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*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*
ISSN 1481-4374
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Volume 3 (2001) Issue 2 Article 11

# Southern American Regional Sensibility versus the North

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## Recommended Citation

Kowalczyk-Twarowski, Krzysztof. "Southern American Regional Sensibility versus the North." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 3.2 (2001): <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1127>

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***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture***

ISSN 1481-4374 <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>
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**Volume 3 Issue 2 (June 2001) Article 11**
**Krzysztof Kowalczyk-Twarowski,**
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<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss2/11>

Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 3.2 (2001)**
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss2/>

**Abstract**: In his paper, "Southern American Regional Sensibility versus the North," Krzysztof Kowalczyk-Twarowski investigates some key myths underlying the culture of the American South. Kowalczyk-Twarowski discusses the issue of national versus regional sensibility in early statesmen and writers such as Thomas Jefferson, George Fitzhugh, and John C. Calhoun. Starting with the mythology that evolved about North-South relations in the wake of the Civil War, Kowalczyk-Twarowski delineates some steps in the construction of regional feeling. In his analysis of the latter, Kowalczyk-Twarowski argues that the romanticized image of the South is a product of Northern needs for an antidote to the fast pace of change which swept America in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Using the examples of the 1930 anthology *I'll Take My Stand* and *The Thanatos Syndrome* by Walker Percy, Kowalczyk-Twarowski shows how Southern mythology resists change and supports self-defensive passivity instead.

**Krzysztof KOWALCZYK-TWAROWSKI**

## Southern American Regional Sensibility versus the North

The prominence in early America of Virginians (e.g., George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Edmund Pendleton, James Madison, James Monroe) may obscure a certain important fact. For all their influence well into the nineteenth century, these men belonged to the landed gentry of the South, a society and culture tottering perceptibly, along with the socio-economic order on which it rested, even as the country was striving for independence. Although these men were instrumental in breaking away from Great Britain, it is perhaps more reasonable to think of them as Virginia aristocracy rather than national leaders; localists rather than federalists. Daniel Boorstin terms the outcome of their exertions on behalf of the nation the "supreme irony" where "The turmoil of the war, the destruction wrought in Virginia by British troops, the disestablishment of the church, the disruption of commerce, the decline of tobacco culture all spelled the decline of the aristocracy and its institutions" (Boorstin 143). A bitterer paradox relates specifically to Thomas Jefferson. A thoroughly liberal mind, in the first draft of *The Declaration of Independence*, he included a proposal to improve radically the position of the blacks in the South, with a hint at their eventual emancipation. However, the Congress voted to drop the notion while just a few decades later, the Northern states, in a complete about-face, demanded that the South abolish slavery.

Several times in his career Jefferson withdrew from national affairs to devote his energies to local politics and, on one occasion, to work on his only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Both in this text and in his public service he identifies himself as Virginian first and American second. His views were molded by the peculiar lifestyle of the Virginia aristocracy with its unique brand of relaxed Anglicanism, broad tolerance of heterodoxy, and the natural, nepotistic interface between the landed families and local politics. Steeped in pastoralism, Jefferson was at first (in the 1770s and 1780s) averse even to considering agrarianism the policy for his country. He believed that relying on economic viability in an agriculturally-based society misses the point, the true worth of a rural society residing in its sound morals and "permanence of government" (Jefferson qtd. in Baym 1, 654). He argued that manufacturers, and the resultant urban squalor, should remain out of the country and he insisted on shipping agricultural produce to Europe for processing, irrespective of expense. The industrialist was Jefferson's bogeyman. Yet, although he abhorred industrialism, he looked on the machine and its uses in a different light: "From Jefferson's perspective, the machine is a token of that liberation of the human spirit to be realized by the young American Republic; the factory system, on the other hand, is but feudal oppression in a slightly modified form. Once the machine is removed from the dark, crowded, grimy cities of Europe, he assumes that it will blend harmoniously into the open countryside of his native land. He envisages it turning millwheels, moving ships up rivers, and, all in all, helping transform a wilderness into a society of the middle landscape" (Marx 150). Later, especially during his presidency, he was forced to revise his views. A lifelong reader and admirer of Theocritus and Virgil, Jefferson came round to regarding the industrialization of America as the only safeguard of its sovereignty.

For about twenty years after Jefferson's death in 1826, the tobacco industry sagging, many Virginians were still prepared to endorse the prospective demise of slavery. At mid-century, however, a change made itself felt: "By the 1850s, agricultural science and a revived plantation economy made slavery much more attractive, halted the speed of manumissions, and replaced Jeffersonianism by a reactionary paternalism" (Wish 5). The regional identity of the whole South was reinforced, slavery retaining its pivotal role. Like in the North, the public sentiment in the South was divided, yet in Dixie it was becoming increasingly difficult not to take a stand on slavery. Thus, defending or condemning slavery came to constitute an essential component of regional identity. Among the apologists one cannot fail to include two names: George Fitzhugh and John C. Calhoun (for Fitzhough, see Wish; for Calhoun, see Wilson). Calhoun is on record stating in 1830 that the ideas formulated in *The Declaration of Independence* are "always understood as applying only to the white race" (qtd. in Bartlett 83).

Still, he was known for painstaking attention to his own slaves' needs and general benevolence. Developing his perspective from standing up for his native South Carolina to embracing the

whole of the South, he argued that slavery was good for America and his claim was predicated on the conviction of the patent inferiority of the black race. Slavery, he believed, stabilized the South and, by extension, the Union. Similarly, George Fitzhugh, in his 1854 *Sociology for the South*, asserted: "We shall build no system, attempt to account for nothing, but simply point out what is natural and universal" (see in Wish 49). Thereby he voiced a crucial Southern belief, i.e., that the region's culture and social system were natural, organic. Fitzhugh employed Aristotle for his arguments and when making his obeisance to the Union in *Cannibals All!* (1857), he declared his chief concern to be the Virginianising of Virginia (see in Wish 95) and the adaptation of the system of government to suit the South's needs.

The remarkable feature of Southern regional discourse up to the Civil War is the transformation of the sense of the Other: The projected reader of Southern writing; the Northern industrialist; the Southern black; the Northern proletarian; the freed black. In Jefferson the tensions of Southern life are still negligible. Ease suffuses his work and the only, mild, antagonist is the Northern Unionist against whom the South wants to protect its economy and lifestyle. At least until the first decade of the nineteenth century, Jefferson saw himself as a counter balance to New England industrialism. The generation of Calhoun and Fitzhugh went through a phase of Jeffersonianism, including the readiness to countenance the manumissions. Slavery at the time was perceived as temporary, although little thought was given to the future existence of emancipated blacks in Southern realities, except for vague ideas of sending them back to Africa. Calhoun hoped to encourage the unity of interest between the Southern planter and the Northern industrialist and the failure of the idea was a personal tragedy to him. In Fitzhugh's writings one notices much more antagonism. He attacks industrialism, grossly exaggerating the squalor of Northern working-class life, despite firsthand experience of the contrary being true. Fitzhugh's other obstacle is the freed black who sets a dangerous example to the slaves and who should be re-enslaved or sent back to Africa.

The war of 1861-65 brought into bold relief some of the frictions previously discounted within Southern culture. One can think of the example of Mark Twain, first volunteering for the Confederate army and then deserting from it, to imagine the upheavals of the time. The war demonstrated that the Southern whites were far from uniform in their views on society. Firstly, in some areas, notably in the Appalachian Mountains, Unionism was popular. In addition, the construction of Confederate laws and constitution followed the principles of federal regulations, including a strong central government and strict taxation. Secondly, more than fifty percent of the originally enlisted Southern soldiers were missing from their regiments when the hostilities ended, only a small proportion having been killed in action. Thirdly, faced with the prospect of defeat some Confederate leaders were seriously considering enlisting blacks, even at the cost of manumission. Thus the myth of the Southern establishment standing unconditionally for racial integrity appears groundless.

If this is true and many Southern myths turn out to be spurious, what exactly is it that shores up the region's mythology? What is so appealing, and to whom, in the concept of the enduring uniqueness of Dixie? One answer to these questions emanates from the relations between the South and the North while the process of regional identity construction was at its most intense. Rapid urbanization and industrialization created a need for a usable opposite as an antidote to the speed of change. Emerging mass society, ethnic and racial amalgamation, the consolidating state machinery menaced the individual. The South seemed to be a very attractive cure for all these ills. Thus, to a very large extent it was the North that gave rise to the myth of Dixie, because the North needed it as desperately as the Southern whites professed their wish to be left alone. In this dialectic, what was on the surface the beginning of the end in social reality, i.e., the lost Civil War, proved to be a lasting mythological attraction. For the pragmatic North the grace of the romanticized Lost Causism of the South held a great deal of irresistible power. Even in the heyday of abolitionist crusades, Northern representations of Southern life tended to have an aura of charming mystery. In the twentieth century a number of scholars drew attention to this relationship, notably Francis Pendleton Gaines in his 1925 *The Southern Plantation: A Study in the Development and the Accuracy of a Tradition*), Gunnar Myrdal in his 1944 *An American Dilemma*), William Taylor in

his 1963 *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character*), and Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords in their 1978 "The Northern Origins of Southern Mythology."

The legend of the benevolent South, committed to land, family, and chivalry, bewitched two classic, Northern-born, novelists: Francis Scott Fitzgerald and Henry James. The former describes his father, descended from a Maryland planter family, as a man who "came from another America" (Gerster and Cords 330). In some of his short stories Fitzgerald betrays an uncritical fascination with the myths of plantation life and the Southern belle. In *The Bostonians* (1886) James idealizes the South although later on he was forced to admit that at the time of writing the novel he knew very little about the realities of life in Dixie. I argue that this myth of the South appears to be a lasting standard in American literature: One recent Southern novel, Walker Percy's 1987 *The Thanatos Syndrome*, provides an example for my notions about representations of the South and its relationship with the North: "The place where the strange events related in this book occur, Feliciana, is not imaginary. It was so named by the Spanish. It was and is part of Louisiana, a strip of pleasant pineland running from the Mississippi to the Perdido, a curious region of a curious state. Never quite Creole or French or Anglo-Saxon or Catholic or Baptist like other parishes of Louisiana, it has served over the years as a refuge for all manner of malcontents. If America was settled by dissenters from various European propositions, Feliciana was settled by dissenters from the dissent, American Tories who had no use for the Revolution, disgruntled Huguenots and Cavaliers from the Carolinas, New Englanders fleeing from Puritanism, unionists who voted against secession, Confederate refugees from occupied New Orleans, deserters from the Confederate Army, smugglers from both sides, criminals holed up in the Honey Island Swamp" (7).

It looks at the beginning as if Percy were constructing a subtly fictitious world, more imaginative than Hardy's Wessex, less Southern than Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha. Yet soon it turns out that the novel is very much about the South, more specifically about a contemporary variant of the mystique of the Southern Way of Life. The mystique attracts a New Yorker, Bob Como, who changes the spelling of his name to Comeaux, a more appropriately Louisianian surname. He conducts an experiment, involving loading the local water supply with chemicals in a massive social engineering project. What he appeals to when explaining this is qualitarian sentiments he believes to be a characteristic of Southerners. Comeaux is a modern Mephisto who argues for elimination of low quality humans to enhance the Southern myth of quality as opposed to indiscriminate democracy with the corollary deterioration of standards. The novel evinces something traditionally Southern when intimating the narrator's attitudes, different as they are from Comeaux's. At the end of the story the narrator is satisfied to return to his original station in life, i.e., to being a provincial psychiatrist. He shows no professional ambitions and is, generally, passive. Southern life, and his own, seems to him self-explanatory. As his world becomes threatened by a Yankee upstart, the menace must be dealt with to restore the balance upset. The novel presents no significant change of the said standard, unless we conceive of the paradise lost and regained motif as relative improvement. This kind of self-defensive passivity is a perennial component of Southern literature, its most articulate formulation coming of age in the 1930 Agrarian essays, compiled in *I'll Take My Stand*. Here, the apologia *pro domo sua* more than countervails the identification of the chief enemy, who, apparently, has remained the same for over two hundred years.

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Author's profile: Krzysztof Kowalczyk-Twarowski received his doctorate with a dissertation about the fiction of J.M. Coetzee at Nicolas Copernicus University. After doctoral research at Durban he joined the Department of American Studies and the Centre for Colonial and Post-colonial Studies at the University of Silesia. Kowalczyk-Twarowski has published on Romantic writing, the regional novel in the USA, and work in post-colonial studies (Coetzee, Naipaul, White), most recently, "The Allegorical Encounter: Three Novels of J.M.Coetzee" in Zbiniew Bialas, ed. *Aristippus Meets Crusoe: Rethinking the Beach Encounter*. Katowice: U of Silesia P, 1999. 125-43. At present, he is working on a book on patterns in American regional writing. E-mail: <kkowalcz@us.edu.pl>.