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America, the South, and the Literature of Reconstruction: Uniqueness of “Another Land”

Though it is essentially believed that it was the mid-years of the nineteenth century that cemented the South as one solid entity, the nature of Southern distinctiveness and separatism is more complex and certainly should be traced into colonial times. On the one hand, long before the times of the Civil War the North and the South could be described as, to a certain degree, similar:

...there once had been a moral perspective that embraced both North and South. That ethical unity, a mixture of traditional Protestantism and folk tradition, made possible a united front against the crown in the American Revolution. A common heritage from Great Britain – devotion to common law and the rights of free men, commitment to familial styles of patriarchy, common language and literary culture – assured a harmony of political interests. (Wyatt-Brown 19)

On the other hand, as long ago as in the colonial period, churchgoing in the South was far from the seriousness and piety of the North, the towns almost absent on the maps of the South whereas Southern plantations were turning into profit-seeking institutions in comparison to the local consumption farming of the North, not to mention the slave-based economy of the Dixie Land. Those Southern settlers who were of British origin came basically from the “more conservative, rustic and wilder areas and households” of the Isles. And slowly but significantly, especially in the decades of the Industrial Revolution, the difference between the agrarian, conservative South and the urban, progressive North became much more visible.¹ Southerners tended to idealize the original Union of 1787, calling it nostalgically the “good Old Union” in comparison with the state of the Union some decades later. The abolitionist movement, the 1860 Lincoln – Hamlin campaign with slavery as one of its main issues and the final choice of Lincoln as President could only widen the already unbridgeable gap – as many Southerners would say – between the North and the South. It must also be noted that some distinguished Northern-

¹ For the differences between the North and the South mentioned above see Wyatt-Brown 18-19.

ers might have added some to set both regions apart, expressing publicly their opinions about the South. Ralph Waldo Emerson himself, during his speech delivered in 1862, spoke about the South with a feeling of open superiority: “Why cannot the best civilization be extended over the whole country, since the disorder of the less-civilized portion menaces the existence of the country?” (Vann Woodward 142). Soon after the 1860 presidential election the *Daily Constitutionalist*, published in Augusta, Georgia announced in its editorial:

The differences between North and South have been growing more marked for years, and the mutual repulsion more radical, until not a single sympathy is left between the dominant influences in each section. Not even the banner of the stars and stripes excites the same thrill of patriotic emotion, alike in the heart of the northern Republican and the southern secessionist. (quoted in Potter 448)

The Civil War itself, as David M. Potter emphasizes, plays the catalyst role of Southern nationalism. The war invokes in the Southerners a sense of enormous unity as a group: “It gives them new things to share – common danger, common efforts against the adversary, common sacrifice, and perhaps a common triumph” (quoted in Potter 450). Louis D. Rubin, Jr., commenting on the final loss of the war by the South, can still emphasize its force of unifying the Southerners:

Yet in defeat the South not only retained its sense of identity, but added to it its mythos of a lost cause, a sense of ancestral pieties and loyalties bequeathed through suffering, and a unity that comes through common deprivation and shared hatred and adversity. This was not exactly what those who favored secession had in mind, but if their object was to preserve Southern identity, there can be no doubt that it worked. (5)

The period that followed – Reconstruction – though technically bringing the South back to the Union, practically caused the “chasm” between Southerners and Northerners to grow even bigger. To borrow a simple statement, “Confederate white supremacy... became increasingly difficult to reconcile with Revolutionary idealism or Federal anti-slavery actions” (Willis 142). White people of the South remembered the war loss extraordinarily well and interpreted any attempts of the North to help the South during Reconstruction as intervention of foreign forces into the crucial matters of the South. And the word “carpetbagger,” that became so popular after the Civil War, had in the South only one, pejorative, meaning. Carpetbaggers, among all the possible evils they tried to implement in the South, on the ideological level, epitomized the prime danger,

the loss of Southern agrarian identity as attacked by the foreign industrial civilization of the North. And though Reconstruction in its original design aimed to put an end to the "house divided," its final result "was actually to widen and deepen the disparity between the revolutionized society and the rest of the Union" (Woodward 110-111). Many Southerners accentuated the existence of two different civilizations within the United States of America, that of the South and that of the North. In 1880, three years after the formal Reconstruction had been over, Edwin L. Godkin, examining the state of affairs concerning both sections of America, wrote: "The South in its structure of society, in its manners and social traditions, differs nearly as much from the North as Ireland does, or Hungary, or Turkey" (quoted in Woodward 142).

In the era of the New South the factual and historical grounds of Southern uniqueness are additionally enriched by myth-making sentimentalism: planting Confederate monuments across and along the South, celebrating Confederate heroism in Southern papers and commemorating anniversaries of the War, arousing interest in genealogy, idealizing the aristocratic heritage of the region including various expressions of nostalgia for the "good ole times." The workings and interplay of all these factors remained not without influence upon the condition of Southern letters and must have shaped the vision and standing of its literature in the last decades of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the one that followed.

The conflict between the two regions of America was often emphasized as a clash between the South and America itself or between the South and the Nation, the distinction explored after the Civil War by journalists, political activists, and writers in the South but occasionally also in the North. Many of them examined all possible historical, cultural, and civilizational aspects of both sections emphasizing their entire separation from each other, and justifying calling them two distinct "civilizations," a word popular towards the end of the nineteenth century, often standing for culture or nation. One compared the difference between Alabama and the states beyond the deep South to the difference between "[t]he Congo... [and] Massachusetts or Kansas or California" (Cash VII). A Southern farmer, exposing the Southern attachment to the local and regional, when showing the gradation of territorial and cultural importance, might, after the Civil War, say "I go first for Greenville, then for Greenville District, then for the up-country, then for South Carolina, then for the South, then for the United States; and after that I don't go for a thing" (quoted in Light 82). Alexander H. Stephens once wrote: "My native land, my country, the only one that is country to me, is Georgia" (quoted in Potter 463). It must be emphasized that his kind of "localism" did not exclude one's attachment to the South as such. Thus on some other occasion the same Alexander H. Stephens could also write: "I must confess that all my feelings of attachment are most ardent

towards that with which all my interests and associations are identified.... The South is my home – my fatherland” (quoted in Potter 474).

The history of the relationship between the two regions almost produced a new academic specialization: the study on the sectional conflict and the differences between the North and the South. The examination of these differences is reflected, among others, in the famous *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), in which the outstanding Southern intellectuals “tend to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way” (XIX) and, about a decade later, W. J. Cash opened the introduction to his *The Mind of the South* writing: “There exists among us by ordinary – both North and South – a profound conviction that the South is another land, sharply differentiated from the rest of the American nation, and exhibiting within itself a remarkable homogeneity” (VII), and thus once again pitting the South against “the American nation.” Among the writers who focused on the sharp distinction between the North and the South in their post-Civil War fiction were Southerners George W. Cable (1844-1925), Thomas Nelson Page (1853-1922), and Thomas Dixon (1864-1946), and Northerners William Albion Tourgee (1837-1905) and John William De Forest (1826-1906).

Like many other writers Cable, a Southerner with Northern roots, developed the topic of the North and the South in stories set in the post-Civil War Dixie. In *John March, Southerner*, published in 1895, Cable put the sectional hatred in the lines of the poem of a Southern poetess, who expressed it in the tone of pathos, writing:

O! hide me from the Northron's eye!
Let me not hear his fawning voice,
I heard the Southland matron sigh
And saw the piteous tear... (107)

In another part of the novel he uses a joke told by the heroine's maid, Johanna, to expose the chasm between the nature and mentality of the “Dixie man” and “Yankee”:

Dixie man say, Fine daay, seh! Yankee say, You think it a-gwine fo' to rain? Dixie man – Oh, no, seh! hit jiss cayn't rain to-day, seh! Den if it jiss po' down Yankee say, Don't this – yeh look somepm like raain? An' Dixie man – Yass, seh, hit do; hit look like raim but Law'! hit ain't rain. You Yankees can't un' stan' ow Southe'n weatheh, she! (136-137)

The distinction between the Dixieland and the “Yankee land” seems to be the core of the definition of the South itself. The South appears as better, warmer, nicer than the

North. It also possesses a unique romantic dimension, set against the ordinary, materialistic North.

'Our South isn't a matter of boundaries, or skies, or landscapes.... It's not... a South of climate, like Yankee's Florida. It's a certain ungeographical South – within – the South – as portable and intangible as – as'

'As our souls in our bodies,' interposed Barbara.... 'Its a sort o'something – social, civil, political, economic –'

'Romantic?'

'Yes, romantic! Something that makes –'

'No land like Dixie in all the wider world over.' (327)

In Thomas Nelson Page's *Red Rock* (1898) the conflict is rather between Southern gentlemen and rascals. Though not all the Yankees are rascals, those who are usually have power and influence. Southerners are still "good guys" who treat the Yankee officers "politely, but not warmly, of course, only just so civilly as to show that Southerners knew what was due to guests even when they were enemies" (I, 272). Paradoxically but, in a sense, also therapeutically, despite the times of slavery, the lost war, social ostracism, and the ruining of the region, Southerners are shown by Page and some other writers as the victors, the victors in the field of spirit, dignity, and mental superiority. As F. Garvin-Davenport claims, "defeats and frustration are usually better remembered" than victories, and, quoting William R. Taylor, he adds that the Southerners "persisted in seeing themselves as different and, increasingly, they tended to reshape this acknowledged difference into a claim of superiority" (4-5). This is also the way, sometimes camouflaged, to emphasize the otherness of the Southerners as people, culturally and socially entirely different from the rest of the Americans, a distinct civilization. One of the possible strategies to achieve that sense of being distinct is to compare the situation of the South to other states or nations. Poland is one of such states that the Southern writers refer to as in a similar situation to the Dixie. Dr. Cary, a character in *Red Rock*, is aware of the actions of Reconstruction aimed at destroying the South. He compares the South during Reconstruction to "the greatest Revolution since the time of Poland" (I, 322)² meaning probably the 1863 uprising.

Interestingly, Thomas Dixon, another Southern author, uses the example of Poland in his 1904 novel *The Clansman*. The advocates of radical Reconstruction "swear to make the South a second Poland. Their watchwords are vengeance and confiscation" (9).

² For an introductory note on the literature of Reconstruction see Sobieraj 135-143.

Dixon describes the post-war North often by contrasting it with the South. In *The Leopard's Spots*, the North is "beautiful homes, with their rich carpets and handsome furniture... beautiful carriages in the parks" (141). The post-Civil War South is "the agony of universal ruin" (142), "the cry of the widow and orphan, the hungry and the dying" (143), "the land of ashes and tombs and tears" (410). It is probably too much to say that certain Southern writers of those times display a kind of neurosis in their works while emphasizing the superiority of the South over the North since certain exaggerations of feelings they present are justified by historical experience. Yet, of course, converting "emotion into an image," they construct and protest the traditional myth of the coexistence of two, often conflicting elements, that of culture and that of nature. The Southern writer puts the myth into actual historical context. The South stands for nature, whereas the traditional North of democracy. The America of innocence, is often transformed in the process of industrialization, the development of the city, and the growing settlement of newcomers, into the land of corruption. As a matter of fact, these writers report the cultural crisis of nineteenth-century America, and of the nineteenth-century world, the crisis that Leo Marx later examined in his book *The Machine and the Garden*.

The Northern writer focuses on quite the opposite. The South is responsible for slavery, for the Civil War, and thus any ethical evaluation often makes the South the evil land set against the better North. William Tourgee, a leading Northern voice in the fiction of Reconstruction, describing the conflict between the two regions, "confronted a humanitarian of the North with the South's hostility" (87). This conviction was developed in Tourgee's fiction and in his non-fictional account of the Ku Klux Klan, *The Invisible Empire* (1880). In the Preface to his less popular two short novels, *John Eax* and *Mamelon or the South Without the Shadow* (1882), Tourgee provides the reader with an evaluation of both regions which stands in opposition to that of such Southern authors as Page or Dixon. In the Preface he prepares his audience for his judgments concerning the North and South with the following statement loaded with an allegorical dimension: "The shadow was over all – the shadow of Slavery and of its children, Ignorance and Wars and Poverty. In the shadow I wrote, contrasting it with the light. It came to me then, almost as a revelation, that the North and the South were two families in one house – two peoples under one government" (6).

The theory expressed in the Preface finds its application later in the very text of the *Mamelon*. A character in the novel, a Southerner, receives Captain Dixon, a Yankee, with

a sort of embarrassed feeling that he [Dixon] was of another people. This has always been true of North and South; they have always been two peoples. Touching in terri-

tory, identical in language and united in governmental forms, but distinct and separate in habits of life and thought. I felt that Captain Dixon was on his guard as a stranger and I was also on guard towards him. (207)

In *Bricks Without Straw* (1880), Tourgee's most famous novel, the gulf between the civilization of the North and that of the South is "deep and impassable" and the contrast between both regions is extended to that between an American and a Confederate (312). Tourgee's characters are the spokesmen for the North to such an extent that a reviewer found *Bricks Without Straw* to be one of those novels which "tend to keep alive sectional strife to inflame Northern bitterness against the South" (Kirkland 367).

But Tourgee's criticism of the South and his appreciation of the North is not simplified or primitive. He does not simply show terrible Southerners as opposed to kind and righteous Northerners. His method displays a great deal of skill and even cunning in showing the North as "good and right." In *Bricks Without Straw* he invents a white Southern aristocrat, Hesden Le Moyne, who is able to pick out and understand the roots of Southern evil, and to appreciate the Northern mission to make the South decent after the Civil War. This mission is embodied in the character of Mollie, an idealized Yankee, who has a peaceful life in the North but comes to the South to teach in a school for black children. Thus the Northern writer provides the reader with the criticism of the South and appreciation of the North through the Southern character who

had felt naturally the distrust of the man of Northern birth which a century of hostility and suspicion had bred in the air of the South. He had grown up in it. He had been taught to regard the 'Yankees'... as a distinct people – sometimes generous and brave, but normally envious, mean, low-spirited, treacherous, and malignant. He admitted the exceptions, but they only proved the rule. As a class, he considered them cold, calculating, selfish, greedy for power and wealth, and regardless of the means by which these were acquired. Above all things, had been thought to regard them as animated by hatred of the South. Knowing that this had been his own bias, he could readily excuse his neighbors for the same. (367)

When Hesden supports the black education organized in the South by the Yankees, the influential Southerners condemn him as the one who betrayed the ideals of the South. In the *Southern Clarion*, a county newspaper, he is considered as a man whom

[e]very true Southern man or woman should refuse to recognize as a gentleman.... Hesden Le Moyne has chosen to degrade an honored name. He has elected to go with the niggers, nigger teachers and nigger preachers; but let him forever be an outcast

among the respectable and high minded white people of Horsford, whom he has betrayed and disgraced! (369)

The sectional conflict is perhaps best referred to by the Northern writer, John William De Forest, in his novel, significantly entitled *The Bloody Chasm*, published in 1880. The novel reveals the chasm between both civilizations, that of the North and that of the South, but it also discloses the possibilities for reconciling both regions.

The conflict between the North and South, which reaches its climax during the Civil War and gets to a dangerous stage during Reconstruction and the New South, also enters into the world of literature. The writers, through their literary spokesmen, i.e. their fiction's characters, continue the fight, the fight to convince the opponent that he is wrong in his judgments about his own region.

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