

From Archetype to Stereotype: a Postmodern Re-reading of the American South

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Abstract:

This study proposes an approach to Southern culture as a perpetually re-written/re-read text that survives by successive re-contextualizations of its fundamental patterns. Relying on fictional and non-fictional representations, the paper follows the trajectory of the plantation as an epitome of the South from the status of archetypal model to that of stereotype, showing how the latter ironically acquires the power of the former, and becomes the very source of misconceptions or simplifying perceptions. Ultimately, as we are going to show, this shift is part of the continuous process of negotiation supported by the basic human need to assimilate otherness and define ourselves in relation with it. In order to illustrate this negotiation, the paper examines a number of contemporary Southern writers, who, by re-reading/re-writing the heritage of their native region, and projecting it into new forms of expression meant to accommodate post-modern experiences, attempt to reconcile a double crisis: of their own identity against the background of their native region, and of their native region against the background of contemporary history.

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Introduction

Since the very concept of reading/re-reading/misreading stands on the equation that institutes culture as a perpetually revised text, any approach that relies on this concept should be aware of the two interplaying processes that generate it. First, the text turns to itself periodically, within different historical and cultural contexts that bring it to life through the act of reading. It is not accidental that this self-revising act of the text, performed by challenging the very cultural patterns and codes that generated it, coincides with the moments of cultural crisis, when reality outgrows language to such an extent that it brings about the need for new forms of expression. Second, the status of the text as a flexible, modeled/modeling structure, not only ensures its survival, but it also turns any act of reading into a re-reading. Moreover, having in view that, once 'the trace is traced', as Jacques Derrida put it, the text is bound to 'betray' its sources, virtually any act of re-reading is a misreading in the sense of an enriching deviation from its previous trajectories. The concept of the 'betrayal-prone' text underlies one of the most productive and balanced theories of postmodernism, which takes over the basic principles of hermeneutics and launches them on the orbit of deconstruction, concluding that there is no such thing as a first reading. And, if we may add, no 'correct' reading in the strictly intentional sense of the word.

On the level of culture, this process is most visible in the frenetic revisiting of canons, in the reassessments of cultural patterns and in the questioning of artistic forms. On its deeper level, the perpetual self-revision of culture as text is driven by the shift from archetype to stereotype, under the pressure of an ever more complex reality that seems to constantly outgrow our means of appropriating it and proclaims a crisis of language. In other words, the paradigm shift pertaining to cultural crisis is triggered by the corrosion of a certain cultural archetype to the point where it turns into a stereotype that fails to accommodate experience and to restore it in a meaningful discourse. Therefore, old myths are worn out and turn into labels, whereas new forms of comprehension take their place, just to be overthrown in the

future, as a result of new needs for ordering human experience. Actually, considering the postmodern fundamental denial of hierarchy and organizing principles, and the proclamation of the ambiguous, the contradictory, the hazardous and the fragmentary, it becomes obvious that, in the contemporary cultural context, archetypes and their pertaining myths are diluted into stereotypes and are gradually dismantled.

In this context, the survival of Southern culture in the post-modern world is conditioned by two interplaying processes that reinforce each other dramatically. First, there is the Southerners' determination to cultivate an image of their region as a 'place apart,' which culminates in the actual secession in 1861. Second, one cannot help noticing the readiness with which 'the rest of the nation' absorbs this image and turns it into a label, out of the instinctive need to define itself in opposition to something different. Actually, the need of self-construction by opposition grows so much out of proportion, and puts so much pressure on the North-South boundary that, ironically, it produces a kind of reflux due to which the trajectory of the stereotyping process becomes a two-way road. More exactly, the mutually cultivated North-South stereotypes seem to acquire the strength of archetypes that induce a reciprocal modeling of the two regions. Thus, in an irony that seems to celebrate post-modern ambiguity, we hear ever more often of such concepts as 'northernizing the South' and 'southernizing the North.'

Obviously, classic Southern literature itself supported this shift from archetype to stereotype by promoting such Southern cultural labels as the 'burden of the past,' 'the sense of place, history and community,' 'the defeated nation,' largely endorsed by scholars in Southern studies, whose vision was biased by their being natives of the region.

Under these circumstances, postmodern Southern literature appears as a series of successful attempts at questioning myths and dismantling stereotypes. Starting with William Styron, contemporary Southern writers turn the concept of 'regional writing' from a mere matter of geography and local mythology into a matter of natively-acquired sensibility, which yields a particular vision of the world. In contemporary Southern writings, *the world* is much larger than the mythological South, with its anger and nostalgia, and even larger than the ground of the old North-South conflict. Thus, projected against the huge canvas of world wars and disasters, or confronted with the theories of globalization that promote the concept of 'the global South,' the legendary, monolithic South and its everlasting conflict with the North are diluted into products of popular culture, or even into simple advertising or political slogans. Therefore, the connection to the reality of the contemporary 'outer' world complicates the original equation and, paradoxically, facilitates the dismantling of stereotypes, under the form of various re-readings of regional myths and patterns of thought.

In this context, some contemporary Southern writers choose to re-read the heritage of their native region by reordering the basic experiences it yields within the space of postmodern artistic forms of expression, whereas others display a more radical attitude by setting their stories far away from the South. In their turn, some contemporary scholars continue to write anthologies of Southern literature and even encyclopedias of Southern culture, whereas others support the idea that regional differences have been blurred in the melting pot of national culture to such an extent that the very concept of region should be placed between quotation marks in order to point out its lack of substance. Consequently, they make a case for writing 'Southern,' 'the South', or even 'Southern studies,' which fails to provide final solutions, since most of their studies still end with a question mark.

This essay cannot pretend to answer their questions. It can only attempt, and hopefully manage, to raise new questions that may open new perspectives on the way in which by (re) reading our culture we (re)read ourselves.

1. 'The Stubborn Back-looking Ghosts': Myth and Reality in the Southern Heritage

As we have already suggested, the responses to Southern culture are catalyzed by the long isolation of the Southern states from the 'rest of the nation' and, on the other hand, by the legend that the South deliberately wove around itself and that the North readily assimilated, out of the inertia that generally governs our perception of otherness and makes us adopt comfortably simplified versions of it.

Such a relation of opposition between two worlds that touched only on the surface of preconceived ideas about each other was nurtured not only by literature, but also taken as far as the mid-twentieth century by such prominent commentators of the South as Wilbur Cash, a Southerner by birth himself, whose book *The Mind of the South* uses historical, economic, social, and even environmental arguments to support the concept of his native region as 'a nation within a nation.' The major impact of his book on the perception of the South within and without the region was due to its central thesis, which reasserts the myth of the plantation as a coagulating factor of Southern patterns of thought and behavior. As "an independent social unit, a self-contained and largely self-sufficient world of its own" (Cash 32), the plantation is the ideal background for the perpetuation of the so-called 'savage ideal': the determination to preserve the old order and, in close relation with it, the instinctive rejection of any form of progress, automatically associated with the threatening North.

Beyond its inherent abstractions, ambiguities, and even certain farfetched theories that contributed themselves to oversimplifications, Cash's book has the merit of pinpointing the source of Southern mythology with its two archetypal dimensions - the acute sense of the native place and the identification of the individual with the community and its history. It is also worth remarking that these two dimensions mark both the trajectory from history to myth and, eventually, from myth to stereotype, when they wear out under the pressure of reality.

The author's assumptions about the South are endorsed by the attitude of classic native writers, who emphasize the importance of their native place, the 'burden of the past,' the defeat in the Civil War, and the sense of guilt generated by the 'peculiar institution,' not only as sources of inspiration, but also as sources of a particular sensibility and vision of the world.

The role of place and its history in literature was repeatedly pointed out by Eudora Welty in her well-known theory that "location pertains to feeling; feeling profoundly pertains to place; place in history partakes of feeling, as feeling about history partakes of place" (47). Therefore, for the Southern writer, place goes far beyond the value of a mere scene where certain things happened at one particular moment; place is primarily a land, concrete and well-defined, which concentrates the feelings and experiences of generations of common people, whose destinies unfold against the background of history, and sometimes even counter it.

Once Southern writers assume the blessing and curse of historical memory in an attempt to endow it with meaning, their conscience becomes the ground of an irreducible conflict between the sense of belonging to their native place they understand in a unique way and the irrepressible need to break away from this source of painful knowledge.

In this context, no other conclusion to this section would be more suggestive than William Faulkner's expression of his ambiguous detachment/attachment to his native heritage, as if anticipating the quandaries of his post-modern successors. Thus, after evasively declaring "I just write about people" (*Faulkner in the University*, 99), he almost passes a sentence on his followers, stating that "To write well about some place you've got to hate it. The way a man hates his own wife" (*Faulkner in the University* 83). The same idea underlies the end of

Absalom, Absalom! when, bewildered by the Southern obstinacy to live in the past, Shreve bursts out into an apology of the North–South fundamental incompatibility:

We don't live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves [...] and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget. What is it? something you live and breathe in like air? (Faulkner 361).

To this question, Quentin's answer comes impersonally, as an already assumed verdict: "You can't understand it. You would have to be born there" (Faulkner 361). However, the answer he gives to Shreve's suspicious question "Why do you hate the South?" adds the final touch to the portrait of the Southern intellectual, reduced to despair and helplessness by his innate incapacity to break off from his ghosts, or at least to come to terms with them. His obsessive repetition "I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!" (Faulkner 378) comes as a useless attempt to learn by heart a line that his mind refuses to absorb.

2. 'Breaking Away from them Magnolias.' Southern Heritage Re-written

The previous section of this study leads to the conclusion that the basic coordinates of the South as a myth–anchored cultural space, with the plantation as its central icon and the 'savage ideal' as an archetypal source of its patterns of thinking and relating with 'the rest of the nation' have been preserved by virtue of the obstinacy of the former, and the oblivion of the latter. Consequently, both the literary and the meta-textual discourse outline a cultural heritage that constantly re–asserts itself in moments of crisis, surviving well into the twentieth century, independently from the economic and social evolution of the region.

In his *The Americans*, D.J. Boorstin shows that the urban areas appeared in the South much later than in the North, which dramatically reversed the force ratio between the country and the city. In comparison with such regions as, for instance, the West, where the railroad appeared first, followed by a town, and only later on by farms, so that "the city stamps the country, instead of the country's stamping the city" (Boorstin 172), the South remained culturally rural long after becoming economically and socially urban. Moreover, just as the legend of the Old South gained in glamour after it was shattered by the Civil War, the plantation reasserted its value as a cultural icon of the South under the threat of urbanization. The result of this revival is that "by the late nineteenth century the plantation as icon of the South was firmly established" (Cash 143), perhaps due to its response to people's instinctive inclination to legends and fairy–tales.

On the other hand, the best proof that the need for fascinating stories about a heroic past is free from geographical limits is that the legend of the South was readily adopted by the Westerners, and even the Northerners, who were equally uncomfortable with the economic rise of the New South in the 1970's, and fascinated by the 'differentness' of the legendary Old South.

Consequently, the myth of the plantation as an archetypal dimension of Southern culture survives in the modern world by insinuating itself into the life of the twentieth century city, and the fascination it exerts over city people is not in the least diminished by the historians that constantly point out its exaggerations and sentimentality. Although the urban society diluted it into a set of stories of glorious times and people, or sometimes a simple label used in commercials, the plantation continues to stir contradictory feelings and to fuel controversies.

Therefore, the basic questions to answer are: How does the contemporary Southern writer perceive the idea of change that affects his double relation with his tradition and with the world?, and What means does he resort to in order to reconcile the terms of an apparently oxymoronic equation: the South as an insular, past–oriented, self-centered cultural space, and

the Post-modern era as the time that questions myths, challenges tradition, and shatters boundaries in celebration of a chaotic, but still meaningful present.

The first question finds its answers as early as the discourse of the interwar writers who repeatedly left their region and returned to it, and who acknowledged the ever-growing crisis of the relationship between the contemporary Southern writer and his native culture.

A relevant example in this sense is Robert Penn Warren, who, in spite of his confessed incompatibility with his native region, from which he always felt “somehow squeezed out” (*The American South: Portrait of a Culture* 325), admits that the identity of the artist is essentially grounded in what he experiences very early in life. Moreover, the strongest proof that his consciousness remains anchored in a place that he abandoned geographically is that many of his characters are confronted with almost instinctive returns to their native places to discover that they no longer exist or they are completely changed.

Therefore, the moment of return deepens the crisis, as the Southerner, as a man and as an artist as well, realizes that there is no real way back. Thus, his entire life experience seems to be marked by the hostility of the North in his first years of residence there and the failure to fit into his native world upon return. This sense of inadequacy leads to the bitter awareness that there have been so many changes both in his region and within himself, that the two parts simply cannot ‘recognize’ each other any longer and, consequently, any attempt to return to the South would only strengthen the feeling of isolation.

As far as his artistic identity is concerned, Warren admits that it was dramatically shaped by the almost obsessive need to return to his native place: “The farther I got away from the South, the more I thought about it” (*The American South: Portrait of a Culture* 337). On the other hand, writing far away from the ‘scene’ is an opportunity to look back at it with different eyes, perhaps sharper and more objective, but never indifferent or insensitive, and to re-examine old experiences in a different light

The so-called second generation of renaissance writers, emerging after World War II, appear visibly more detached from their regional experience, beginning to consider it from a larger perspective. William Styron, for instance, is very determined to demonstrate that, for the writer of the twentieth century, when the major torments and dilemmas of humanity concern *everybody*, regional and racial differences are but obsolete, superficial and distorting perceptions of reality. Therefore, he rejects the concept of regionalism not in the sense of the cultural identity that the writer inherits from his native place, but in the sense of confining one’s writing to the cultural space of one region, which cannot yield but one-sided perspectives on human experience

Actually, Styron is well-known for his reluctance to being labeled a ‘regional writer,’ as he has always been quite determined to point out that his stories could have happened anywhere in the world. As a matter of fact, some of his stories do happen outside the South, proving that reaching towards other cultural spaces does not involve a dilution of identity on the part of the writer. In this sense, his writings prove that the projection of human destiny against the larger background of world history is meant to ensure a deeper comprehension of both.

However, if there is something really Southern in Styron, it would be his obvious inconsistency in defining his relation with his native place. After he admits that “I’m very much the writer I am because of my origins, which were Southern” (Rubin 324), he counterbalances this confession with the idea that his moving away from the South involved no conflicting feelings or crisis of identity, on account of a certain cultural ‘fluidity’ between his native region and the North. Finally, the premise of fluidity is overthrown on many occasions when he builds his discourse on a permanent South–North axis, showing that he

does perceive the two regions as different worlds. Actually, this inconsistent discourse makes us wonder if the writer doesn't try a little too hard to deny his belonging to the South, denial being one of the major symptoms of the 'Quentin syndrome.'

Anyway, the extent to which Styron was willing to accept his Southern identity is not a matter of any importance, as long as his entire work, regional in feeling and perception, though cosmopolitan in subject, demonstrates that these two dimensions of his art do not exclude each other. On the contrary, we may say, they outline a space within which experience gains new and subtler meanings.

Styron's attitude towards the idea of regionalism and writing prefaces the orientation of the latest generation of writers, whose writings have given some critics reasons to insist upon the inverted commas when it comes to defining them as Southern. Such writers as Barry Hannah, Bobbie Ann Mason, Robert Olen Butler and Randall Kenan write with the awareness of what Styron identified as the danger of overrating local color to the detriment of infusing real life into characters, and follow his urge to "break away a little from all them magnolias" (Plimpton and Matthiessen 7).

Therefore, even when they choose the South as a setting for their stories, these writers do not allow themselves or their characters to be absorbed in the mythology of the glorious past, or of an idyllic space, being aware that there is a fine line between the archetype and stereotype and that the pressure of contemporary history shatters the illusion of totalizing, mythical visions, replacing it with the reality of the contingent and the fragmentary. Therefore, as Robert H. Brinkmeyer notices,

Southern writers have more and more been striking out on their own, moving away from the imaginative shape of classic southern literature that is so secure in regional place, history and memory (Brinkmeyer 26).

Keeping in mind the fact that place, history and memory are precisely the dimensions of the 'the savage ideal' as a cultural pattern rooted in the archetypal image of the plantation, the tendency of contemporary Southern writers to re-read/re-write their native culture within a new context relies primarily on the challenging of this fundamental myth. Ultimately, this tendency results in a body of fiction that is "protean, dynamic and heterogeneous" (Guinn 571), eluding traditional paradigms of content and form, and assimilating Southern heritage, with different degrees of iconoclasm, into a form of discourse capable of ordering the experience of the contemporary world by acknowledging and assuming it as a permanent challenge of language.

For instance, Bobbie Ann Mason's *Shiloh and Other Stories* displays a "superficial present-day South – a South of mobile homes, plastic restaurants, and Parthenon-like shopping malls" (Hobson 8-10), populated with average people, whose sense of history, place and community fades in front of their efforts to keep pace with everyday life. They live in a changing South, whose reality has outgrown both the unifying, mythical representations and the nostalgic effusions of traditional literature. Finally, although she is known for her typically post-modern auctorial withdrawal from the text, the lack of nostalgia, the questioning of old patterns and the sharp sense of realism in her prose are ultimately and declaratively her own:

I'm not sure all those qualities of the Old South were all that terrific [...] I'm not nostalgic for the past. Times change and I'm interested in writing about what's now. (Wilhelm 37).

Randal Kenan's volume of twelve short stories *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* conveys the same message, even if in a totally different register. By virtue of inherited archetypes/

stereotypes, critics immediately associated him with two of his predecessors: Eudora Welty, known for the importance she granted to place as a source of knowledge, and Faulkner, on account of his fictional setting Tims Creek identifiable with the real geographic space of Cinquapin, where he spent his early years. On the ground of such associations, his book is considered to represent a resurgence of classic Southern literature. However, once we enter Kenan's fictional space, the breaking away from tradition is obvious. First, we feel more at ease in Tims Creek than in the mythical Yoknapatawpha, where we frequently got lost among entangled stories and legends that blur the boundary between history and mythology. Actually, the construction of a post-modern Yoknapatawpha is a successful attempt to go beyond the contemporary context and gain a more comprehensive view of history and humanity within the space of the fictional text.

What we certainly perceive, from the very first contact with Kenan's world, is a revival of Southern orality on a more 'casual', more 'reader-friendly' level, created by the projection of Southern cultural patterns at the intersection between Faulkner's inclination towards perpetually told stories, Flannery O'Connor's sense of the grotesque, and, sometimes, even John Barth's meta-textual outbursts.

The heterogeneous forms of expression mentioned above absorb inherited patterns into a vision of our own fragmentary experience of the world and converge towards a crucial point, made in the story *Clarence and the Dead* and related to the metaphoric title of the volume. In this story, Kenan resorts to one of the secondary characters to get through to the reader's sensibility and convey his subtle message. Ellsworth, a middle-aged man, lost in the world of his memories and in perpetual mourning after his wife's death, has severed all his connections with the present. His final suicide appears as a warning that letting yourself be drawn into the past is a very subtle form of death.

If one decided to rank contemporary Southern writings according to their degree of iconoclasm, the next would be the prose of Robert Olen Butler, who takes a step further towards the uprooting of Southern patterns. In the collection of short stories *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, the only connection he preserves with the South is the setting in the state of Louisiana. Although not a Southerner by birth, Butler declares a certain affinity with his adoptive place at first contact, but 'takes off' from any trace of Southern heritage by populating the region with Vietnamese immigrants, who have their own memories of a painful past, their own cult for their ancestors, and their own mythology, closely connected with their impulse to remember and tell stories. Viewing America through their eyes is a decisive step towards the blowing up of stereotypes and canons of expression. His attempt to attain as much detachment and objectivity as possible reaches its climax in his novel *Mr. Spaceman*, where, as he declares in an interview, he resorts to an alien, "the ultimate outsider" (Weich 2000), to resonate with our civilization and to extract meaning from it.

In terms of Post-modern expression, Butler assimilates the fragmentariness of contemporary experience and finds an ingenious way of restoring its meanings by taking the concept of multivocality to its climax in two volumes of short stories, *Had a Good Time: Stories from American Postcards*, a 'patchwork' of stories that reconstructs the world of the early twentieth century from postcard messages, and *Tabloid Dreams*, which expands on tabloid headlines.

With Barry Hannah, contemporary Southern literature reaches the climax of its iconoclasm, both in content and form. Hannah makes a clear break away from 'them magnolias,' definitively smashing to pieces the myth of the Southern writer, who has to write in order to come to terms with his own regionally-rooted idiosyncrasies. His rebellion in attitude and language identifies him as "the boldest, zaniest, and most outrageous writer of the contemporary South" (Hobson 32). The strong, contradictory reactions he stirs in the reading

public and the critics emerge from the unique way in which his prose melts into it the traditional Southwestern humor, the grotesquerie of Southern Gothic, and the eloquence of the tall tale teller specific to frontier stories. From *Geronimo Rex*, which centers upon a Walker Percy type of character, struggling with the obsession of the Old South, to *Ray*, where persons in real life appear by their real names and mix with invented characters, and *Tennis Handsome*, populated by brain-damaged, bisexual, and homophobic characters, Hannah's prose is illustrative of "an uneasy moment in a traditionalist literature in which history has returned, under clear-eyed scrutiny, with a vengeance" (Guinn 575). Stepping far away from Faulkner's shadow, Hannah writes a type of prose whose style reminds us, rather, of Hemingway's apparent casualness, and almost journalistic narrative style, in which old myths and patterns are sacrificed to celebrate the ultimate assertion of language as a means of imposing order on contemporary chaos.

3. 'Southern' or Southern? Instead of a Conclusion

On its way from archetype to stereotype, Southern culture is a perpetually re-written/re-read text, whose endurance is explained by something more subtle than Southern segregationist obstinacy, or Northern ambitions of supremacy, namely the individuals' need to appropriate otherness and define themselves in relation with it.

The success that Southern prose and music enjoy nowadays, not only in America, but all over the world, is a relevant proof that the 'northernization' of the South had its counterpart in a 'southernization' of the North. Nevertheless, whether we should place the adjective Southern between quotation marks or not is still debatable. On the one hand, the way in which contemporary Southern writers integrate inherited patterns into new forms of expression, re-writing the South so as to make it accessible for contemporary readers, definitely requires the inverted commas in terms of form. On the other hand, in terms of content, each reader can decide, according to individual sensibility and needs, to what extent he/she accepts a playful integration into the world of the text, or just a detached analysis from the outside. The quotation marks definitely pertain to the latter approach.

Ultimately, this questioning by means of quotation marks becomes a 'problem' in itself, as long as literature fulfills its essential function, offering "the vision of an eternal gap between imagined order and actual chaos" (Fiedler 11).

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