

## Patterns to Affinities to Labels: Exploring the Roots of “Southern Writing”

Robert Moore

Richard Ford, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Independence Day* and a native of Mississippi, has decried the imposing of labels on writers and their work—Southern writer, the Jewish writer, the black writer, the feminist writer. What do such labels do, Ford asks, but load down the particular writer with a burden of presuppositions and stimulate readers to approach the work with a fixed set of expectations? (“A Stubborn Sense” 42-43).

Labels do, of course, carry power. Once a label comes to be fixed in the public’s consciousness, it may confer a certain status, association; it may suggest a certain configuration of qualities. In the commercial world, certainly, corporations work very hard and spend a great deal of money to establish a logo, a label. An instantly recognizable brand name carries weight. It can become a shorthand indicating the range of features that corporation promises with its products. And that may be fine in the world of Nike, or Microsoft, or Benetton, but is it useful—Ford suggests—it be dangerous in our domain, in the realm of literature?

It is in our nature to impose order, to seek out patterns, to look for similarities and differences. And if that is true of humankind in general, it is the professional disease of the critic and teacher. So despite the calls to resist labels, in the face of writers’ complaints that they can be stifling, they persist. My purpose in this paper is to consider the label of *Southern literature*, to examine its genesis and its features, and finally to question whether it continues to have descriptive value today as we look at the contemporary generation of American writers whose roots can be said to be southern.

Let me begin by offering a brief cultural history of the South from its earliest days through the First World War. The South geographically, for the purposes of our discussion, will refer to that area of the Southeastern United States south from the Potomac River and Washington D.C. to the Gulf of Mexico and westward from the Atlantic Ocean more or less to the Mississippi River. It encompasses the eleven states that composed the Confederacy during the Civil War: Virginia, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas. Historically the South was colonized not so much by settlers seeking religious and political freedom as was the case along the eastern seaboard to the northeast, but by men who had sought and been given large grants of land to cultivate and settle in order to provide for the agricultural needs of Britain, from which they had emigrated. In short, they sought economic opportunity. The South, then, was largely an agrarian economy with both large plantations and small farms through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The primary money crops were cotton and tobacco, and these—particularly cotton—required substantial land, closely tended.

Although a few cities such as New Orleans, Atlanta, and Charleston, South Carolina grew as trade centers or as important ports to ship products to the New England textile mills, to cities of the Northeast and to Europe as well, the South was generally made up of small towns and rural farmlands. The cultivation of these large cotton plantations was a labor-intensive enterprise in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the South met its labor needs with the cheapest of cheap labor—slaves imported from Africa, oftentimes through the Caribbean, and put to work on the large plantations and less often on the smaller farms. There were numerous consequences to this dependence on slave labor—political, social, economic, and certainly moral. One of the byproducts of the growth of large plantations based on slave labor, historian C. Vann Woodward has argued, is that the southern communities developed a kind of self-sufficiency which isolated them from the mainstream of America (201-02). Wealth tended to be concentrated into the hands of a relatively few. Among whites there was a small middle-class of shopkeepers and professionals who attended to the needs of the community and the plantations and a much larger number of poor, uneducated small farmers who scratched out a subsistence living from season to season. These peasant farmers—for that was what they were although the word “peasant” carried unpleasant associations with the Old World and would not have been used—perched precariously just above the lowest rung of the economic and social ladder, fearful oftentimes of the large population of first, second, and third generation slaves who in some parts of the deep South—parts of Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, for example—outnumbered the white residents. One way of keeping the slaves in check was to limit their ability to communicate and organize, which was achieved by denying them access to even the most basic literacy. Laws were passed to make it a crime to teach a slave to read and write, for it was recognized that with education came power. The literacy of the poor white peasant farmers, however, was scarcely much better.

This social hierarchy inevitably had consequences to the development of any literary culture in the South. The pre-Civil War Southern aristocracy at the top of the pyramid modeled itself on the landed gentry of England. Their pretenses to letters often went only so far as surrounding themselves with the trappings of gentility and culture. Recall Mark Twain’s satirical portrayal of the Grangerford family from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Impressionable, inexperienced Huck is awed by the appearances of civility with which Colonel Grangerford surrounds himself and his family, but we readers see through this façade to the corrupt and brutal nature of the Colonel and his family, who are engaged in a deadly feud with the neighboring Shepherdsons, the reason for which neither side can recall.

The widespread illiteracy and poverty assured that there would be little market close at hand to stimulate and nurture any literary culture in the pre-Civil War South. The fertile ground for an emerging American literature was New England and New York. Those few Southerners with literary aspirations had to seek publishing opportunities and their audiences there. What emerged was a regional literature that came to be called Southwest humor. It featured sketches of Southern frontier life, told in

the Southern dialect, exaggerated and outrageous at times, often violent, usually humorous for the entertainment of Northeasterners who most likely would never visit the South themselves. Southwest humor sketches—Thomas Thorpe’s “The Big Bear of Arkansas” and George Washington Harris’s Sut Lovingood tales are good examples—frequently employed a frame narrator—a man of sophistication who spoke in the proper English of the educated in contrast to the characters and situations he described. This narrator acted as mediator between the “gentle ears” of the reader and the tale. There were also a handful of talented, serious writers from the region—the romanticists William Gilmore Simms and John Pendleton Kennedy, the poet Sidney Lanier. But the only writer with Southern origins who has come to be mentioned in the company of Emerson and Thoreau, Hawthorne and Melville, and Cooper and Longfellow was Edgar Allan Poe. And the topic of the Southernness of Poe—or the lack thereof—is the worthy subject of another essay.

The Civil War (1861-1865) remains the watershed event in American history. Within a decade of the end of the war, significant change had occurred in most of the country. The population of the nation more than tripled from twenty-three million in 1850 to seventy-six million in 1900. New York City grew from 600,000 in 1860 to 3,000,000 in 1900; Chicago, from 30,000 to 1,000,000. The transcontinental telegraph was completed in 1861, the transcontinental railroad in 1869 and by the 1880s there were four such transcontinental railways and 10,000 miles of new track were being laid each year. In 1862 the Homestead Act opened the Western prairie, and the subsequent expansion west was nothing short of “domestic imperialism,” beginning to provide raw materials for Northeast and Midwest industry and food for the tables up and down the East coast. Alaska was purchased for \$7.2 million, the first oil well was drilled in 1859, the first commercial typewriter produced, the telephone, the electric light, and the automobile invented—all in the period between 1859 and 1885. The result of these dramatic developments was the creation of wealth. By 1900 the GNP of the United States surpassed that of all European nations except Great Britain and France (and Great Britain borrowed \$50 million from American financier J.P. Morgan to finance the Boer War). While there were fewer than 100 millionaires in the country in 1860, there were more than 1000 in 1876. But the South after the Civil War did not participate in this economic boom. The Gilded Age did not reach the old Confederacy. In fact, its economic condition severely worsened. The South became an economic backwater, left to come to terms with its military defeat and, equally important, with the discrediting of its very way of life. In the period from 1865-1876, the period known as Reconstruction, large portions of the South were occupied with federal troops. The large plantations, the economic engines for prosperity in the pre-war South, were subdivided into small farms where blacks and whites alike were left to eke out a subsistence level living. Sixty years later in the midst of the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared that the South was “America’s number one economic problem” (qtd. In Lea 1169).

The literature emerging from the region in the latter third of the nineteenth century



echoed the sense of loss. Much energy and ink was spent nostalgically representing a romanticized image of the antebellum South or railing against what was perceived as the unfair treatment of the post-war South. There was scant room left for serious imaginative writing. American writers from other regions, William Dean Howells and Henry James, Stephen Crane and Edith Wharton, Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser, were leading the march in a new direction—toward realism and naturalism. Arguably the single important writer with ties to the South in this period was Mark Twain. But whether Twain should be called a Southern writer remains a matter for debate. His parents' roots were in the South, but he was born and raised in Hannibal, Missouri. As a young man he navigated the Mississippi River from St. Louis to New Orleans as a riverboat captain and, thus, was well acquainted with the South and its ways. When the war broke out, he enlisted in the Confederate Army, but he deserted after just a few weeks (see his "A Brief History of a Campaign That Failed") and headed west, spending the war years in Nevada and California, where he began to write professionally for the first time. Every region would like to lay claim to Mark Twain, but for the thesis I am arguing here, it is hard to claim him as a Southern writer exclusively.

In 1917 H.L. Mencken, journalist and cultural critic, in an essay entitled "The Sahara of the Bozarts," asserted that "[the South] is almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert" (157-58). He went on to say "once you have counted James Branch Cabell (a lingering survivor of the *ancien régime*: a scarlet dragon-fly imbedded in opaque amber) you will not find a single southern prose writer who can actually write" (Mencken 159). But within a decade of Mencken's pronouncement, a flowering of Southern literature began that lasted more than thirty years and came to be called "The Southern Renaissance."

What explains this remarkable reversal in fortune? Does understanding the roots of this so-called "renaissance" provide insight into what might be the qualities that make Southern writing Southern?

America's late engagement in World War I was sold to the American public with slogans. America would see to it that this would be "The War to End All Wars"; America's young men were enlisting to fight to "Make the World Safe for Democracy." A generation enthusiastically sought out the opportunity to prove their courage. Witness three of them: F. Scott Fitzgerald, age 21 in 1917; William Faulkner, age 20; and Ernest Hemingway, age 18. Fitzgerald left Princeton to join the army, was posted for training at various locations including just outside Birmingham, Alabama where he met his wife-to-be Zelda, but he was never sent overseas. Faulkner tried to enlist in the Army Air Corps but was rejected because at 5'5" he was judged too short, so he left the States, joined the Royal Canadian Air Corps but also was still in training when the war ended. Hemingway was rejected outright when he tried to enlist because of a football injury; but after a brief stint as a reporter in Kansas City, he managed to join the Red Cross and was sent to the Italian front as an ambulance driver. There he was seriously wounded and decorated for valor for his actions in rescuing one of his comrades after they had been shelled.

The actual experience of the war, the trench warfare and the gassing and the shelling, was brutal—not the occasion to become a hero and to save the world as many had envisioned. Those who returned came back to an America embroiled in partisan politics as President Woodrow Wilson fought with a Republican-dominated Congress over U. S. participation in the League of Nations that Wilson had worked to establish. The administration of Warren G. Harding, the man who in 1921 followed Wilson into the White House, was marked by scandal and corruption (most notably the Teapot Dome scandal of 1922 that landed the Secretary of the Interior, Albert Falls, one of Harding's cabinet members, in prison). A deep sense of disillusionment set in. The Prohibition Amendment was passed and took effect in 1920, prohibiting the sale of alcohol, and in some areas was largely ignored. Illegal whiskey flowed and bribes were paid to officials to turn a blind eye, undermining respect for the law. Cynicism about American values replaced the naïve idealism that preceded the war in some circles. A hedonistic sense of license defined the Roaring Twenties, Fitzgerald's Jazz Age, yet coexisted with the strain of stringent moral absolutism that had put Prohibition into place.

Writers born in the South in the decade just prior to and immediately following the turn of the century were coming of age in the years just after the First World War ended. They had been raised on stories of the "Lost Cause" and had breathed the air of defeat and disillusionment. They had grown up in a marginalized culture, among generations of family and neighbors accustomed to looking backward into the past to seek an explanation of present circumstances. Critic Louis Rubin in an essay called "The South and the Faraway Country" makes another point about these young men and women from the South who were drawn to writing in the decades between the two world wars: all of them spent some time away from the South, whether it was to fight in the war, to attend university, or to travel the country (and in some cases Europe). That time away, Rubin argues, provided them with a different perspective when they returned: they were *in* the culture but no longer *of* it (Rubin 8-11). Returning to the South, they were critical, on the one hand, of the rigidly structured, traditional Southern social order, of the racism which permeated the society, and of the air of anti-intellectualism they encountered; on the other hand, they were often appalled by the crass materialism and the blind faith in the idea of progress they saw as at the heart of the broader mainstream American culture. They saw a nation drifting, seeking values that could give direction, order and purpose to life. Out of this tension between a mainstream culture adrift and their native Southern culture so stagnant and backward facing came art.

These young writers sought to understand the disillusionment of the twenties in terms of their own pasts. And they built on their tradition of oral storytelling. "Spinning yarns" as it was called was an age-old feature of the folk culture in the South, both black and white. From the Southwest humor tales, mentioned earlier, which had been collected and packaged for a Northern audience, to the Negro folk tales carefully recorded and published by Joel Chandler Harris and others in the late nineteenth cen-



tury, an oral tradition in which stories were told and retold, embellished and added to was as natural as the air they breathed.

And so, as if in response to Mencken's 1917 indictment of the South as cultureless, serious writing began to emerge from writers born and raised there. At first it was a trickle; the work of Virginia novelists James Branch Cabell and Ellen Glasgow received notice. By the late 1920s Faulkner began to publish fiction and the Fugitive poets, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and others began to receive recognition for their work. Over the next twenty-five years, the trickle became a flood, and writers whose roots were in the South became perhaps the important movement in American literature. In addition to Faulkner, fiction writers such as Thomas Wolfe, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, Zora Neale Hurston, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, Richard Wright, and Robert Penn Warren; poets such as Ransom, Warren, Tate, and Randell Jarrell; dramatists Tennessee Williams and Lillian Hellman were recognized with Pulitzer Prizes, National Book Awards, Bollingen Prizes, and New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards for their work. And, of course, at the pinnacle was Faulkner's recognition with the 1949 Nobel Prize for literature. There were popular writers as well whose work grabbed the public's attention: Margaret Mitchell with *Gone with the Wind*, Erskine Caldwell with the steamy *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre*, and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings with *The Yearling*. This outpouring of significant, acclaimed writing continued through the thirties, the forties, the fifties, the sixties, and into the seventies by which time late Renaissance writers such as Truman Capote, Walker Percy, James Agee, William Styron, James Dickey, Elizabeth Spencer, and Harper Lee had already established themselves. Faulkner's work both inspired and spurred new directions in the Southern fiction writers who followed him. As Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "The presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down" (Inge).

Around this extraordinary output of creative writing, a literary culture emerged that moved toward a critical stance as well. At Vanderbilt University in the 1920s, John Crowe Ransom, poet but also professor of literature, gathered around him a group of young students who were interested not only in literature but in culture—particularly the culture of the South in relation to the nation at large. Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren (mentioned above for their creative work), Andrew Lytle, Donald Davidson, and others began to write critical as well as creative pieces. In an early collection of essays, *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), these writers staked out a politically and culturally conservative position against what they saw as the materialism and preoccupation with technological progress that gripped the American mainstream. They championed an agrarian lifestyle more consistent with a time before assembly-line industrialization and the concentration of population in ever-growing cities. As their academic careers took them away from the South, their influence spread: Ransom moved to Kenyon College in Ohio where he founded *The Kenyon Review* in 1939,

Tate to The University of the South in Tennessee where he joined his friend Lytle in reestablishing *The Sewanee Review*. These two academic publications became serious journals of literature and culture and contributed to the launching of a new approach to literary studies, the New Criticism. It focused on the primacy of the literary text itself, its imagery, metaphoric language, structures and themes, rather than on the contexts in which it was produced or read. These New Critics, allied themselves with the Formalists, whose base was Princeton University, set the critical agenda through the forties, the fifties, and well into the sixties. Meanwhile Robert Penn Warren had moved on first to Louisiana State University, then the University of Minnesota, and finally to Yale. There he collaborated with Cleanth Brooks, a Mississippian, established as a scholar and teacher at Yale, to develop two textbooks, *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*, which taught the New Critical approach to analyzing literary texts and became the standards for teaching introductory courses in literature at universities across the country. Southerners were no longer in the wings of American literary culture. They were on the center stage and among the leading players.

Nevertheless, establishing as I have that writers who happened to share the fact of their Southern roots rose to prominence in this period from the late twenties through the sixties does not, in and of itself, define "Southern literature," that is, give the label meaningful coherence. If the designation is to carry descriptive weight, it must refer to more than a shared place of birth. So what I propose to do next is offer a set of six qualities common to the writing of these men and women. This is not to say, of course, that each piece by these several authors exhibit all these qualities or that each of these writers may not have on occasion written works which seem to display *none* of them. But in the preponderance of work by these writers from Faulkner to Welty to O'Connor to Williams to Capote, we find these recurring features.

First, a preoccupation with the past. Seldom do we meet a character in the novels of Faulkner or Eudora Welty or Robert Penn Warren without learning something of the history of his forebears, placing not only that character but his "people" within a defined social order against the backdrop of history. Certainly Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha saga—novels from *As I Lay Dying* to *Light in August* to *Absalom, Absalom!* to *Go Down, Moses*—exhibit this quality as do Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*, Warren's *All the King's Men*, Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter* and *Losing Battles*, and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Short stories by O'Connor such as "Good Country People" and "Everything That Rises Must Converge" present us with characters who try to assert their status, their place in the modern world based on who their ancestors had been in the order of the Old South.

Second, a particular sense of time. Time in Southern literature is most often seen as moving in cycles rather than along a straight line. "Now is then; then is now" or as Faulkner has Gavin Stevens say in *Intruder in the Dust*: "The past is not dead; it isn't even past." The poetry of Ransom, Tate, and Warren emphasize this cyclical view of time as does the fiction of Faulkner, Warren, Porter, and more recently Walker Percy. Third, a strong sense of place. Faulkner was once asked why he wrote about Mis-



issippi. "I had to write about someone, somewhere," he answered. Albert Camus, writing in the forties, explained why he initially responded to Faulkner: "I could feel the heat and the dust." As Joyce wrote about Dublin or Proust about Paris, these writers place their stories in a particular place at particular times: Wolfe's hill of western North Carolina, Welty's rural Mississippi, O'Connor's Christ-haunted, fundamentalist southern Georgia. These settings are closely observed and finely drawn. They live in the details of nature and in the acute ear for the language of the people who populate the region. This ability to evoke a place so vividly comes in part, I believe, from the oral folk traditions out of which these writers emerged. They soaked in what was around them, listening and watching as tales were spun by storytellers, formally uneducated perhaps but steeped in the culture and language of their region. Critic Louis Rubin has written:

I doubt that any imaginative writer writes primarily 'about' a particular time or place when he sets his fiction or poetry in a recognizable locale or era. [. . .] Leo Tolstoy did not write 'about' Russia, nor William Faulkner 'about' Mississippi. Instead both men used geography and history to embody countries of their own, in which the characters and scenes could act out fables designed to show what it meant to be alive and human. [. . .] What the writer importantly draws from his background are certain attitudes toward language and toward experience, and these he can never escape. We discern important and recognizable influences of such things in his books, so that we can speak legitimately of 'Southern fiction' or 'the Russian novel.' But it is the attitudes, not the typical subject matter, that make possible this identification. (Rubin 15-16)

Fourth, a distrust in the concept of the "perfectibility" of humankind. If time isn't linear, neither is the moral progression of man. There is a pronounced streak of Calvinistic religiosity that informs much Southern writing even, I would argue, in those writers who claim no particular religious belief. The Christian myth of the Fall of man from the grace of God and the consequences of that fall is at the center of the work of Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor. But thematically crucial to the work of others of these writers is the idea that human beings are conceived in sin and must recognize and accept the limitations of the human condition. To be human is to be imperfect.

Fifth, given this sense of human imperfection, Southern writers often draw characters who are, in important ways, twisted in the manner in which they interact with the world. They are violent or victims of violence, deformed at birth or by life physically or psychologically or both. It is here that that earliest of writers born in the South, Edgar Allan Poe, would seem to have had his influence. There is a gothic grotesque that courses throughout the work of O'Connor and is a strong element in that of Carson McCullers ("The Ballad of the Sad Café," for example), Tennessee Williams (*The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Night of the Iguana*),



Richard Wright (*Native Son*), and of course Faulkner (*The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, *Sanctuary*).

Finally, and this may be the saving quality in the midst of this portrayal of the depravity and distortion of these flawed human beings, there is never far from the surface in these works a wicked sense of humor—an exaggeration carried so far that one detects a sly wink of the eye in the reader's direction as if to say, "have you ever seen the like? Come along with me as I record the human comedy." Let me illustrate this with the ending scene from Flannery O'Connor's short story "Good Country People." The central character, Joy, is a 33-year old Ph.D. in Philosophy, who lives with her mother on a rural Georgia farm and devotes herself to a nihilist view of the world. "I don't have illusions," she says. "I'm one of those people who see *through* to nothing" (287). She lost her leg in a shooting accident when she was ten and has come to conclude that her given name, "Joy," is inappropriate so she changes it to "Hulga." The climax of the story comes when Joy/Hulga allows herself to be lured into the hayloft of the old barn by a traveling Bible salesman named Manley Pointer. She sees him as pure innocence and imagines she will open his eyes to the true ugliness of the world. He is fascinated by her artificial leg and finally summons up the courage to ask her to show him how it detaches. She believes that finally she has come upon someone who "had touched the truth about her" (289), and to accommodate him she takes off the leg—whereupon he seizes it and climbs from the loft as she sits stunned. As he leaves, he turns back to the loft and calls to her, "I've gotten a lot of interesting things [. . .] one time I got a woman's glass eye this way" (291). Now certainly seen from one perspective, this is a painful moment as this poor, crippled girl has her last illusion of her superiority taken from her. But it is also a moment of delicious comic irony.

Having identified these several qualities of the literature that was created by the pens of this wide range of writers, male and female, black and white over a period of thirty to forty years, we can now, I think, confidently assert there is such a thing as a distinct "Southern literature." But is Richard Ford, the contemporary writer born in the South almost twenty years after the Renaissance was well underway, accurate when he says being labeled a "Southern Writer" places an undue burden of expectations? In an article in *Harper's Magazine* in August 1986, Ford and eight other contemporary writers with roots in the South discussed their relation to that earlier, extraordinary generation of poets, playwrights, and fiction writers. One of them, Mary Hood, was asked, "How far are you from where Flannery O'Connor lived and worked?" "About thirty years," Hood replied without a beat (Crews, "A Stubborn Sense" 36). And that answer speaks volumes about the need of contemporary writers of the South to escape the long shadows of their predecessors. But not without appreciation for what that earlier generation meant to them as they began to conceive of themselves as writers. Lee Smith, a Virginian on the *Harper's* panel, was quoted elsewhere on her first reading of O'Connor and Welty: "[t]hese writers hadn't been anywhere I hadn't been, and didn't know anybody I didn't know. [. . .] For the first time I began to have the sense of what I knew, of what my subject might be" (qtd. in Walker 153). Alice Walker, the African-

American writer of *The Color Purple* as well as other fiction, poetry, and essays, has been at pains to acknowledge her debt as a second generation black woman writer to Zora Neale Hurston, the groundbreaking novelist of the Harlem Renaissance.

There continue to be wonderful poets and novelists and playwrights, their roots to the South firmly implanted, who would make anybody's short list of outstanding contemporary American writers. Their work often shares many of the qualities I have mentioned as characteristic of the literature of the Southern Renaissance. But the South has changed. It is no longer the nation's number one economic problem; today it is the Sun Belt, attracting business and industry not only from what has come to be called the Rust Belt of the Northeast and Midwest but from all over the world. For the last quarter of the twentieth century, it was economically the United States' fastest growing region. Southern literature, art, music—folk culture, popular culture, and high culture of all kinds—thrives in the multiethnic America of the twenty-first century. If the label "Southern writer" seems archaic today, it is because *this* generation—the Anne Tylers, the Maya Angelous, the Marsha Normans, and, yes, the Richard Fords—now confidently have taken a seat at the table of *American* writers.

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