't Quit You, Baby* (1988), an expressionistic account of two women, one white and one black, who have worked together in the white woman's kitchen for fifteen years. In an era when the fabled ability of the southern family to subsume retainers, eccentric neighbors, and miscellaneous waifs-of-the-storm has lost a measure of sociological credibility, other social organisms sometimes serve the novelist as quasi-familial units. The most frequent of these is the small town. It should be said, however, that the small town serves often today to evoke a tradition of humor that finds its prototype less in the family than in the Mississippi River towns of Mark Twain. In novels of this tradition, towns are dysfunctional organisms populated



with rubes who embody the fundamental drives of humankind. The angles of vision in such novels tend to be wonderfully skewed; plotting, to be off-the-wall. Clyde Edgerton has set several such novels in small towns of North Carolina: *Raney* (1985), *Walking Across Egypt* (1987), and *Killer Diller* (1991). And in a rapidly developing oeuvre, T.R. Pearson has set a series of novels in towns of the rural South: *A Short History of a Small Place* (1985), *Off for the Sweet Hereafter* (1986), *The Last of How It Was* (1987), *Call and Response* (1989), and *Gospel Hour* (1991). James Wilcox has set his comedies in the fictional town of Tula Springs, Louisiana, a community of lost industries and declining population. His *Modern Baptists* (1983), *North Gladiola* (1985), *Miss Undine's Living Room* (1987), *Sort of Rich* (1989), and *Polite Sex* (1991) are a fine aggregate.

Organisms other than the town also serve the southern novelist as quasi-familial units, often as vehicles of ironic allusion to the family and the assumption of its deep-rootedness. Donald Hays finds such a quasi-familial unit in the Arkansas Reds, a left-wing baseball team hassled by right-wing evangelists in *The Dixie Association* (1984); Alice Adams, in a gathering of classmates during their years at Radcliffe College and afterwards in *Superior Women* (1984); John Fergus Ryan, in a gang of rogues driving across Arkansas in *The Little Brothers of St. Mortimer* (1991). Such works are seldom without whiffs of xenophobia and Arcadian nostalgia, of course, whatever their degree of irony.

With the possible exception of Charlie Smith's *Canaan* (1984), a lush, Georgia-plantation saga, the sentimentally historical southern novel epitomized by Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* is generally now conflated with the bodice-ripper and considered beneath literary attention. Certainly it makes no serious claim to attention in the recent, anachronistic publication of Alexander Ripley's *Scarlett* (1991), an authorized sequel to *Gone With the Wind*, or in the resuscitation of Julian Green's *The Distant Land* (1991), a nine-hundred-page novel of the antebellum South that was unobtrusively shelved in the 1930s when *Gone With the Wind* was released. Several new and recently established southern novelists seem, indeed, to write a postsouthern novel for a postsouthern America — which is to say, an America in which even southerners no longer believe themselves to have a homogeneous culture born of a lost war, expressed in an agrarian, family-rooted society, transcending the processes of history.<sup>7</sup> Among such writers of the postsouthern novel are Madison Smartt Bell and Richard Ford. Bell's increasingly impressive oeuvre includes to date only one novel set in the South,

*Soldier's Joy* (1989), a tale of black/white camaraderie forged in the caldron of Vietnam and put to the test in Tennessee against a platoon of Klansmen. *The Washington Square Ensemble* (1983), *Waiting for the End of The World* (1985), and, most recently, *Doctor Sleep* (1992) are set more typically in the sociological underbellies of New York City and London and explore graphically the drug-related origins of urban violence. Richard Ford's novels acknowledge the claims of family that are a staple of southern fiction, but such claims tend to be only catalysts of the stories in his fiction, not their essential urgency. In *The Ultimate Good Luck* (1981), Harry Quinn and his girlfriend Rae try to get her brother out of an Oaxaca jail, where he has been incarcerated for drug-dealing; in *The Sportswriter* (1986), a novelist rejects an examined family life for the unexamined life of a sportswriter; and in *Wildlife* (1990), an adult narrator remembers his teen-age self in Montana observing the slow estrangement of his parents. All are about human beings watching themselves in action, hoping for self-understanding. They are fine, elegantly cinematic novels written by a southerner but not in any truly distinguishing way southern.

The epistolary novel seems today to be experiencing a revival. Passing reference has already been made to a number of such novels by southern writers — Lee Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies*, John Barth's *LETTERS*, George Garrett's *Poison Pen* — and it might be observed that letters are important in the narrative technique of Reynolds Price as well. But no contemporary work has had a greater success in the epistolary mode than Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), which is made up of letters addressed to God by a black American girl named Celie and of letters exchanged between Celie and her sister Nettie. The letters document powerfully the pathos of Celie's life as she attempts to take charge of her destiny; most powerfully of all, they document years of sexual abuse by Celie's putative father and her turning to the love of Shug Avery, a female blues singer. In recent years, Walker has developed larger narrative ambitions than those manifest in *The Color Purple*, but she puts those ambitions entirely at the service of sociopolitical and psycho-sexual agenda. *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), which she describes as "a romance of the last 500,000 years", is an unsuccessful mix of fantasized history, exemplary biography, and improvised myth-making that she uses to explain the collective psyche of black Americans in the twentieth century. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) is a work equally polemic and just as factitiously mythic.

If a fantastical black rhetoric tends increasingly to unmoor Walker's craft, the novels of Toni Morrison remain anchored in authentic Negro lore, sometimes folk, sometimes documentary, sometimes religious. *Beloved* (1987), her masterpiece, imagines the interior life of an actual runaway slave immortalized in a nineteenth-century slave narrative. Tracked down in the free state of Ohio by her Kentucky owner, the historical Margaret Garner tried to kill her children rather than permit their re-enslavement, as does Morrison's character Sethe, who is subsequently haunted by "Beloved", the ghost of a daughter she succeeded in killing. It is an extraordinary story that Morrison tells — lyrically pitched in some scenes, calculatedly operatic in others, awesome in its imagining of both Sethe's and Beloved's psychic traumata. Indeed, it is a tale so grounded in human realities and in cathartic aspects of the black experience that it must already be considered a masterwork of the American canon. It towers over Morrison's earlier, entirely estimable novels, as well as over her recent *Jazz* (1992).

Like Morrison, Ernest J. Gaines continues to root his fiction firmly in black experience. If his recent novels are not the equal of his best work, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), they are substantial works that evoke sympathy for the plight of black men and women without recourse to a rhetoric that is incompatible with aesthetics of the novel. Indeed, although it has significant racial content, *In My Father's House* (1978) is a story not about relationship between blacks and whites but about those between black fathers and sons, for it is the story of a civil-rights leader who is confronted at the height of his career by a bastard son who is determined that his father will acknowledge what happened to his illegitimate family. On the other hand, *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) is unequivocally a tale of black rebellion against the status quo. Like *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, it is also a paean to old age — the story of seventeen elderly black men who rectify lifetimes of overmuch acquiescence and save the life of another black man by confessing multiply to the murder of a white Cajan. It is Gaines's distinction that he maintains balance and artistry in writing of the southern black experience in an age when the black novel tends to veer toward polemics.

A number of important novels (not necessarily by southern writers) have been grounded recently not in the experience of the *faex populi* chronicled by Morrison and Gaines but in experiences of a black elite — what W. E. B. Du Bois called "the talented tenth". These include, notably, Illinois-born Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), which is narrated in the year 1830 by a newly freed slave

improbably well-versed in the classics, and Indiana-born Darryl Pinckney's *High Cotton* (1992), whose narrator is the grandson of a Harvard graduate and who runs errands for Djuna Barnes while himself studying at Columbia University. The impulse remains strong in the southern novel to understand the experience of blacks mired in the underclass without filtering that experience through the contrivances of an educated sensibility and a bookishly allusive language. Among first-time novelists of this impulse, Susan Straight is of particular interest with a novel entitled *I Been in Sorrow's Kitchen and Licked Out All the Pots* (1992). Straight's protagonist is Marietta Cook, blue-back in skin color, contumacious, lubberly, who moves inexorably through a world of abiding racism from 1959 to the present. Although it is a fine narrative in almost every way, the unmistakable glory of Straight's novel is the Gullah patois that flows musically both in the dialogue and in the mind of its protagonist. Like Morrison and Gaines, Straight demonstrates persuasively that novels of the black underclass need no overlay of an alien sophistication in order to render either the characters or their experience interesting.

Hardly a woman mentioned in these pages is untouched by feminism — how could it be otherwise? — but there seems to be less stridency in the feminist socio-political agenda than heretofore insofar as it impinges on the southern novel. This is most conspicuous in marginally literary works like Rita Mae Brown's *High Hearts* (1986) and *Bingo* (1988), which moderate to a significant degree the lesbian-feminist political vision of her earlier *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) in an apparent effort to reach a mainstream audience. With the exception of *Sudden Death* (1983), a novel that fictionalizes Brown's relationship with the tennis star Martina Navratilova, Brown's novels have at the same time focused increasingly on the South to celebrate characters who struggle against the categorical imperative. They do so with a raunchy brio that has become Brown's stock-in-trade. Transcending in literary appeal anything that Brown has written and in many ways the most interesting feminist novel to emerge from the South in recent years is Blanche McCrary Boyd's *The Revolution of Little Girls* (1991), which is the story of an intrepid tomboy who endures a marriage from which she emerges confidently lesbian. Spare, hilarious, perfectly pitched in language, it is an altogether winning view of contemporary American society. At the other extreme, a novelist like Joan Williams has moved away from the artistically and socio-culturally traditional bias of her earlier work in apparent response to feminist acculturation. *Country Woman* (1982) is about a woman awakening to herself in the context of 1960s racial

agitation, and *Pay the Piper* (1988) recycles a secondary character from *Old Powder Man* (1966) to make her rethink her traditional values as a newly single, middle-aged woman. Indeed, it is difficult to think of a serious female character not shaped by the feminist perspective in the contemporary southern novel — those written by men as well as by women. The one-time flower of southern womanhood has become entirely a comic character.

"The day of regional Southern writing is all gone", quipped Walker Percy in 1971. "I think that people who try to write in that style are usually repeating a phased-out genre or doing Faulkner badly."<sup>8</sup> In light of the decade of southern novels chronicled in this bibliographical essay, Percy's requiem for a distinctively southern literature was premature — which is not to say that the Southern Renaissance, that dubious conceit of the Vanderbilt University Agrarians, lives on. It is to say, rather, that a universe of decayed gentry, upstart rednecks, suffering blacks, and sexually distressed ladies with triple-barreled names lives on as a strata of the New South in the work of such estimable writers as Lee Smith, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Alan Gurganus, and that such writers are not in any sense impoverished Faulkners. It is to say, further, that there remains a distinctive style of earned emotional truth, based on ethical modalities, that is southern: the sort of truth found in a telegram that the young Hutchins Mayfield receives from his grandmother on the eve of his departure from the South to study in England ("AWAKE ALL NIGHT HUNTING RIGHT FIFTEEN WORDS TO SAY WHAT I THINK. ALL I FIND IS FOURTEEN. SPEND EVERYTHING YOU TAKE. BRING HOME NEW LUGGAGE. YOU WILL ONLY REGRET YOUR ECONOMIES")<sup>9</sup>. It is to say, finally, that the South endures as a state of mind even as it transforms itself into a part of the Sun Belt, even as a new generation of writers evokes regional peculiarities, experience, and idiom to create an art that disturbs old bones.

## Notes

- 1 For an important statement of the problem of literary theory vis-à-vis southern literature, see Jefferson Humphries, "On the Inevitability of Theory in Southern Literary Study", *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 3: 1 (1989): 175-86. Rpt. in revised form as the introduction to *Southern Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Jefferson Humphries (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990). The latter is a collection of critical essays exemplifying different approaches to the literature. See also Philip Castille and William Osborne (eds.), *Southern Literature in Transition: Heritage and Promise* (Memphis: Memphis State UP, 1983), especially C. Hugh Holman, "No More Monoliths,



Please: Continuities in the Multi-Souths", pp. xiii-xxiii. For a background to the ongoing debate, see Richard H. King, "The South and Cultural Criticism", *American Literary History*, 1: 3 (Fall 1989): 699-714.

- 2 The accurate dating of American novels is increasingly difficult inasmuch as the officially listed dates of publication tend to be placed as late as possible in order to extend a book's apparent newness and inasmuch as bookstores and book reviewers tend increasingly to anticipate official dates of publication. I have taken an accurate approach to dating when I know a book was clearly and widely available in the calendar year before its alleged year of publication.
- 3 The problem of what elements of birth, residency, style, and content define a southern writer is endlessly debatable. My principle for inclusion is that all writers I name (unless otherwise stipulated) are considered to be southern writers either by themselves or by a cadre of literary critics. There are problems, of course: is Alice Adams, a west-coast writer now but with a southern childhood, properly included? Is Ohio-born Toni Morrison, whose parents were Georgian and who considers herself Georgian even though she has lived for many years in New York State? For the transcript of a panel discussion on the subject by Beverly Lowry, Reynolds Price, Elizabeth Spencer, and James Whitehead, see Austin Wilson (ed.), "What It Means to Be a Southern Writer in the 80s," *Southern Quarterly*, 26: 4 (Summer 1988): 80-93.
- 4 For an emphasis not my own, see Julius Rowan Raper, "Inventing Modern Southern Fiction: A Postmodern View," *Southern Literary Journal*, 22: 2 (Spring 1990) 3-18, presented originally as part of an NEH Summer Institute, "The Southern Novel and the Southern Community", The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, July 12-July 20, 1989.
- 5 The standard work on the New South as a cultural concept is still Paul M. Gaston's *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Knopf, 1970).
- 6 When the Beulah Quintet was only the Beulah Trilogy, it included a novel entitled *Fight Night on a Sweet Saturday* (1964), no longer designated by the author a part of the sequence. *Prisons* was republished in England in 1974 under the title *The Long Road to Paradise*.
- 7 So far as I am aware, Louis P. Simpson coined the term *postsouthern America* in the concluding chapter of his *The Brazen Face of History: Studies in the Literary Consciousness in America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1980) p. 255.
- 8 Walker Percy, "An Interview with Walker Percy", ed. John C. Carr, in *Conversations with Walker Percy*, ed. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1985), p. 69. Rpt. from *Georgia Review*, 25 (Fall 1970): 317-32.
- 9 Reynolds Price, *The Source of Light* (Toronto: Ballentine, 1981), p. 62.