

# A Southern Renaissance

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The Cultural  
Awakening  
of the  
American  
South,  
1930-1955

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RICHARD H. KING

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To My Parents,  
Dorothy and Dawson King

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## Preface

The origins of this book lie in the early 1960s when I was an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina. During those years the activist phase of the Civil Rights movement began in nearby Greensboro and soon spread throughout the South. No one who was a Southerner or who lived south of the Mason-Dixon line at that time could help but be aware that enormous changes were in the offing. At roughly the same time, I first read Faulkner and was immediately and permanently hooked. Indicative of Faulkner's impact was my response to a question posed in an interview for a graduate fellowship. One of my interrogators asked whom I considered the leading Southern historian. Though I had read W. J. Cash and C. Vann Woodward, my immediate reply was, "William Faulkner." Needless to say, this was not the right answer, or at least the answer he was looking for. I did not win the fellowship. But, caught up as I was in Faulkner's world, still registering that shock of recognition which his work touched off in me, I could have hardly answered otherwise.

Chapel Hill was an ideal place in many ways to be in the early 1960s. Liberalism was a tradition there, not an aberrant impulse. The names of Howard Odum, Rupert Vance, and Thomas Wolfe,



the university's most famous alumnus, were heard often. Cash's *The Mind of the South* was assigned in history classes and C. Vann Woodward's *The Burden of Southern History* had just appeared in paperback. I heard Robert Penn Warren lecture in Chapel Hill. James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was re-issued around that time, and several of us were put onto it by our teachers. In my senior year at Chapel Hill I wrote an honors thesis on "Faulkner and Southern History." That thesis contained the seeds of much of what is in this longer study.

While working on this project I often encountered friendly skepticism when I described what I was doing as an intellectual history of the South between 1930 and the mid-1950s. Typically, the response would be, "Is there one?" It was as though I had proposed a study of Spiro Agnew's political ethics or of Norman Mailer's poetry. But, yes, there *is* one. As I indicate, the Southern Renaissance was much more than simply a story of William Faulkner's achievement, much more than a strictly literary movement. I have also sketched in the historical context within which the Southern Renaissance flourished. Intellectual historians, literary scholars, and sociologists of culture urgently need to take up a comparative investigation of cultural creativity. How can we explain those amazing outbursts of intellectual production which, as often as not, seem to appear in the most unlikely places, far from the centers of political, economic, and social power?

Some readers may find this study excessively theoretical. My general approach has been shaped by psychoanalytic theory and its recent applications in the work of literary critics such as Harold Bloom and the French Freudians. Like Bloom and unlike the French I have not been shy in evaluating as well as analyzing texts. I have been less interested in doing psychohistory (an unfairly maligned subspecialty in the historical profession) than I have been concerned with using Freud's theory as a way of talking about cultural change as expressed in written, "high" cultural works. This study is a form of cultural anthropology in the broadest sense of the term. It investigates a regional culture's symbol and image systems—its conscious articulations and hidden underpinnings—as they responded to historical change.

My own proclivities aside, I have made heavy use of theory for two reasons. First, the writing of American history has suffered from a paucity of theory; this seems particularly true of intellectual history. (It is less true of much recent work in the history of slavery, and that historiography is much the richer for its theoretical content.) Why this is true is a matter which is not my purpose to investigate here. Suffice it to say that graduate students in history are seldom asked to study Marx or Freud, Weber or Durkheim, Nietzsche or Hegel, or even the speculative philosophers of history in any thorough way. The result is a certain theoretical "tone deafness" among historians trained in this country.

Second, much of the writing about the South, particularly by Southerners, has been intensely autobiographical, even confessional. It seemed time to draw back and try to make sense of the cultural context within which Southern writers and intellectuals—and articulate Southerners in general—have tried to formulate their ambivalent feelings about the region. In fact, this Southern tradition of self- and regional scrutiny was brought to fruition by the writers of the Renaissance. From them many of my generation learned something about what we had "experienced" as we grew up in the region. We had been speaking "Southern" without even knowing it. That shock of recognition from reading Faulkner brought with it the realization that one could live in the region and still care for it, that the final definition of "being Southern" had not been established, and that the region's recent experience and its tradition, particularly in the twentieth century, encompassed far more than the Klan and the segregationists, the cynical politics of race and class domination, and a collection of timid academic and religious institutions. Thus I had to step outside the immediate world of the South and the Southern Renaissance in order better to apprehend it. A theoretical approach allowed this simultaneous "distance" and "closure."

By now it is probably not hard to figure out that my general political sympathies are of the liberal and populist variety. (Of course these two traditions are by no means synonymous.) Moreover, coming as I do from Tennessee, East Tennessee at that, I did not grow up with the glories of the Old South reverberating

in my ears. When I told one Southern writer that I came from Tennessee, he replied, "Hell, that's not even in the South." To be sure, there are figures such as Allen Tate or William Alexander Percy on "the other side" from whom one can learn. But finally, I have little use for Southern conservatism of the Agrarian or aristocratic or any other sort. Yet, as I suggest at the end of the book, the Southern liberalism voiced by intellectuals by the mid-1950s was more an attitude than a program, less activist and politically cogent than one might have hoped. It was a world-view rather than a fighting creed. In a sense, my study falls in this tradition of Southern intellectual liberalism; still, I hope that the quarter century since the mid-1950s has added something to that tradition.

One does not complete a study such as this without incurring numerous debts of gratitude along the way. Nor did this work come to fruition without certain costs. My debt to those who helped me through rather trying times is incalculable.

Much gratitude goes to Dr. Frank Ryan of the History Department at Chapel Hill who supervised my honors thesis. His quiet intensity and passion for ideas provided me with a much needed intellectual model in those early years. Jerry Kindred and I began talking about history and historical consciousness in the late 1960s. Our conversations on these and related matters helped sharpen my thinking considerably. One can often learn as much from the "lay" reader of, say, Faulkner as from the professional. Jon Connolly, Louise Strawbridge, Jenny Cashdollar, and Tim Bird have provided me with many hours of stimulating conversation—and insights—about the South and its writers. My trip through the South a few years back with Jim Wagner was a delightful way to re-acquaint myself with the region. Students at both the University of the District of Columbia and the University of Nottingham helped me see things in the texts we were studying together that I would not have come to on my own.

I am also grateful to Paul Gaston for his general encouragement of this project and to Bertram Wyatt-Brown who helped me find a publisher after he had read parts of the manuscript. Erik Wensberg has been very supportive of my work over the years and pro-

vided valuable information on James Agee and a close reading of the pages that deal with Agee. My year as a Fulbright lecturer in England brought me into contact with Brian Lee and Dave Murray. Their intellectual acumen, knowledge of American literature and culture, and friendship were invaluable. Gib Ruark, Jim Herbert, Larry Friedman, and Steve Whitfield have been exacting but valuable companions. The readings which Friedman and Whitfield gave of my first draft helped bring the manuscript into coherent shape. Sheldon Meyer at Oxford Press forced me to rethink parts of the manuscript and his advice resulted, I think, in a better and more accessible book. Also, Kim Lewis at Oxford has gone over the manuscript closely and pointed out the most glaring stylistic infelicities and obvious errors.

At the most personal level I want to thank Nancy King for her encouragement through most of this project. Without her it would never have been begun. Charlotte Fallenius has been much more than a help; she's been an "älskade vän." To my parents, Dorothy and Dawson King, I can only—and inadequately—say, thanks.

*Washington, D.C.*  
*October 1979*

R.H.K.

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# Contents

1	A Southern Renaissance	3	
2	The Southern Family Romance and Its Context	20	
3	Modernizers and Monumentalists: Social Thought in the 1930s	39	
4	Repetition and Despairing Monumentalism: William Faulkner and Will Percy	77	
5	Between Repetition and Recollection: Allen Tate and William Faulkner	99	
6	Working Through: Faulkner's <i>Go Down, Moses</i>	130	
7	Narcissus Grown Analytical: Cash's Southern Mind	146	
8	From Therapy to Morality: The Example of Lillian Smith	173	
9	From Theme to Setting: Thomas Wolfe, James Agee, Robert Penn Warren	194	
10	The New Southern Liberalism: V. O. Key, C. Vann Woodward, Robert Penn Warren	242	
	Conclusion	287	
	Notes	295	
	Index	335	

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## A Southern Renaissance



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## A Southern Renaissance

In 1975 the leading historian of the South in the post-World War II era, C. Vann Woodward, sought to define the Southern Renaissance and to specify the conditions of its emergence.<sup>1</sup> "Why the Southern Renaissance?" was characteristically Woodwardian in its lack of dogmatism, its lucid summations and deft criticisms, and its tendency toward equivocation. Locating the origins of the Renaissance in 1929, the year that saw the publication of Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Woodward characterized it as a flowering of the "literary arts—poetry, fiction and drama."<sup>2</sup> Although Woodward suggested no point at which the literary well ran dry, one might conveniently locate the end of the main phase of the Renaissance somewhere around 1955. After that year the South was preoccupied with "other voices, other rooms."

This is not to say that Southerners stopped writing or that nothing of worth appeared after the mid-1950s. Far from it. But by this point the figures dealt with in my study were either dead or past their creative peaks. Though he won a Nobel Prize in 1949, Faulkner's powers as a novelist had waned considerably. Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom had all but ceased writing poetry,

while their critical and cultural essays appeared with decreasing frequency. W. J. Cash, William Alexander Percy, and Thomas Wolfe were dead; and James Agee was to succumb to a heart attack in 1955. After the middle of the decade, Lillian Smith published little and turned her attentions to the civil rights struggle, as well as to her own battle with cancer. Neither Howard Odum nor Rupert Vance sounded any fresh notes on the theme of Regionalism after World War II, while V. O. Key shifted his energies from the political culture of the South to other aspects of political science. To be sure, C. Vann Woodward was to emerge as one of the most prominent American historians in the 1960s, but his pioneering work in Southern history lay behind him. And though Robert Penn Warren's reputation as a poet waxed tremendously in the 1960s and 1970s, his fiction never regained the heights of *All the King's Men*. The apogee had been reached; the Renaissance had become a tradition.

Woodward went on to survey the various explanations that had been advanced for the Renaissance. He rejected as absurd the "sociological" explanations that saw the cultural flowering as the issue of Southern prosperity or industrialization, a newly discovered liberal spirit, or the infusion of new blood from the outside. He then proceeded to dismiss the "defensive" theory, which he attributed to W. J. Cash. In this account the Renaissance was the attempt of Southern writers to justify themselves and their society in the face of a hostile American society. Finally, however, Woodward gave a qualified nod of approval to Allen Tate's "backward glance" thesis: the Renaissance was the product of the creative tension between the Southern past and the pressures of the modern world.

But the Tate thesis did not entirely satisfy Woodward either. First, it failed to explain why the Renaissance happened precisely when it did; and, second, it failed to account for the literary productivity of Southern writers after World War II. Thus the backward glance notion provided the "necessary conditions" but not any sort of final explanation. To add specificity to Tate's thesis, Woodward drew upon Cleanth Brooks, a critic who had been closely associated with the Agrarians at Vanderbilt University in

the 1920s and their hostile view of modern culture. According to Brooks, the Southern experience had been marked by a feeling for the concrete and specific, a familiarity with conflict, a sense of community and religious wholeness, a belief that the mystery of human nature defied rational explanation or manipulation, and a sense of the tragic. This was the fertile ground in which the South's artistic and intellectual promptings took root and flourished.

Woodward was properly skeptical that any determinate relationship between historical causes and cultural results could be drawn; but he was also perhaps overly defensive. Indeed it is difficult to imagine what a scientific (in the sense of "natural" scientific) explanation of the Southern Renaissance would look like. Besides this knotty theoretical issue, however, Woodward's essay suggested other matters that called for further analysis.

First, the Southern Renaissance was more than "just" a literary movement. It was certainly that; but it also represented an outpouring of history, sociology, political analysis, autobiography, and innovative forms of journalism. W. J. Cash, James Agee, Lillian Smith, Howard Odum, and William Alexander Percy were as central to the Southern Renaissance as William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and John Crowe Ransom. To be specific, Woodward's biography of the Georgia Populist leader Tom Watson, which appeared in 1938, deserved the kind of attention which Warren's novel about a Huey Long-like figure, *All the King's Men* (1946) attracted. This is not to say that *Tom Watson* and *All the King's Men* are the same kind of book. They are, however, embedded in the same historical context and informed by a "structure of feeling and experience" (to use Raymond Williams's phrase) common to the writers and intellectuals of the Renaissance.<sup>3</sup> In that sense they can and should be considered together.

Woodward's essay presents other problems. He never identifies the source of the sociological explanation of the Renaissance, and it seems to me a straw man. Though he attributes the "defensive" thesis to W. J. Cash, nowhere in *The Mind of the South* does Cash claim that the Southern Renaissance was the product of

Southerners under siege, except in the case of the Agrarians, where there is a lot to be said for Cash's claim. Cash paid high tribute to the realistic romanticism of Thomas Wolfe, Faulkner, and Erskine Caldwell. They were examples of the newly emerging critical spirit at work in the "mind" of the South after World War I. But though he mentions Faulkner and Caldwell together, Cash never equates them, as Woodward claims he does.

Finally, though there is no gainsaying some of the regional characteristics that Woodward draws from Brooks, it should be noted that they are generally conservative traits or tend to be most eagerly embraced by the party of the past. But the Renaissance was by no means the exclusive property of the conservative spirit and those who protested the appearance of the modern world. Second, some of these alleged characteristics of the Southern experience are questionable. It is difficult to see, for instance, how one can speak of the Southern fear of abstraction when the section has been addled over the years by all sorts of chimerical causes and collective delusions. Nor does the Southern claim on the tragic sense appear very strong if one assumes that the tragic sense requires insight into the circumstances which have led to grief. The South has rarely shown much of that insight. More generally, Woodward might have placed greater emphasis upon what is implied in the Tate thesis: the *dissolution* of the social and cultural context that nurtured these characteristics made way for the literary and intellectual resurgence in the South circa 1930.

If Woodward's essay represents the conventional account of the origins of the Southern Renaissance, there are other accounts which bid for attention. Writing in what might be called the neo-Catholic tradition of the Tate wing of the Vanderbilt Agrarians, Lewis Simpson claims that the Renaissance was most centrally about "memory and history." Though the restoration of an agrarian order was ostensibly its goal, the Renaissance sought "to assert the redemptive meaning of the classical-Christian past in its bearing on the present."<sup>4</sup> Thus, according to Simpson, the Renaissance was less literary than religious; it was, "a search for images of existence which will express the truth that man's essential nature lies in his possession of the moral community of memory and

history.”<sup>5</sup> What the Renaissance resisted was the corrosive pessimism of modernity and the utopian faith that knowledge can change “the very constitution of being” and that history can be abolished.<sup>6</sup>

Simpson’s interpretive account of the Renaissance is both more interesting and less pertinent than Woodward’s. Surely history and memory, loss and absence, were central preoccupations in much Southern writing in the years after 1930 (as they were in much writing before those years). But Simpson’s claim that Faulkner and his contemporaries were essentially religious writers is debatable, to put it mildly. Nor does Simpson give any examples of powerful utopian impulses at work in the South in these years. Whatever else may be said about Southern liberals and reformers, they were hardly wild-eyed radicals or soft-headed dreamers. Finally, Simpson’s account fails to ground the Renaissance in its specific (Southern) historical setting. Instead, he sees it as a counterattack against the spirit of modernity and the gnostic strain in Western political thought articulated first by Joachim of Floris in the twelfth century. His was intellectual history with a vengeance.

What then was the Southern Renaissance? Put briefly: the writers and intellectuals of the South after the late 1920s were engaged in an attempt to come to terms not only with the inherited values of the Southern tradition but also with a certain way of perceiving and dealing with the past, what Nietzsche called “monumental” historical consciousness. It was vitally important for them to decide whether the past was of any use at all in the present; and, if so, in what ways? Put another way, the relationship between present and past which the Renaissance writers explored was fraught with ambivalence and ambiguity. The “object” of their historical consciousness was a tradition whose essential figures were the father and the grandfather and whose essential structure was the literal and symbolic family. In sum, the Renaissance writers sought to come to terms with what I call the “Southern family romance.”

This study is not intended as a complete intellectual (or literary) history of the Southern Renaissance. Rather, I will trace

the attempts of various (white) Southern writers and intellectuals to come to grips with the tradition of the Southern family romance, white Southern racism, and the received truths about Southern political culture. Related to, though distinct from, this concern with the family romance is my concern with the varieties of historical consciousness at work in Southern culture in the 1930s and 1940s. Put succinctly, I see in this period an emerging self-consciousness in Southern culture, a quasi-Hegelian process as it were. Increasingly, in those years, the Southern tradition was not only raised to awareness, it was also progressively demystified and rejected.

By historical consciousness, I do not mean "philosophy of history." William Faulkner, for instance, was neither an interesting thinker nor a profound philosopher. But I am interested in the ways he and his contemporaries articulated the tortuous process of dealing with the past of the region. Thus, by historical consciousness, I do not mean a philosophically rigorous discussion of the ultimate constituents of historical reality, the driving force(s) of the historical process, or the *telos* of that process. If Freud and Nietzsche are anywhere near correct, our systematic and "cognitively responsible" views of the past are rooted in personal and cultural experience; and if Hayden White is correct, our accounts of historical reality are filtered through literary "figures," written according to certain standard plots and shaped by various ideologies or world-views.<sup>7</sup> Thus historical consciousness refers to the way we understand and articulate our perception of the past.

Beyond this I will generally focus on works which take the South and its tradition as problematic. For this reason I do not deal with black writers such as Richard Wright or Ralph Ellison or with women writers such as Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, and Katherine Anne Porter. All of these writers would demand extensive treatment in a complete history of the Renaissance. Black writers are not taken up because for them the Southern family romance was hardly problematic. It could be and was rejected out of hand. Their great theme was the attempt (literally) to escape the white South which had historically oppressed their people. The case with the women writers is more difficult,

but my reading of them indicates that whatever the merits of their work—and they are considerable—they were not concerned primarily with the larger cultural, racial, and political themes that I take as my focus. For whatever reasons—and the one woman I do treat, Lillian Smith, urged women to address themselves to these larger themes—they did not place the region at the center of their imaginative visions.<sup>8</sup>

Not surprisingly, Faulkner dominates my study. One is often tempted to pass off the Renaissance as the exclusive product of its one undeniably “great” writer, Faulkner. It is with some reluctance that one dares say anything additional about Faulkner, since so much has already been said. But John Irwin’s *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge* (1976) both anticipated some of the things I had to say about Faulkner and compelled me to extend the extraordinarily insightful thesis he developed.<sup>9</sup> At any rate, no study of Southern historical consciousness and the family romance can avoid confronting Faulkner’s profound exploration of these themes.

Further, my study is most centrally informed by Freud’s theory of memory, culture, and therapy. “Informed,” however, is a weasel word, and there is no need to be coy. I would suggest that what Freud did in and for European culture, Faulkner (and to a lesser extent Cash and Lillian Smith) did in and for the modern Southern cultural tradition. My reading of the “literature of memory” is mediated by my understanding of Freud; in turn my grasp of Freud has been enriched, I think, by my immersion in the texts of Faulkner and his Southern contemporaries. Their modes of expression and their truth-claims differ, but Freud, as well as the Southern writers of the Renaissance, explored the engagement of memory with and in a tradition which was frighteningly powerful even in its death throes.

This is not to suggest that I am interested in direct or conscious influences between Freud and Faulkner or anyone else. Faulkner’s biographer records that Faulkner may have read Freud in the 1920s. But when asked later about possible influence, Faulkner replied in typical fashion that all the psychology he knew came from his characters and his poker-playing.<sup>10</sup> Of course



Faulkner was notoriously perverse in his response to such questions. But whether he was a reader, much less a close student of Freud, is of little interest to me. Most well-read Southerners would have read or heard something of Freud by the 1920s. There *were* a few oases in the "Sahara of the Bozart," as H. L. Mencken called the South of the time; Lillian Smith and Cash had read their Freud and taken him seriously.

But I also have more than interesting cultural analogies in mind when I say that Freud's influence is strong in this study. For the way Freud went about his explorations of the psyche—his own and others'—exemplifies the difficult role of the historian and the vicissitudes of historical consciousness in general. As in Freud and his patients, so in the writers of the Renaissance: repetition and recollection, the allure of the family romance, the difficult attempt to tell one's story and be freed of the burden of the past, and the desire to hold onto the fantasies of the past, were all powerfully at work. "Only" the language and the ostensible intent were different.

Finally by "informed" I mean that Freud's theory of therapy—the movement of memory in repetition, recollection, and working through—seems to me a normative model against which we can gauge the power of a work which takes the past as thematic. It is the mark of seminal historical works, and of fiction such as Faulkner's, that they take us back, then through, and out the other side—which turns out to be the way we came in, only at a different level.

### *Southern Intellectuals: Tradition and Self-Consciousness*

Ante-bellum Southern intellectuals provided one of the few sources of dissent from the prevailing American cultural ethos and historical consciousness.<sup>11</sup> More generally, if American intellectuals have traditionally been marginal to actual political and economic power, post-Civil War Southern intellectuals were even more so. As provincials they suffered under the suspicion (from others and from themselves) that they were "rustic and boorish,"

out of touch with the main action in the centers of cultural ferment.<sup>12</sup> Though this subjective burden, mixed with envy and resentment, was shared with other American intellectuals, it was accentuated by the South's trauma of defeat and occupation during Reconstruction and the South's historical association with racial bigotry, religious primitivism, and lack of cultural achievement. If this were not bad enough, the Southern intellectual has measured his status in the South and the nation against the dominant intellectual role played by the Virginians in the founding and formation of the nation. As Allen Tate wrote in "Aeneas at Washington": "The city my blood had built I knew no more."<sup>13</sup> Thus not only has the South been a cultural province, it has had to live with a decline from prior cultural and political pre-eminence.

Historically, the choices open to the white Southern writer or intellectual have been limited, though not as restricted as those imposed on black Southerners, or, say, upon the intelligentsia in Czarist Russia. He could leave the South, perhaps under pressure, assimilate to the national culture, and "forget" his origins. Or he could leave, but remain a "Southerner" in manner and sympathies, serving as an explainer of the region to the rest of the nation. As recently as the 1960s, under the editorship of Willie Morris, many émigré white Southerners found in *Harper's* an outlet for their writings, which offered a mixture of criticism and nostalgic good feelings toward the land they had left. There are several ironies in the title of Morris's autobiography *North Toward Home*.

Those intellectuals who remained in the South could either become spokesmen, however sophisticated, for the Southern tradition, or speak out for change. To take the latter position was to run the obvious risk of being accused of "fouling one's nest," of being a fifth column for alien, that is, "Yankee," notions. For spokesmen of the tradition, the problem was that as intellectuals they were alienated from those to whom and for whom they spoke. To be an intellectual in the South was to talk to oneself or at best a close group of sympathizers—or to be set upon as an arrant traitor for daring to suggest that intellect might be used for something other than the exigencies of regional self-defense. For instance, in the 1920s, sociologist Howard Odum came under heavy

fire from ministerial and business groups in the Piedmont for allowing essays on modern science and religion and industrial working conditions to appear in the newly founded journal *Social Forces*. Either no one listened—or the wrong sort listened.

One of the chief problems was that the South had neither a strong “enlightenment” tradition nor mass tradition of intellectual or educational concern. The Jeffersonian ideal of intellectual curiosity about whatever bore on man’s fate had long since faded. By the 1930s the Jeffersonian legacy was a rather tame affair, something honored more in the breach than observance. Virginius Dabney’s attempt to show the pervasive influence of Jeffersonian liberalism served mainly to show how weak and amorphous it had been.<sup>14</sup> And of course no better example exists than the Scopes “Monkey” trial in Dayton, Tennessee, in 1925, about the teaching in public schools of Darwin’s theory of evolution, and the controversy surrounding it to show that it was not simply a matter of hostile and fundamentalist masses against a beleaguered intelligentsia. Humanism and a defense of the Christian tradition in the South were considered compatible with religious fundamentalism. Nor did the Populist movement in the 1890s provide any lasting education of the masses, whatever its immediate political successes.<sup>15</sup>

On the institutional level, the university tradition in the South was notably weak, though by the 1920s several departments of history and sociology (along with Vanderbilt’s English department) were beginning to make their mark. As Howard Odum would note in *Southern Regions* (1936), no Southern university belonged in the top rank of American universities. There was but a small and rather precarious space of freedom within which to consider, much less advocate, new ideas. There was certainly no tradition of academic radicalism in Southern institutions of higher education. Nor, needless to say, was there a vital and intellectually astute clergy in the largely Protestant and fundamentalist South. In general, the steadiest voices of moderate enlightenment came from newspapermen. Dabney, George Fort Milton, John Temple Graves, and—a bit later—Ralph McGill, Hodding Carter, and Mark Ethridge would stand for a certain civil dissent, but they

were either unable or unwilling to break any lances against mass opposition.

In addition, Southern cities such as Atlanta or Birmingham, New Orleans or Charleston, lacked strong, dissident artistic communities or influential universities. While black scholars such as W. E. B. Du Bois, earlier at Atlanta, and Charles Johnson at Fisk did important sociological work, the black minority lacked the power or opportunity to be a major factor in Southern intellectual ferment.

All this is to say that, prior to the 1930s, there was little contact between the political and cultural elites, a point made in W. J. Cash's gloomy conclusion to *The Mind of the South*. Agrarian conservatives ruled as they always had—according to tradition and self-interest, which were often synonymous. Neo-populist leaders depended more upon the life of the mouth than of the mind, more on rhetoric than applied intelligence. Business progressives went to school at the Chamber of Commerce and businessmen's clubs. Put simply, by around 1930, Southern intellectuals inhabited another country.

And yet, as Cash might have said, something began happening in the 1920s. The "introspective revolution" of the 1930s and 1940s was prepared by a series of historical events which had profound symbolic reverberations among Southern writers and intellectuals.<sup>16</sup> These events served as historical precipitates, crystallizing cultural themes and solidifying individuals into groups, thus setting the stage for much of the *Kulturkampf* in the 1930s.

The first of these events was World War I itself, which marked the end of a century of European peace and the stable bourgeois order which marked that period. Though less so than among the intellectuals of the European nations, the war profoundly affected American writers.<sup>17</sup> The center did not hold. For sensitive Southerners, World War I represented the occasion for the South, as Allen Tate put it, to "rejoin the world."

Nor was the effect of that war lost on young Southern writers such as William Faulkner, who wrote of the disillusionment of the returning veteran in *Soldier's Pay* and *Sartoris*. William Alexander Percy, then a young poet, was later to write in *Lanterns on the*

*Levee* of the exhilaration of combat—and then the sense of being adrift after his return from the trenches. Many young Southerners must have seen World War I not only as a great adventure but also as a sort of historical second chance. Having grown up in a Southern tradition powerfully shaped by the Civil War and Reconstruction, young Southerners saw World War I as a chance to demonstrate the heroism which had been drummed into them as one of the transcendent virtues of the Southern tradition. In the long run the war's cultural reverberations gave a final blow to the genteel tradition in literature. In this sense the Southern Renaissance, at least in its literary manifestations, drew less from the Depression experience than from the cultural impact of the war.

In these years the most frontal (and notorious) assault on Southern cultural esteem came from H. L. Mencken.<sup>18</sup> His "Sahara of the Bozart" (1917) was read by many devoted Southerners, including liberals, as an unfair attack by an outsider. It is less well known that Mencken did not attack only to withdraw and gloat at the havoc he had wreaked. Rather, he helped keep alive fledgling literary magazines such as *The Double Dealer* in New Orleans and *The Reviewer* in Richmond, and later opened the pages of *The American Mercury* to young Southerners, such as W. J. Cash and Gerald Johnson, who were critical of the region's cultural aridity. For him, as for the poets associated with *The Fugitive* in Nashville, the enemy was the genteel tradition, New South boosterism, and the cultural wasteland of rural society. Indeed, when it suited his purposes, the sage of Baltimore fancied himself a Southerner of sorts. His reading of the region's history told him that a golden age had existed in the South sometime prior to 1800; and he even bemoaned the decline of aristocratic influence in the post-Civil War South. Thus, Mencken's attack on the contemporary South was grounded in a certain nostalgic fondness for the Virginia dynasty, and his later championing of Howard Odum and Cash was a strange one. Mencken was no modern liberal, and his affection for the aristocratic ethos should logically have placed him nearer the Agrarians. But Mencken, unlike most American conservatives, had even less use for the clergy and the spirit of religious fundamentalism than he had for social reform. What led to the enmity between Mencken and the Vanderbilt

group was the publicist's savage dissection of the fundamentalist mentality at work in the Scopes trial. It was in response to Mencken's attack on the South in Dayton that poets and intellectuals in Nashville readied the counterattack which was to appear in 1930 as *I'll Take My Stand*.

By then even for defenders of the Southern tradition, not to mention its critics, the tradition had become an "entity" which could not be simply assumed; it had to be reappropriated.<sup>19</sup> Accompanying this reification of the tradition was an upsurge in historical self-consciousness, a sign itself of the distance between self and tradition. As Allen Tate was to write in 1930, "[T]radition must, in other words, be automatically operative before it can be called tradition."<sup>20</sup> The very act of trying to re-present the tradition pointed to its absence. In fiction and poetry the tradition was often symbolized in the portraits of the heroic generation, the presiding presences of the tradition, who had wrested the land from the Indians and defended it against the Yankees and the aggressions of Reconstruction. The portraits of these men—stern, untroubled, and resolute—hung in the entrance halls or the parlors of the homes; and from there they judged the actions of their successors. Their example was a standing rebuke to a decline in energy and will. The next generation was of necessity less heroic; charismatic origins were institutionalized, perpetuated by hard work, and marked by less glamor, for the generation between the heroic one and the one that experienced the tradition as absent had to live in the world rather than die heroically. They were too near their sons to be quite heroic. The meaning of the Civil War was, in Donald Davidson's words:

Something for grandfathers to tell  
Boys who clamor and climb.  
And were you there, and did you ride  
With the men of that old time?<sup>21</sup>

("Sequel of Appomattox")

And yet, a crucial segment of the third (and in some cases fourth) generation, which was born around the turn of the century and lived through the cultural crisis of World War I, came to feel

increasingly estranged from the tradition. That tradition loomed distressingly distant and overpoweringly strong, insupportable yet inescapable.<sup>22</sup>

This in turn raises the question which has haunted the modern world and has remained central to the culture of modernism: what does it mean to live without a tradition? Insofar as Southern writers and intellectuals were concerned with this question, they expressed a central concern of the modernist movement. The answers to the question are various, some of which this century has seen embodied in ghastly forms. Here Hannah Arendt's work sheds light, for the loss of "the thread which safely guided us through the vast realms of the past" renders memory helpless. In the face of these difficulties "old verities which have lost all concrete relevance" may be "rehashed." Also in the absence of its traditional authorizations, present authority may degenerate into the application of violence which in turn provokes counterviolence. Or finally the world may grow "fantastic."<sup>23</sup>

Certainly of the rehashing of old verities there was no end in the 1930s. One thinks here of the Agrarians or of William Alexander Percy. Calling upon the past to aid the present, they attempted to revitalize the tradition by turning it into a conservative, even reactionary ideology. Some, like Percy, realized that the tradition could not be revitalized in any binding, collective way and that it had become "merely" a personal code by which they could at least live.

Nor was violence far from the surface of much of the writings in the 1930s. One thinks here of Tate's call for violence to reclaim the lost Southern tradition or his evocation of the lost possibility of an expansionist slave empire in his biography of Jefferson Davis. And no matter how far removed they were from the ideological violence of contemporary European fascism, the fictional fantasies of Faulkner's Gail Hightower in *Light in August* or the lacerating self-destructiveness of Bayard Sartoris in *Flags in the Dust* and the sophisticated poetry of Tate or Donald Davidson in his "Lee in the Mountains," all testified to the barely submerged violence that threatened to surface in the Southern tradition at its time of dissolution.

Certainly Arendt's description of reality become "fantastic"

could stand as a general characteristic for much of the literature of Renaissance, a sort of modernist gothic style. What else is Faulkner wrestling with in his work up through, say, *Absalom, Absalom!*? And surely W. J. Cash and Lillian Smith were preoccupied with the fantastic aspects of Southern culture, the ways in which historically shaped desires and their inverse, self-destructiveness, had woven a texture which stifled rather than gave comfort. Though the question of when a culture becomes fantastic is terribly complicated, not least because all cultures are based upon certain fantasies, a provisional answer might apply the pragmatic criterion: when it no longer "works." Themes and motifs split off and become isolated from the whole; they are spun out into whole visions. One might also say, following Freud, that in fantasy there is a refusal to acknowledge that we must die, that we have a body which imposes certain limits on us, and that we must live in a world with other people.<sup>24</sup> In cultures grown fantastic, the regressive or reactionary form of memory is dominant. Time is denied.

Paul Ricoeur extends Freud's discussion of the relationship of fantasy to reality by noting that in aberrant cultural situations the cultural principle in the individual, the super-ego, is more than normally driven by aggressive impulses, guilt (aggression against the self), and over-idealizations. Such a "culture of melancholy" becomes death-dealing: "the super-ego reveals itself as a pure culture of the death instincts, to the point of suicide."<sup>25</sup> Rather than enforcing the binding power of Eros, guilt unravels the collective and individual worlds. As we shall see in works such as Faulkner's *Flags in the Dust* and *Light in August* and Percy's *Lanterns on the Levee*, cultural melancholia embodied the lost tradition in figures of death, at once idealized and feared because of their powerful hold over the present and because of their absence. Thus a tradition grown fantastic denies death and the workings of time on one level only to be obsessed by death at a deeper level. The monumental or reactionary form of historical consciousness is not necessarily wrong in a moral or substantive sense, since there are traditions which one might wish revitalized. Rather it is "wrong" insofar as it desires the impossible—repetition—rather than the necessary recollection and working through of the past.

But in the Southern Renaissance a second movement of mem-



ory despaired of the repetition which marked the culture of melancholy and set about scrutinizing the tradition of the family romance itself. As seen in Faulkner's *Quentin Compson* of *Absalom, Absalom!* and in Tate's work, beginning with "Ode to the Confederate Dead" and culminating in *The Fathers*, this form of historical consciousness ends in a tragic confusion between past and present, fantasy and reality. Neither repetition nor recollection can triumph. What recollection reveals is the violence and horror at the heart of the tradition itself, or its weakness and contradictions. Time becomes an obsession, and the founding of the tradition and the costs thereby incurred are emphasized.

The third mode of historical consciousness moved toward a reconstitution of "reality" after having carried through on a demystification of the family romance. Building upon the agonized analysis of the second stage, it incorporated and transcended the Southern tradition as previously conceived. As seen in Faulkner's "The Bear" and the writings of W. J. Cash and Lillian Smith, memory emerges from the trap of fantasy which is organized around the judgments of the founding fathers. Recollection triumphs over repetition; not only the impossibility but the undesirability of resurrecting the tradition become clear.

These three stages of historical consciousness present analogies to the unfolding and transformation of memory in psychoanalysis. In both instances, the past is problematic: now overpowering, now completely absent from memory, it is debilitating. What had been assumed as "mine" now appears as "other" and strange. In the final stage this "otherness" is demystified and reasimilated after having been worked through. It is incorporated into a new synthesis. The movement is from incapacitating repetition to recollection and then to self-consciousness, from identity to estrangement and back to incorporation at a higher level. Beyond Nietzsche's monumental and critical forms of historical consciousness, a new form—the analytic or the ironic—emerges. One awakens from the nightmare of history.

Thus the modes of historical consciousness which emerged in the 1930s and 1940s were manifestations of the ambivalent spirit of cultural modernism. The prototypical historical consciousness

of the modern period is obsessed with the past and the precarious possibilities of its survival. In addition, the preoccupation with the past among Southern writers and intellectuals in this period was typically Southern. Still, they were by no means united in their attitudes toward the past in general or toward the family romance in particular. The decades after 1930 were to see a reassessment of the Southern tradition, and it is to that effort which we will now turn.

## 2

# The Southern Family Romance and Its Context

Historically, the South has been a “peripheral” or “underdeveloped” region within the European world-system and within the United States itself.<sup>1</sup> Before the Civil War the South’s cotton went directly to England and the Continent or so ended after calling at New York. Lacking significant home industries and unable to raise enough foodstuffs to meet its own needs, the South had to import most of what it consumed. Besides its economic disadvantage in the larger world economic system, the South was starkly divided along class and racial lines. A planter elite dominated Southern life; and it was just accessible enough to ambitious—and lucky—strivers from the sizable Southern yeomanry to keep social tensions among whites from becoming unmanageable.

But if the plantation system was the key to understanding Southern economy and society, the presence of an enslaved black population (around one-third of the total population of the South) explained much else about the South. Slavery placed the South on the defensive in the modern world. From its early cosmopolitanism, the South after 1830 increasingly turned inward, developing a siege mentality to justify itself and its essential institutions. Under attack from the outside, the region came to see

itself as different from the rest of the United States. Though the South was still a frontier society in many ways, its planter elite was attracted to what historian Eugene Genovese calls "pre-modern," i.e. pre-bourgeois, values.<sup>2</sup> In the planter ideology, leisure was valued over hard work; the cultivation of the social graces and hospitality was preferred to the pursuit of the main chance; a patriarchal hierarchical society came to seem preferable to an egalitarian one; the agrarian way of life was preferred to the urban, industrial sort. Cultured Southerners were struck by the resemblance between the South they thought they inhabited and the fictional world of Sir Walter Scott's novels. In the Southern conception of itself, master and slave, rich and poor, male and female, knew their place before men and before God.

In all these ways, and others, the South was not born traditional, but became so. Its insistence upon cultural superiority masked anachronistic cultural values. The relative prosperity of the planter class hid the fact that the South was itself enslaved by the demands of the larger world economy. Its defenses of slavery diverted attention from the fact that slavery rested upon the master-slave relationship, upon plain exploitation, not benevolence or concern for the less fortunate. And the white South's uneasy balancing of democratic aspirations with aristocratic ethos produced contradictions of its own.

The central "event" in the history of the South was the Civil War and Reconstruction. In defeat, in the memory of the common struggle against the Yankee and the Freedman, the white South became united as it rarely had been before the war. Many white Southerners professed relief that the "peculiar institution" of slavery was a thing of the past. But the destruction of slavery did not automatically lead to the economic "take-off" of the South.<sup>3</sup> Its cotton was still in demand in the outside world. The plantation system, it turned out, could run quite well with "free" labor. In place of chattel slavery for blacks and freehold farming for middle-level and poorer whites came tenancy and sharecropping. If the small farmer did manage to hold onto his land in the grim years after 1865, he often was little better off than the sharecropper. He was caught in the "crop lien" system by which he mort-

gaged his crop to a merchant in exchange for a loan to see him through the coming year. By 1880 cotton production had reached its highest prewar levels. In place of the dignified old planter or the fiery Cavalier, the merchant and banker as absentee landlords now played a prominent part in the plantation economy.

The 1870s saw something new in Southern history—the rise of an indigenous commercial class linked with the emerging railroad, coal, and iron interests but still tied by interest, family, and sentiment to the agricultural sector. Encouraged by the “Redeemer” governments which had rescued the Southern states from “radical” governments imposed by the North during Reconstruction, efforts were made to attract investment capital to the region from the Northeast and Europe. In the manner of most elites in underdeveloped areas, the ideology of this new class—the “New South” ideology—expressed both reactionary sentiments and progressive desires, particularist pride and national sentiments.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, however, the rhetoric of sectional development masked the South’s continuing dependence upon the outside investment that flowed into the South as the century came to a close. Though the illusion of rapid growth and regional prosperity was widespread, World War I saw the South still dominated by “low-wage, low-value-creating industries.”<sup>5</sup> The case of textile manufacturing told much of the story: goods produced in the South were then sent North for final processing. Though economic diversity grew, the Southern economy remained a pawn of outside interests.

World War I saw the rapid growth of the lumber, shipbuilding, explosives, textile, coal, oil, and iron and steel industries. Cotton prices soared; the years 1917 through 1919 were the best ever. Yet after 1919 and the return to “normalcy,” cotton prices plummeted: from a high of 35¢ in 1919 to around 20¢ in 1927 and then to 6½¢ in 1932. The invasion of the boll weevil, the exodus of blacks and poor whites, and the shift of cotton production toward the Southwest contributed to the growing awareness that cotton was no longer king. By 1930 some 55 per cent of farm operators were tenants. The region’s economy stood somewhere between miserable failure and utter disaster. Though state and local governments continued to try to lure industries to the South with the