

## THE SOUND AND THE FURY OF SOUTHERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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The South of the United States presents, in the twentieth century, a remarkable flowering in the area of Literature. It has produced, especially in the first half of the century, more good writers than any other region in the country. Writers of the stature of Thomas Wolfe, Eudora Welty, Richard Wright, Tennessee Williams, Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Carson McCullers, to name just a few, together with William Faulkner, the greatest of all, have been responsible for a period of such creativity that it has come to be known as "the Southern Renaissance."

Yet the Renaissance, with its characteristics of following the classical principles of order, stability, clarity, equilibrium, harmony, is not what comes to one's mind as one dives into the production of the Southern writers who have created the so-called "Southern mode." On the contrary, Mannerism and Baroque are the artistic and literary trends that seem to have more in common with the particular world-view expressed in these texts.

Nothing too unexpected about this statement. As several critics have pointed out, our century presents, to a large extent, a reexamination and reevaluation of both trends. Afonso Ávila, in *O lúdico e as projeções do mundo barroco*, has stated that

*a atração exercida pelo barroco sobre a inteligência e a sensibilidade modernas decorre, sem dúvida, das similitudes e afinidades que aproximam duas épocas cronologicamente distanciadas entre si, dois instantes porêm de civilização ocidental que colocam em crise os mesmos valores, dois homens que*

*experimentam com isso uma análoga perplexidade existencial, duas artes que repercutem em sua linguagem uma bem parecida pressão de historicidade e uma idêntica instabilidade de formas.*<sup>1</sup>

Rather than being faced with harmony and stability, the Southern man views the world as a tense, unstable, violent place. Rather than dealing on the rational level of concepts and theories, he delves into Reality, into the concreteness of Reality, which he perceives in a very sensorial way. Senses, sensorial perceptions. Sound. Conflict, tension, violence. Fury. Life "is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."<sup>2</sup> No wonder Faulkner took, from this quotation from Shakespeare, the title of one of his novels. Shakespeare was also able to perceive that the apparent stability of the Renaissance was hiding a major crisis of values soon to follow and to find expression in Mannerism and in the age of Baroque.

A discussion of Shakespeare's work does not fall into the scope of this paper. However, one can at least mention Arnold Hauser's comments, in his *Historia Social de la Literatura y el Arte*,<sup>3</sup> on several aspects of Shakespeare's texts that reveal the dissolution of the classical notion of Art without tension. Hauser mentions, among others, his contradictory characters, the abandonment of the principles of unity, order, and economy, the mixture of the tragic, the comic, and the grotesque, of the sensual and the intellectual, of the abstract and the concrete, the violent scenic effects, the abrupt shift in scenes, the use of antitheses, puns, and metaphors, the emphasis on the irrationality and the absurdity of life, etc.

For Shakespeare, as for the Southern writers, the sound and the fury are seen as constant components of life and recurring elements of human experience. In this way these artists, separated

by time, give expression to the same anguish. Their works convey at once the peculiarity of their experience and the universality of man's predicament as he finds himself trapped by time.

Faulkner was not the only writer to perceive this affinity with the Elizabethan playwright. Allen Tate, in his essay "The Profession of Letters in the South," discusses the peculiar historical consciousness of the twentieth century Southern novelist. He compares it to that of Shakespeare, in that they dramatize "the psychic consequence of the shift in the Western apprehension of existence from the traditionalist to the historical mode."<sup>4</sup> Such consciousness of time and history, and of their relation to the self, is fundamental in Southern literature and is related to the peculiarity of the Southern experience in the context of the history of the United States.

The American legend of success, wealth, and victory established in the earlier years of the twentieth century is familiar to whoever studies any aspect of the American life. On the individual level, it has come to be known as "the American Dream," making of Lincoln a major symbol of the possibility of social ascension due to personal characteristics; on a national level, it has been supported by a succession of victories that lifted the country to a position of prominence in the world. Before Vietnam the United States had not experienced defeat. Nationalism, faith on their institutions, acceptance of Capitalism, and the ideology of Americans as models for other people were accepted by most Americans. Different types of "missionaries" of the United States still travel throughout the world spreading this Messianic view of their role and the gospel of success.

Only one region in the United States was unable to share all of the illusions of unchallenged power. Unlike most Americans, for whom their country was immune to the historical process that

inevitably leads all civilizations, strong as they are, to decadence and destruction. Southern men knew the taste of failure. They were the only ones in the United States who had been forced to go through the experience of military defeat and occupation. Their submission to the North therefore conflicted with the prevailing view of life in the country. They could not consider man as the master of his destiny, for they had to acknowledge the existence of uncontrollable forces which surpass the power of one's will. Such perception of man as trapped by History, by Time, must also be related to the Calvinistic ideas that pervade Southern culture. Calvinists see man as a limited creature, and evil as an active force operating in life, and creating anguish and anxiety. Edgar Allan Poe, another Southerner, has expressed these views in a recurrent way.

The perception of evil, the notion of human limitation, and the feeling of failure accompany the struggle of the Southern writer to cope with his sense of dissolution and loss due to the fragmentation of the community and the collapse of the social order of the Old South. Recurring themes of Southern literature are exactly the loss of unity of being in modern man, the divorce between means and end, the gap between religion and moral agency, the contrast between the old order based on a code of honor and the guilt of slavery, the moral duplicity of the new world, the treacherous role of the past as it has a controlling function in human life, history and memory as essential elements in life. A sense of fate and doom, of guilt and the demand for expiation are peculiar elements of the Southern experience to find expression in literary works. And so are the fury hidden behind the mask of gentility, the crisis of values, the contradictions inherent in their view of life. And so is the attempt to perceive life on basis of the concrete, the particular, the actual, revealing what Warren has

called "the fear of abstraction, (...) the fear that the concreteness of life will be violated."<sup>5</sup> From this evolves the concern with reality as it can be perceived through the senses. The sensorial method and the dark view of life - "the sound and the fury" - are then special traits which made of the "Southern mode" a unique contribution to twentieth century American Literature.

The same type of contribution comes from other areas of culture. The concern with the actual, the concrete, and the view of tension and paradox as primary elements in art are the main characteristics of a movement in literary criticism originated in the South - the New Criticism. The main figures of this group are some of the same authors we have mentioned before, such as Ransom, Tate, Brooks, Warren, who worked together since the publication of the famous magazine *The Fugitive* in Nashville, Tennessee. They all had one feature in common: they turned to a study of poetry concentrating on the actual text of the works, trying to solve the problem of unity on basis of the verbal structure of the poem. Tate, for example, states that the meaning of a poem lies in the tension of intension (connotation) and extension (denotation). Brooks, another important Southern critic, analyses poems as structures of paradoxes and ironies. A good or complex poem would have to be ironic, that is, to present the recognition of incongruities and ambiguities, and a reconciliation of opposites.

I mention these critical positions only to reinforce the notion that the elements we are discussing stand out whenever a literary work by these Southern writers is subject to inquiry.

Professor C. Hugh Holman is then justified in his statement that

*approach it however you will, you will find*

*at the heart of the southern riddle a union of opposites, a condition of instability, a paradox. Calm grace and raw hatred. Polished manners and violence. An intense individualism and intense group pressures toward conformity. A reverence to the point of idolatry of self-determining action and a caste and class structure presupposing an aristocratic hierarchy.*<sup>6</sup>

This is the subject matter Southern writers have at hand. To give artistic expression to it is the natural step for artists who perceive the tragic dilemma of man torn between past and present, between his thirst for eternity and his acute and anguished awareness of transitoriness. The same ambiguities that led the South to disaster provide the material for an extraordinary artistic presentation of life.

This does not mean, however, that the acute regional consciousness of the Southerner is a limiting trait which would lead to the narrowing of his perception. The writer creates out of his personal experience, but the fictional world has a life of its own. Yoknapatawpha County is not Lafayette County, and Jefferson is not Oxford, Mississippi, but they are universalized recreations, since Faulkner is searching for a pattern, a meaning behind "real life" and his accumulated personal experiences.

For this reason, several critics have stated that the Southern writers reshape History into myth: they use the particular, the regional, as a means to attain deeper knowledge of human life. Their characters then become "archetypal," in that they dramatize the tragic condition of the human lot.

Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* exemplifies, in a perfect way, these main traits of Southern literature. The quotation from which the title derives provides the best comment one could

make on the meaning of this work and on Southern literature as a whole:

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.<sup>7</sup>*

Although it would be impossible to present here an extensive analysis of the novel, there are some important aspects one could deal with in order to clarify the relationship between the quotation from *Macbeth* and Faulkner's text.

The novel presents, through the recollections of different narrators, a period of some years in the life of the Compson family. However, one can see that, rather than being the saga of a family, it has, as its subject matter, Time itself.

The fragmentation of the point of view, the apparent disorder of the narrative, the intermingling of past and present in the memories of the characters reveal that Faulkner is not concerned with chronological time, but with Time as an overwhelming and inscrutable reality. The four sections of the novel deal with different forms of perceiving (or not perceiving) time, but they all lead to the same conclusion: man is entrapped by time. He is tied to his past and is forced to face the fact that he is timebound and transitory, a walking shadow, a brief candle, a poor player, who aimlessly tries to stop the flux of time. If Caddy tries to live the present and Benjy has no sense of time, Quentin and Jason are obsessed with time. Jason is constantly

trying to catch up with time, and he never does. Quentin tries to transcend chronological time, and he only does it through death. All of them are tied to their past, to the emotional bonds of love or hatred from which they never free themselves. Caddy comes back to see her child, and is finally frozen in a picture where she looks "ageless and beautiful, cold, serene and damned;"<sup>8</sup> Benjy cannot forget his sister; Quentin considers himself the guardian of a sense of honor which comes from tradition and kills himself by drowning; Jason cannot forgive Caddy for not having got his job and feeds on his hatred for almost twenty years.

Symbols of time associated with death recur in the novel: Quentin's watch (which he breaks in the attempt to escape time), the river where he drowns himself, the kitchen clock, water, fire, shadows, all carrying the themes of finitude and flux. Man's anguish as he realizes that everything passes forces him to look backwards, not into the future, for nothing is or will but was.<sup>9</sup> Life is therefore devoid of meaning and the sense of absurdity pervades our perception of it. Man, alone with himself, faces his loss of innocence and his deterioration, and is led into various forms of evading awareness: alcohol (Mr. Compson), money (Jason), sex (Caddy), suicide (Quentin), disease (Mrs. Compson). And thus he unwillingly performs his role in the tragicomedy of life. Benjy's castration becomes a major symbol of the process of deterioration to which time submits the human being. Then comes the fury:

*it will be a gamble and the strange thing is that man who is conceived by accident and whose every breath is a fresh cast with dice already loaded against him will not face that final main which he knows before hand he has assuredly to face without essaying expedients ranging all the way from violence to petty chicanery that would not*



*deceive a child until someday in very disgust he risks everything on a single blind turn of a card no man ever does that under the first fury of despair or remorse or bereavement he does it only when he has realised that even the despair or remorse or bereavement is not particularly important to the dark diceman and i temporary and he it is hard believing to think that a love or a sorrow is a bond purchased without design and which matures willingly and is recalled without warning to be replaced by whatever issue the gods happen to be floating at the time. (pp. 220-21)*

This pessimistic view of life is echoed in most works written by the Southerners: Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*, Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again*, *Look Homeward, Angel*, *Of Time and the River*, Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Glass Menagerie*, Warren's *All the King's Men*. The list is endless, and the titles themselves suggest the preoccupation with the past, the South, time passing, man's transience and fragility.

The sensorial method, which is the other side of "the sound and the fury," also finds perfect expression in Faulkner's novel. While "the fury" is associated with revolt, as man is faced with the absurdity of his condition, "the sound" becomes an indicative of the concreteness in the artists' rendering of material.

The world of all the characters is full of sounds, smells, colors, shadows, fire. The description of people is conveyed in terms of startling visual images, such as:

*her face was like a cup of milk dashed with coffee in the sweet warm emptiness. (p. 155)*

*a big man who appeared to have been shaped of some substance whose particles would not or did not cohere to one another or to the frame which supported it. (p. 342)*

Also, Benjy sees the objects of the world as "bright shapes" and is almost hypnotized by fire, while Quentin perceives them as shadows.

Their world is also receding with smell. Caddy smells like trees, the smell of the honeysuckle is associated with sex, Quentin feels the smell of the curves of the river where he will drown himself, people smell of rain, Benjy's sense of smell is repeatedly referred to, Mrs. Compson always has a camphor-scented handkerchief to her nose, Jason has several headaches due to the smell of gasoline, Benjy perceives that Caddy has lost her virginity because he feels a different smell.

And their world is full of sound. Jason and Quentin constantly hear the sound of chimes and bells, Benjy roars inside and outside the house, Mrs. Compson calls for help, the negroes sing or laugh aloud, Jason screams.

"The sound," which we took as a symbol for sensorial perception itself, is also the expression of the hopelessness of fury, of revolt, since the human condition cannot be changed. Benjy, the idiot, the first narrator who tells us the tale, the character for whom reality exists only as it reaches his senses, bellows

*slowly, abjectly, without tears;  
the grave hopeless sound of all  
voiceless misery under the sun. (p. 395)*

And so it becomes true that

*Life is a tale, told by an idiot, full of  
sound and fury, signifying nothing.*<sup>10</sup>

Fortunately for us, however, some things resist the destructive power of time. If the candle is brief, it is capable, nevertheless, in its short appearance upon the stage, of creating a perennial picture of life, immortalizing it through Art.

One more ironical contradiction to add to those discussed in this paper and to sum up the importance of Southern literature in the twentieth century: by dealing with time, with the flux of time, the Southern writers, like Faulkner, have crystallized it in their works, creating meaning out of chaos.

These authors, to borrow Faulkner's words, have not only endured.

They prevail.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Afonso Ávila, *O lúdico e as projeções do mundo barroco* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1980), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, in *Shakespeare. Complete Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), V, v, pp. 867-68.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Hauser, *Historia Social de la Literatura y el Arte* (Madrid: Ediciones Guadarrama, 1969), Vol. II, pp. 63-94.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis P. Simpson, "Southern Fiction," in *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, ed. Daniel Hoffman (Harvard: The Belknap Press, 1979), p. 153.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* (New York, 1957), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> C. Hugh Holman, *The Roots of Southern Writing* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972), p. I.

<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, pp. 867-68.

<sup>8</sup> William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), p. 415. All subsequent quotations from this novel are taken from this edition.

<sup>9</sup> Quentin's sentence is indicative of this: "Non fui. Sum. Fui. Non sum" (p. 216).

<sup>10</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, pp. 867-68.