3 : p.71-86

Exile and Home Again: Postwar Fiction of the American South

Jeffrey J. Folks

ABSTRACT

Robert Penn Warren's fiction reveals the tension, perhaps not fully apparent even to Warren himself, between an identification with and sense of exile from the South. It may seem that this tension between alienation and return has been dispelled in the writing of the most recent generation, that of Bobbie Ann Mason, Clyde Edgerton, Jill McCorkle, Andre Dubus, and Mary Hood, yet recent divisions between "red" and "blue" states would seem to attest to enduring regional affiliations. Focusing on three recent southern writers—William Styron, Richard Ford, and Bobbie Ann Mason—this paper argues that the postwar generation of southern writers assert their identity by way of their rejection of traditional regional identity, yet this rejection may not reflect the historical regional divisions that continue to exist in American society. Like Robert Penn Warren, postwar southern writers, whether they wish to do so or not, continue to write from the posture of the "loneliness" artist trapped between the extremes of exile and home.

KEY WORDS

southern fiction, American regionalism, postwar southern fiction, postmodern southern fiction, Vietnam fiction, contemporary American regional politics

In his book, *The Fable of the Southern Writer*, Lewis P. Simpson recognizes Robert Penn Warren's enduring stature as an American poet and novelist yet stresses at the same time the tension, perhaps not fully apparent even to Warren himself, between Warren's identification with and his sense of exile from the South. "Exile" and "home" are the polarities in Warren's writing about the South, but as the "loneliness artist" seeking a mythic home beyond the alienating force of modern history, Warren has adopted a persona that by the early twentieth century was, for Southern writers, already a convention, although still a vital and useful one. Simpson traces the same energy for artistic creation in much of the next generation of southerners: Styron, Welty, Percy, Spencer, and McCarthy. That this tension between alienation and return continues in the writing of the postwar generation, Simpson believes, is questionable: it has "become no more than a scarcely discernible impression in the southern writers of the last two decades, as for instance, Bobbie Ann Mason, Clyde Edgerton, Jill McCorkle, Lee Smith, Mary Hood, and Padgett Powell" (154).

In the wake of the southern renascence—the generation of Faulkner, Warren, Welty, and Wright—and that second renascence of Gaines, O'Connor, Percy, and Styron—the question facing the third generation of writers from the South is what to make of a cultural legacy that is grounded in a dialectic of exile and home. The southern renascence, that "quite temporary" period of accomplishment that Allen Tate attributed to the "crossing of the ways" (the moment in the South historically analogous to the situation of Elizabethan England during which a provincial, traditional culture first encountered modernity and historical consciousness), and the post-renascence are

still relevant but largely as the subject of irony and parody. But is it possible to sidestep the renascence altogether? In the wake of such a formidable tradition, even a tradition that has now devolved into ironic gestures, is it possible to stand outside of a literary tradition that circumscribes the major period of accomplishment of southern letters?

In point of fact, postwar writers of the American South can be seen to be working both within and outside of a literary tradition that extends from early modernists such as Kate Chopin and Ellen Glasgow to postmodernists such as John Barth and Bobbie Ann Mason. As such, southern writers are engaged in documenting the gradual mainstreaming of southern experience within national and international culture. For example, Mary Hood, a writer who has spent much of her life in North Georgia, nonetheless is influenced by a cosmopolitan narrative tradition based on her broad reading of European and American literature. Indeed, her novel *Familiar Heat* explores a geographical and cultural world—that of South Florida and the Caribbean—contiguous to but culturally different from the American South as one conventionally defines it. Like Elizabeth Spencer and, in a quite different aesthetic manner, Cormac McCarthy, Hood transgresses the boundaries of "southern" and explores the relationship of the American South to the Caribbean and Latin world at its perimeter. The cultural idea that southerners, more than others from other regions, ought to conform to parochial limits of what "southern" connotes or connoted in the past, would seem to be fading. Indeed, southern writers have always known more of the world than they have been permitted to speak according to aesthetic convention. Among contemporaries, Tim McLaurin, whose stories are set in the small city of Fayetteville, North Carolina, has, like most younger southerners, gained experience outside his native region: he served with the Marines, traveled across America as a sideshow "carney," and spent years overseas in Tunisia as a Peace Corps volunteer. The difficulty for McLaurin, as for Hood, McCarthy, and others in the postwar generation (or generations, now including a second and third generation since the Second World War) is that their writing diverges so widely from the established cultural conventions associated with

southern regional identity.

Regional stereotypes, while they are the product of historical forces, bear an inexact relationship to social reality. In the case of the American South, as Jefferson Humphries has written, "Both the northern and southern versions of the South respond arbitrarily and in an extremely contingent manner to actual fact" (129). For example, the familiar conception of the South as a culturally isolated and monolithic region has, of course, never been accurate, though in the complex relationship of the South to the national culture, it has been useful as an element of the southern persona. The southern writer has necessarily functioned as best he or she could in a dialogue with the national culture in which the southerner was often viewed as a cultural colonial and had little choice but to employ the regional images created by the national culture. Thus, until the 1950s, Faulkner's Snopes stories (several of them originally appearing in the mass circulation *Saturday Evening Post*) and his "potboiler" novel *Sanctuary* (recast for the national mass market as the seamy film, *The Story of Temple Drake*) were better known than the classic initiation story "The Bear" or his experimental novel, *The Sound and the Fury*. For reasons that critics and cultural historians still resist articulating, regional conceptions are more persistent than practically any other form of cultural figuration, for they mirror underlying relationships of cultural power that are extraordinarily resistant to change.

In reality, most conventional images of southern decadence can be traced as far back as the post-Civil War period of economic decline, and in nearly every respect these colonial images are now outdated. One fundamental cause of social change—an aspect of recent southern cosmopolitanism investigated at some length by George B. Tindall among others—has been the increasingly diverse composition of the southern population since the Second World War. The rate of foreign immigration into the South in the period since the war has been four times that of the national average. Along with this foreign immigration, the rate of internal migration, not only to retirement centers such as Florida but to many other parts of the South, even to the inland and small-town areas, has greatly increased. An interesting component of

this internal immigration is the movement of African-Americans from the North and West to the South, reversing to some degree the Great Migration that took place in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

However, the existence of a new, second New South does not imply that southern literary conventions have not continued to be employed, nor that a genuine regional culture does not continue to flourish as a historical reality. What it does suggest is the difficulty of writing within or about a regional culture in which social changes of enormous complexity have taken place over a brief period of years. As one might expect, a wide range of approaches to such a shifting regional subject has arisen, everything from the traditionalism of a neo-agrarian writer such as Madison Jones to the disengaged satire of a Donald Barthelme. Whether traditionalist or ironist, however, all of these approaches depart from a certain consensus concerning core southern characteristics and values. The tendency to avoid abstractions in favor of the particular, the tendency toward employing features of the oral culture in written tales, the emphasis on ancestral and local tradition, a skepticism toward utopian schemes of social reform, a degree of contentment with physical existence and with the natural world: these are all identifiable characteristics of the southern regional culture in America, even following more than a century of effort to reassimilate what was once viewed as a pariah, separatist society within the national culture. A distinctively southern culture continues in evidence in the continuing emphasis on talk as the basis for narrative, in the social rituals and manners of neighbors who retain a sense of relatedness, in strained and diminished but still crucial ties of kinship, in a greater degree of participation in religious communities, in a skepticism toward too rapid social change, in a slower pace of life and of speech, and in a peculiarly ironic humor related to the habit of southern self-deprecation.

As a traditional society that has seen rapid social change since the end of World War II, the American South has experienced a greater awareness of change, and of the problems and tensions accompanying change, than have other regions of America. Because until recent decades most southerners lived within memory of an agrarian past, the

southern transformation to modernity has resulted in a dramatic and often disturbing sense of change. Southern culture, quite simply, has been forced to "catch up" with the national culture, and so has moved further in a shorter period of time than other American regions. At the same time, the process of change itself becomes the focus of southern discourse, often accompanied by the sense that change has upset the balance of society. As Flannery O'Connor wrote in "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," "in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological" (817). Thus, the southern "penchant for writing about freaks" (817), the pervasive element of the grotesque in much southern writing, is a predictable reaction to the disturbance of the "theological" order that dominated the South for centuries.

The fiction of William Styron is representative of this shifting conception of regional identity and of the attempt to assimilate southern culture within the national culture in the post-World War II period. By inserting regional culture into the national debate over race, Styron makes the southern historical experience a national rather than a regional matter. Yet underlying the racial debate is another, perhaps more urgent matter of consideration for a writer such as Styron, who was, after all, self-exiled from the South, living as he did in New York City and its environs for most of his adult life. This underlying issue has less to do with race than with the acceptance of the *southerner,* not the racial other, within the national culture.

It is perhaps for this reason that Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), which creates a protagonist based on the historical figure of Nat Turner, seems to depart so decidedly from the historical record of the nineteenth-century slave revolt in favor of an oblique commentary on postwar regional politics. Turner, the most significant leader of a black slave revolt in American history, nonetheless appears in Styron's depiction to entertain a less than urgent sense of racial mission. Styron's protagonist begins to plan his rebellion after having a vision of freeing his people and, as his plan gradually takes shape, sees the necessity of killing all the white people in Southhampton County, Virginia, and if necessary of leading his following into the Dismal Swamp of eastern Virginia, from whence they will carry out a

prolonged guerilla war. By the end of the novel, however, with the revelation of his education at the hands of liberal whites and with his obsessive meditation on his relationship to Margaret Whitehead, the young white woman whom he has killed, racial boundaries in the novel have been greatly blurred. Nothing is as it seems, which seems to be the point of Styron's lengthy revelation of Nat's psychological ambivalences and of his ambiguous and surprising relationships with various whites and blacks.

Styron's novel is thus evidence of a significant shift in race relations in the United States away from predictable stereotypes. Though it may not seem so today, the *Confessions* was intended as the plea of a liberal southerner on the behalf of civil rights: that, at least, is the way in which the novel was read by many if not all of Styron's contemporaries. The fact that it could have won the Pulitzer Prize attests to the enthusiastic critical reception that the novel received, even if that initial reception was undermined by the attacks in *10 Black Critics Respond* and by a stream of less topical critical articles that have progressively marginalized the novel.

The racial message of Styron's novel turns out to be a conception that can be dated to the 1960s and that has not had lasting relevance, nor could it ever have, because it is a message built on a very unstable idea of race relations. The subtext of the novel is simply that, translated into the milieu of the late civil rights period, Nat Turner's rebellion can be reinscribed in the anarchic race riots that shook America's cities in the 1960s from Boston to Los Angeles. The implicit message is that unless the promise of equal rights is fulfilled, the "rebellion"—the burning, looting, and killing that everyone witnessed on their TV screens—would continue and would even intensify to the point where the security of American society as a whole would be jeopardized. Given the choice between violence on a national scale and racial reform, the choice was obvious. By presenting this choice in the starkest of terms, Styron was serving the cause of civil rights and hastening the racial equality that he supported. Never mind that the depiction that he offered of Nat and his troop of disciples, from the genial, slow-moving Hark to the vindictive, hate-driven Nelson, cast

African Americans in the role of murderous thugs. The intended *end result* of Styron's message was an improvement in race relations.

From the perspective of a southern regional writer, however, there was another message implicit in the novel. The race riots of the 1960s were a repetition of violence of a sort with which the South was all too familiar. The nation as a whole was now replicating the experience of the region, and in some odd and paradoxical way, the North seemed to exist in a culturally ancillary position to the South since the North now faced a historical situation of a sort of which the South possessed ample knowledge. Implied in Styron's construction of the novel is not only the ameliorating of racial division as Nat's protest asserts the need for solutions to race issues but also, and more importantly for the author, a solution to the long-standing regional division in America. The social and historical conditions of North and South, at least in Styron's depiction, are hardly distinguishable.

An even greater shift toward assimilation of regional culture is evident in the writing of Richard Ford. In this de-regionalizing project, the mediating role of Ford's narrator-protagonist in *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*, Frank Bascombe, plays a crucial part. Paradoxically, however, even as regional boundaries all but disappear, other social and historical factors of a divisive nature rise to the surface. Ford's novels and stories suggest a demythologized landscape indistinguishable in many respects from those of other postmodernists: minimalist in language, containing flat description in which even irony is too pointed a narrative mode with which to convey the insubstantiality of meaning, involving narrative sequences which are less "plotted" or structured than seemingly random, replicating the perceived insignificance of characters who avoid defining moments and avoid probing their conditions. If, however, he often writes of southerners such as Frank Bascombe living outside the South and apparently uninfluenced by its culture, it may be that Ford, in so strenuously resisting southern literary convention, protests too much. His apparent repudiation of nearly all elements of regional aesthetic simply underlines the continuing anxiety of a southern writer working in relation to what he perceives as a still vital tradition.

In his profession as a realtor in *Independence Day* (rather than as a writer in the earlier book, *The Sportswriter*), Frank Bascombe moves toward a more mundane and affiliated social role of the kind that involves constant mediation and negotiation. The narrator's role as mediator also extends to positioning the narrative in relation to Ford's reader, who, it is assumed, stands in particular social and historical relationships to the diverse communities and social groups that comprise much of the novel's subject matter. Much of the narrator's role involves positioning the fantasies of his clients (buyers and sellers of homes) in relation to seemingly immutable economic realities (the price of homes, credit histories, etc.). Frank's commentary suggests his consciousness of his ability to calculate precisely the degree of marginality of his clients, a position based largely but not exclusively on economic capacity. Economic levels are related to and in part determined by cultural boundaries, evidenced by Frank's investments in rental homes designed to appeal to "working-class" residents (in this instance class boundaries overlap heavily with racial boundaries).

Frank's work, both as realtor-figure within the narrative and as narrator of the text, involves manipulations of various sorts of anxiety concerning social location and inclusion. His narration also suggests the ways in which hegemonic forces impinge on private or domestic life as it becomes increasingly difficult for him as a character and for his clients (and for the reader) to compartmentalize public and private spheres or to construct a private or transcendent existence. While Frank attempts to position himself and his family outside the economic and cultural forces that he observes so acutely, arguing, for example, that "we should all just get on with *being* independent, given that it is after all the normal, commonsensical human condition" (*Independence Day* 425), in reality the text of the novel locates much of his narration within the same social boundaries that he observes in others. In the end Frank is forced to acknowledge his own historical position within the community where he lives and works. The illusion of personal freedom and communal affability that Frank holds at the beginning is worn down through the process of his involvement with his son, his girlfriend, and his colleagues and clients. The peculiar seduction of

American consumer and suburban culture—the illusion of existing outside historical and economic limitations—is replaced by the end of the novel by the pathos of Frank's identification with socially marginalized and traumatized elements in his society. As he declares in the novel's final sentence: "I feel the push, pull, the weave and sway of others" (*Independence Day* 451).

Bobbie Ann Mason is another major example of a contemporary southern writer who appears to be dismissive of regional identity even as she continues to cite, engage, and critically interrogate regional stereotypes for satiric effect. In the title story "Shiloh" from her important first collection, *Shiloh and Other Stories*, Mason narrates Norma Jean Moffitt's decision to separate from her husband Leroy, a disabled truck driver who has "mellowed out" to the point of not caring about anything beyond smoking marijuana and constructing a model log cabin out of Popsicle sticks. A deconstruction of regional myth and tradition is found in every aspect of Mason's account of the Moffitts' lives, from the Popsicle cabin sitting atop the television set like "a rustic Nativity scene," to Norma Jean's name (after Marilyn Monroe's "real" name), to the crucial visit to Shiloh battlefield where tens of thousands of men sacrificed their lives for their belief in southern regional uniqueness. For Mason's characters, however, for whom a meaningless afternoon is spent driving "aimlessly through the park" with the Moffitts impressed only by its immensity and unable to "see it as a battlefield" or to connect it in any way with an historical past, the South's traditional identity is totally unimportant if not imperceptible.

Mason shows little intention of reverting to the traditions of the past, yet she is aware of the difficulties of finding meaning in a postmodern civilization in which all values are interchangeable and the past trivialized. The confusion and emptiness of contemporary life is suggested by the silences, non sequiturs, and moments of indecision in the Moffitts' speech. Norma Jean may be struggling to construct a provisional existence in the same way that at the story's opening she is working on her physique, developing her pectorals with three-pound dumbbells. Attempting to find an aesthetic existence in her organ repertoire from *The Sixties Songbook* (as far back as the "classics" go

for her generation) and grasping for an education from courses taken at the local community college, Norma Jean, however seriously she has been presented by the author, appears to be another figure in the *Tobacco Road* genre of southern writing.

As Mason's "ode" (with a distinctly small "o") to the Confederate dead, "Shiloh" transports a postmodern couple into one of the most sacred of southern places, but their response is almost perversely oblivious to the historical significance of the place. They find it "pretty" and wisecrack about "the boys in gray" as they spread out their lunch among campers and picnicking families. In this setting, the real business of the postmodern world's central myth is confronted when Norma Jean announces her intention of leaving Leroy because he "won't leave her alone." The demands of her existence, terrifying and implacable in the imperative to construct an "authentic" personal identity, are unlikely to be well met by any of Mason's or Hood's protagonists. What most settle for, as a result, is not happiness but merely survival, a furtive balance in which the demands of authentic personal identity are never confronted.

Mason's apparent skepticism concerning the more conventional paths toward happiness is a product of the historical experience of her time. For many of Mason's generation, adulthood has brought mostly unfulfilled promises: the hopes for technology that culminated in the space race, the military rivalry of a seemingly endless Cold War that has now ended only to initiate a perhaps more menacing era of nationalistic and religious conflicts, a Civil Rights movement that has led to progress for many but has not resolved racial divisions, an age of personal freedom that has resulted in vulnerability and loneliness as much as happiness. For this Boomer generation, many of the central images emerged on the television screen: images of the first televised war in history, of public protest and official hypocrisy, of instability in society.

Perhaps because of the higher per capita military enlistment in the South, the Vietnam War remains a particularly sensitive and discordant topic among southerners. Mason's novel *In Country* reveals the inner lives of those who returned from the fighting and those, like Samantha

Hughes, who were traumatized when their fathers failed to return. Even more traumatic for Sam Hughes is the troubling reality of her father's service as documented by his wartime notebook, a reality that conflicts with her idealized vision of her father as a uniquely humane and decent soldier—a mythologized figure who resembles Hawkeye of the television series *M. A. S. H.* more than any actual human being in combat. In its language and observation, the novel embodies the legacy of the war with its accumulated details of popular culture and its replication of seventies' idiom transformed by a demoralizing conflict. Throughout most of the novel Sam Hughes believes that she and her contemporaries have been "born too late," for she looks back to "the energy of the sixties [. . .] as if back then were a much better time to be young than now" (*In Country* 52).

What is obvious in each of these works by Mason is the extent to which traditional regional identity has been discounted even as it is played for satiric effect. The conventions continue to be cited and referenced, but they exist like disembodied shadows that no contemporary can take seriously. What *is* taken seriously in Mason's fictional world is the influence of contemporary history and popular culture. In her imaginative construction, we move from a nation divided by regional loyalties to a nation in which there exist no strong or enduring loyalties of any kind. We step in one moment from the "dark and bloody ground" of Kentucky's past to an empty culture, perhaps more dark and bloody in its own minimalist fashion, of mass media, universal consumerism, and endless attempts at self-gratification. It is, as Walker Percy (another major postwar southern writer) has theorized, the narration of a "post-Christian" exile in which "modern man is estranged from being, from his own being, from the being of other creatures in the world, from transcendent being. He has lost something—what, he does not know; he knows only that he is sick unto death with the loss of it" (262).

From this review and analysis of postwar fiction of the American South, several conclusions can be suggested concerning the persistence of regional identity and the uneasy relationship of postwar southern writers to this identity. Over time, the sense of regional division

between North and South has withered as the terms in which the division was once understood, those of race and economic rivalry, have gradually been drained of meaning. Certainly, differences of accent, attitude, and manners remain, but new ties of media and corporate culture have drawn all regional cultures in America closer together. Yet even as the ancient regional identifications are dispelled, new and more complex divisions have emerged. However much American regional writing has changed in the decades following the Second World War, one should not lose sight of a deeply embedded cultural continuity, one that has shaped southern cultural history and that now to a considerable extent impinges on the national culture. In a discussion of this persistent regional identity, Lewis P. Simpson wrote: "The Southern writer has tended to be a kind of priest and prophet of a metaphysical nation, compelled in his literary construction of human existence in the South [. . .] toward representing it as a quest for a revelation of man's moral community in history. The revelation may be ironic, tragic, humorous; it may be all three at once, but it is salvational" (*Man of Letters* 202).

Robert Penn Warren, so acutely aware of his exile from a spiritual homeland, certainly wrote within what Simpson terms the "salvational" mode. For the generation that followed Warren, however, the sense of exile and the place of the salvational in their writing is considerably less decisive, yet I would argue that, even in resistance or opposition to the prophetic mode, the regional writer of the American South manifests an awareness of a continuing literary tradition of the sort that Simpson defines. This uneasy relationship of younger southern writers to the conventions of their literary tradition has been productive of major cultural work, as a close reading of Styron, Mason, Ford, or any number of others would demonstrate. Writers from the American South continue to chronicle their sense of cultural disturbance, an unease that includes not just their documentation of the pace of social change in the South but their discomfort as well with the artistic limitations of the very condition of unease itself. Thus, doubly exiled in a sense—exiled from the traditional agrarian South that was once the southern birthright and exiled from the now familiar mode of "southern hunger

artist"—postwar writers of the American South can be seen responding to extraordinary artistic challenges with the invention of ever more complex narrative strategies. What may be less certain, given the ever greater assimilation of the regional into the national culture, is the extent to which their art will continue in the twenty-first century to manifest either an identity with or a sense of exile from conventional regional characteristics and assumptions.

WORKS CITED

Ford, Richard. *Independence Day*. New York: Vintage, 1995.

Humphries, Jefferson. "The Discourse of Southernness: Or How We Can Know There Will Be Such a Thing as the South and Southern Literary Culture in the Twenty-First Century." *The Future of Southern Letters*. Ed. Jefferson Humphries and John Lowe. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. 119–33.

Mason, Bobbie Ann. *In Country*. New York: Harper, 1985.

---. *Shiloh and Other Stories*. New York: Harper, 1982.

Percy, Walker. "The Coming Crisis in Psychiatry." *Sign-posts in a Strange Land*. Ed. Patrick Samway. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991. 251–62.

O'Connor, Flannery. Collected Works. New York: Library of America, 1988.

Simpson, Lewis P. *The Fable of the Southern Writer*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1994.

---. *The Man of Letters in New England and the South: Essays on the History of the Literary Vocation in America*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1973.

Styron, William. *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. New York: Random House, 1966.

Tate, Allen. "The New Provincialism." In *Essays of Four Decades*. Chicago: Swallow, 1968.

Dr. Jeffrey J. Folks has taught in Europe, America, and Japan, most recently as Professor of Letters in the Graduate School of Doshisha University in Japan. He has published nine books and sixty articles including *In a Time of Disorder: Form and Meaning in Southern Fiction from Poe to O'Connor* (2003), and *Damaged Lives: Southern and Caribbean Narrative from Faulkner to Naipaul* (2005).

Received: 2 January 2007 Accepted: 11 May 2007

放逐與返家：美國南方的戰後小說

摘 要

華倫 (Robert Penn Warren) 的小說顯露出認同南方與從南方放逐之間的張力狀態，這一點或許華倫本人也未必充分察覺。這種疏遠與回歸之間的張力狀態在最近一代—梅森 (Bobbie Ann Mason)，艾玖頓 (Clyde Edgerton)，麥考克 (Jill McCorkle)，杜柏斯 (Andre Dubus)，胡德 (Mary Hood)—的作品中似乎已消失殆盡，但是最近有關「藍」州與「紅」州之區分的問題證實了地域間的相互依屬。本文將焦點放在晚近三位南方作家—史岱倫 (William Styron)，福特 (Richard Ford)，及梅森—身上，並主張戰後一代的南方作家以摒棄傳統地域認同的方式來堅持他們的認同，然而這種摒棄未必能反映持續存在於美國社會的傳統地域區分。向華倫一樣，戰後南方作家，不管願意與否，仍繼續以陷於放逐與家園的極端中的孤寂藝術家的姿態寫作。

關鍵字：南方小說，美國地域主義，戰後南方小說，後現代南方小說，越南小說，當代美國地域政治