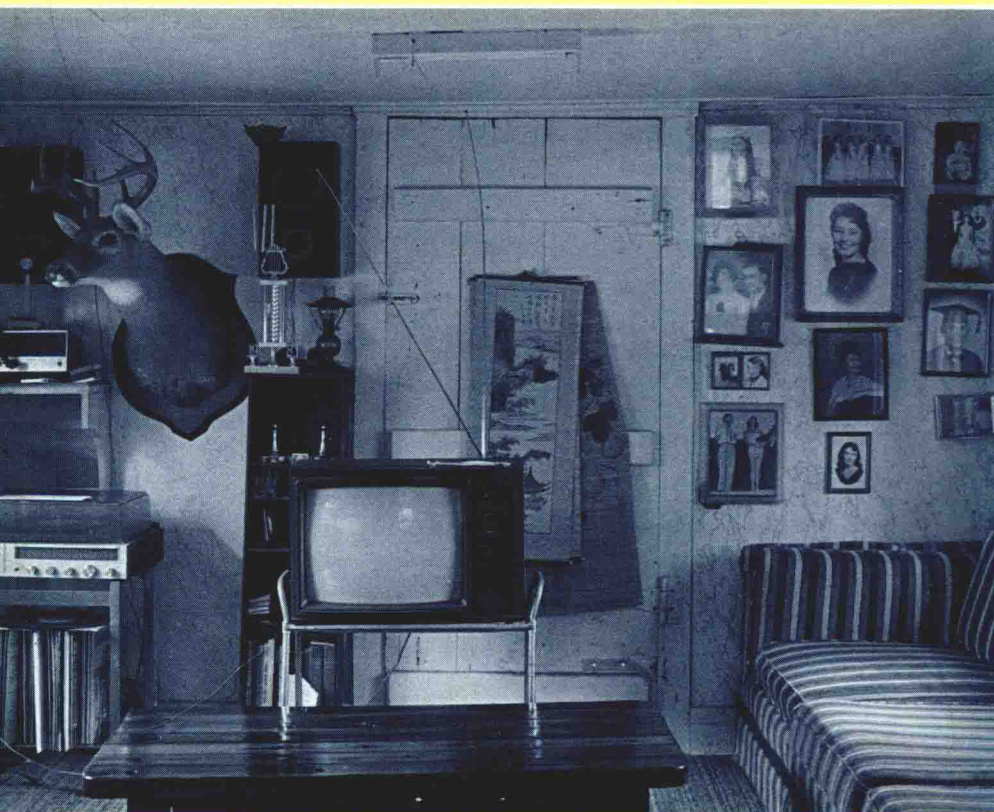


The
SOUTHERN WRITER
in the
POSTMODERN WORLD



Fred Hobson

THE

SOUTHERN

WRITER IN THE

POSTMODERN

WORLD

Fred Hobson

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Athens, Georgia 30602

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Designed by Louise M. Jones

Set in 10/14 Linotype Walbaum

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Council on Library Resources.

Printed in the United States of America

95 94 93 92 91 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Hobson, Fred C., date.

The southern writer in the postmodern world / Fred

Hobson. p. cm. — (Mercer University Lamar
memorial lectures ; no. 33)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-8203-1275-4 (alk. paper)

1. American literature—Southern States—History
and criticism. 2. American literature—20th century
—History and criticism. 3. Postmodernism
(Literature)—Southern States. 4. Southern States—
Intellectual life—1865- . 5. Southern States in
literature. I. Title. II. Series: Lamar memorial
lectures ; no. 33.

PS261.H535 1991 813'.5409975—dc20

90-11031 CIP

British Library Cataloging in Publication Data
available

THE SOUTHERN WRITER
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For
Louis D. Rubin, Jr.
and
Lewis P. Simpson

Foreword



In this volume drawn from the thirty-third series of Lamar Memorial Lectures, Professor Fred Hobson of the University of North Carolina ventures readings of the most recent southern fiction, the works composed by what seems to be a third or even fourth generation of the Southern Renaissance. These younger writers, fifty and under, grew up during or after the civil rights movement of the sixties, a time that was as pivotal in southern life and letters as the twenties had been for earlier generations.

The younger writers are not writing with the "burden" of racial guilt; they are writing about "unburdened" characters who are very different at first glance from Quentin Compson and Jack Burden and their brothers and sisters in classic Renaissance fiction. Recent novels still feature distinctively southern voices, but their characters apparently do not have the southern-consciousness and self-consciousness typical of a Faulkner character.

The lives of these characters, immersed in the American mass culture, may seem emptier and flatter, but Professor Hobson finds more in the novels of Bobbie Ann Mason and Richard Ford than first meets the eye. He shows us that "minimalist" fiction may be read better by the "non-minimalist reader" (Professor Hobson's

memorable phrase from the first lecture) and that such novels may be concerned in their own way about several of the subjects that concern the characters of Faulkner, Warren, and Percy: history, the past, and the "ambiguous afflictions" consequent to internecine warfare.

Professor Hobson also demonstrates in the representative cases of Ernest Gaines and Fred Chappell a kind of writing which, while set in the contemporary South, is in some respects more clearly attuned to the "autochthonous ideal" of the Agrarians. He argues impressively that Gaines is the contemporary writer whose work best fits the standards that the Renaissance gave us.

Fred Hobson has become the leader of his generation of critics who study southern literature and culture. The Lamar Lectures committee is grateful to him both for the excellence of his lectures and for their subject and their timing: he has brought the Lectures full circle, helping to begin a new generation of Lamar Lectures, which are moving to the study of more recent phenomena as they continue Mrs. Lamar's desire "to provide lectures of the very highest type of scholarship that will aid in the permanent preservation of southern culture, history, and literature."

Michael M. Cass

for the Lamar Memorial Lectures Committee

Preface



These remarks on contemporary southern fiction are an expanded version of the Lamar Memorial Lectures delivered at Mercer University in October 1989. What they consist of is not rigorous scholarship so much as a trying out of ideas, a preliminary estimate of writing going on around us in the South. The value of the Lamar Lectures, it seems to me, is precisely this: they allow a scholar to undertake a subject about which he or she has *something* to say but not enough to fill a three-hundred-page book—a subject he would like to explore, would like to venture certain opinions on, but concerning which he has no intention of pronouncing the final word. Such is particularly the case when one is dealing with novelists who are in their thirties, forties, and fifties, and who will undergo any number of transitions and transformations before they complete their careers.

I would like to say that I have enjoyed writing this book perhaps more than any other I have undertaken, and the reason lies largely in the freedom given the Lamar lecturer by the Lamar Committee at Mercer University. I would like to go on record as well in saying that the reputation of the Lamar Committee for splendid hospitality is well deserved. I wish to thank, in particu-

lar, Professor Wayne Mixon, chair of the committee, whose wide and deep knowledge of the American South, its history and its literature, would probably qualify him to give these lectures himself each year. Wayne and Fran Mixon were the most gracious and most generous of hosts. I am also grateful to Michael and Lynn Cass and Henry and Pat Warnock for their gracious hospitality. Aside from these and other persons connected with Mercer University, I acknowledge the following debts: to Frances Coombs, who typed the cleanest manuscript—out of the untidiest final draft—I have ever seen; to Malcolm Call, Karen Orchard, Debra Winter, and Ellen Harris of the University of Georgia Press; and especially, in the writing of this book, to the members of my seminar in contemporary southern literature at Louisiana State University in the spring of 1989—particularly to Edward Dupuy, Michael Griffith, and John Zmirak—and to Ann Henley, whose knowledge of southern fiction is surpassed only by her knowledge of most other fiction written in English. These scholars—as well as accomplished South-watchers Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Lewis P. Simpson, Julius Rowan Raper, Jane Hobson, and Linda Whitney Hobson—contributed greatly to my understanding of the mind and expression of the contemporary South.

THE SOUTHERN WRITER
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Contents



Foreword ix

Preface xi

1

*The Contemporary Southern Writer
and the Tradition* 1

2

*A Question of Culture—and History:
Bobbie Ann Mason, Lee Smith, and Barry Hannah* 11

3

*Richard Ford and Josephine Humphreys:
Walker Percy in New Jersey and Charleston* 41

4

*Contemporary Southern Fiction
and the Autochthonous Ideal* 73

Notes 103

Index 111

1

The Contemporary Southern Writer and the Tradition

Some thirty years ago Donald Davidson of Vanderbilt University gave to the inaugural series of the Lamar Lectures the title *Southern Writers in the Modern World*. In those lectures the Southern Agrarian Davidson was interested in the role of the writer in a radically changing world: the South of the 1920s, and the response of the Fugitive-Agrarians to it, was his particular interest.¹ I do not share a great deal with Davidson as far as his view of the South is concerned, but I do share his interest in what happens to the southern writer as the South changes, as conditions that gave rise to earlier writers seem not to be with us any more. The world I wish to discuss here is the contemporary South, and the writers I have in mind are principally (although not exclusively) those who began to write during or after the 1960s—and in some cases not until the 1980s.

I am particularly interested in the continuity—or lack of continuity—between certain attitudes, assumptions, and even values that informed southern literature during its first great flowering, the Southern Renaissance of the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and, we might add, 1950s. During the years of the Renaissance it was assumed—and accepted by all, friend and foe—that the South

was the defeated, failed, poor, unprogressive part of the United States. But an irony of southern literary history, to go along with all the other southern ironies, is that this legacy of defeat and failure served well the writer in the South. Like Quentin Compson at Harvard, the southern writer wore his heritage of failure and defeat—and often guilt—as his badge of honor. It provided him or her something that no other American writer, or at least American novelist, of the twentieth century had in any abundance—that is, a tragic sense. The Southerner alone among Americans, as C. Vann Woodward has pointed out, had known defeat, had known what it was not to succeed, not to prosper. The Southerner, that is, shared with the rest of the world, but not with the non-southern parts of the United States, the realization that things do not always work out. The southern writer, thus, was born with a knowledge—or soon acquired it—that the nonsouthern American writer did not have, at least in his inherited historical consciousness. Just as failure is more interesting than success (particularly failure when so much was hoped and expected) and defeat more interesting than victory, the southern writer had a great advantage over his nonsouthern counterpart. As Quentin said to Shreve McCannon at Harvard, “You would have to be born there.”² Whether, in all cases, you *would* have to be born there is beside the point. The southern writer believed you did. Much that was southern helped to contribute to a tragic sense.

Not to mention high drama. As Richard Weaver wrote in his essay “Aspects of the Southern Philosophy”: “The fact is simply that for the North the South is too theatrical to be wholly real.” Or, to draw again on *Absalom, Absalom!*, this time Shreve to Quentin on the South, “It’s better than *Ben Hur*” (p. 217). The South *was* dramatic. If racial tension, conflict, violence—as well as unrealistic but lofty aspirations—made for tragedy, they also made for spectacle; the Gothic South in *general* made for spectacle. It is a wonder that the southern writer did not seize his advantage be-

fore the 1920s, the late 1920s at that. Exactly what happened in that decade, of course, has been documented and discussed by any number of writers and scholars, most prominently Allen Tate and Louis D. Rubin, Jr.: the southern writer, who in most cases had left home for a time, focused his eye on a changing South, an industrializing South, but looked as well at a South that was slipping away, and the result was a creative mixture of detachment and involvement—an escape from, then an attempt to return to the southern community—that contributed greatly to the work of Faulkner and Wolfe and the Southern Agrarians.⁵

One found numerous attempts in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s to define, to describe, the Southern Temper, the Southern Mind, and one still finds them. The attempts came largely, although not exclusively, from the Southern Agrarians and certain neo-Agrarians such as Richard Weaver,⁴ and one feels in part that these attempts were, among other things, efforts to capture the Southerner, to define him or her (and, one feels, in most cases, *him*) before he slipped away. Some of these “aspects of the southern philosophy” identified and celebrated by the Agrarians and neo-Agrarians are open to debate, although others are less so. One might say with some certainty that those qualities stemming at least in part from the Civil War and its aftermath—a greater attention to the past, an acceptance of man’s finiteness, his penchant for failure, a tragic sense—are more characteristic of the Southerner than of other Americans; but certain other qualities that are indeed representatively southern—a religious sense, a closeness to nature, a great attention to and affection for place, a close attention to family, a preference for the concrete and a rage against abstraction—might also be said to be rather characteristic of any rural people who have lived in a traditional society in a single area for a great number of years: upper New England, north of Boston, for example, or even parts of the eastern Middle West. In fact, as concerns the presumed southern preference

for concreteness, one might contend that the southern mind, despite its stated abhorrence of abstraction from the 1840s on, has been in certain respects the most abstract of minds. No American writer was more given to those abstractions honor and duty—to the whole code of chivalry and to other codes that ordered and prescribed behavior—than Thomas Nelson Page. One could also easily contend that the Civil War was fought, in part, over an abstraction, the extension of slavery into western territory that could not have supported slavery in any case. But to Southerners it was a matter of principle—and an insult to southern pride. And in later southern society, what else was racial segregation but a monstrous abstraction, what else but an abstraction the identifying and categorizing (and thus restricting) of any individuals—blacks and women in particular—by group?

But, these questions aside, I think it can be said that the most notable southern *writers*, white and black, of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s were far more conscious of place, family, community, religion and its social manifestations, and the power of the past in the present than were nonsouthern American writers, and that southern *writers* did rage against abstraction more than nonsouthern writers. (Certainly Hemingway was against abstraction in *A Farewell to Arms*, but not nearly so much as Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor in much of their fiction—not to mention southern polemicists such as Davidson who railed in numerous essays against abstraction, sociology, social planning, and various social and cultural indexes which put southern states at the bottom.) So did those southern writers of the 1950s and most of the 1960s concern themselves with place, family, community, and religion. In particular the southern writer of that latter period continued to be fascinated with history, with the southern past and the individual past as it was involved with the regional past. And the southern writer through the 1960s seemed very much aware, as well, of those *writers* who had gone before. Most notable south-

ern novelists through the 1960s, it seems to me, still wrote with an eye very much on past southern giants. William Styron, one of the two or three most significant southern novelists of the past forty years, could not seem to escape, did not seem to *want* to escape, the influence of Faulkner and Wolfe. In ways that have been pointed out by Louis Rubin and others, *Lie Down in Darkness* was *The Sound and the Fury* cast in Tidewater Virginia.⁵ One also had to be reminded of Faulkner, although less obviously, in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. And in *Sophie's Choice*, a novel written in the 1970s but belonging very much to the 1950s and 1960s, Styron seemed in many ways to be rewriting Thomas Wolfe. Stingo, the autobiographical protagonist of a long, wordy, self-indulgent novel—another young, impressionable, oversexed WASP up from college in the North Carolina Piedmont, finding a place in Brooklyn, fascinated by the man-swarm of New York, particularly fascinated by Jewishness and ethnicity, and out to write the Great American Novel—is in many ways the young Thomas Wolfe or Eugene Gant or George Webber. Styron could leave Wolfe behind no more easily than he could leave Faulkner, and, again, he did not really seem to want to.

Nor could any number of writers as late as the 1960s relinquish one of the southern writer's traditional roles in relation to his society, which was in many, although not all, cases an adversary relationship, or more accurately a love-hate relationship seen in numerous earlier writers but exemplified best by a tortured fictional character, Quentin, in *Absalom, Absalom!* Shame, guilt, anger, pride: these were still the feelings pronounced by many southern writers of the 1960s, seen both in novels dealing with race and the civil rights movement and perhaps even more dramatically in a number of nonfiction works of contrition and confession, Willie Morris's *North Toward Home* and Larry King's *Confessions of a White Racist*, among others. These two books, as I have discussed elsewhere, were very much in the tradition of

George Washington Cable, W. J. Cash, and Lillian Smith, among white writers—and, in a different way, Richard Wright, among black writers—a tradition which required that the writer probe deeply and painfully his relationship to his homeland. But something seemed to be missing in these latter-day confessionals. They are interesting and eloquent—*North Toward Home* has become, deservedly, something of a southern classic—but one wonders if their authors really *meant* it as deeply as Cable and Cash and Smith, and especially Wright, had, if they were risking all in their truth-telling as their predecessors had. Or were they merely writing in a particularly southern mode, writing the obligatory love-hate memoir more out of custom and habit, and the realization that they had a good story to tell, than out of true rage, fear, guilt, or shame? In the South of the late 1960s positive thinking, not contrition, was dominant. Could the writer in *that* South write with the same intensity and conviction that drove Cable and Smith and Cash—or, in a different way, Faulkner? Had what was once natural become stylized, what was deeply and painfully experienced become ritualized?

To some extent I believe it had, but one quality which much of the writing through the early 1970s did share with the writing that had gone before was an acute self-consciousness, an intense awareness of *being* southern, as well as a preoccupation with old themes, old settings and truisms. Many white southern writers, generally speaking, still thought they had a love-hate relationship with the South whether they did or not, and those writers had to write the traditional work coming to terms with their homeland.

I do not believe that is the case with most white southern writers who have begun to publish in the past fifteen or twenty years. Those writers—again, broadly speaking—seem hardly to have the need to join the battle, to wrestle with racial sin and guilt. What one finds in more recent novelists such as Bobbie Ann Mason and Anne Tyler is a relative *lack* of southern self-