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Messing with Romance

American Poetics and Antebellum Southern Fiction

EXTRACT

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1. Introduction

The "Old South" is one of the most interesting constructs in American intellectual history. It is rooted in auto- and heterostereotypical representations of "the South" as a separate "culture" which gained ground during the conflicts that would eventually lead to the Civil War.[1] Ever since, antebellum southern society as it supposedly existed before the war has served as a referent by which a changing United States has defined the extent, benefits, and costs of its modernity. Simultaneously, the imaginary socio-cultural landscape of the "Old South" has figured as a ground of contestation in battles over the social role of aesthetics. Often, it has inspired surprisingly radical answers to questions about the relevance of literature and literary forms. Attempting to explain southern difference in his classic *The Mind of the South* (1941), Wilbur J. Cash was drawn to "romance" as the characteristic quality and formative force of antebellum southern society and culture. Emphasizing a specifically "Southern" tendency "toward unreality, toward romanticism, and, in intimate relation with that, toward hedonism,"[2] Cash did not hesitate to relate these qualities to "the influence of the Southern physical world," which he described as "a sort of cosmic conspiracy against reality in favor of romance."[3] According to Cash, "romance" was the general condition of the "Southern mind." At the same time, "romance" could be used to designate a loosely defined yet ideologically definitive literary genre. Cash called Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* (1925) "the first real novel, as opposed to romances" which "the South had brought forth" and attributed the eventual rise of the region to self-recognition and an acceptance of reality to a change in genre: from "romance" to "novel."[4]

The "remarkable and anachronistic society"[5] of the antebellum South, sometimes even viewed as a distinct "civilization,"[6] has been equally attractive

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1 William R. Taylor's classic study *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (1961; Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1963) continues to be an important analysis of the imagological dissociation of "South" and "North" before the Civil War.

2 Wilbur J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (1941; New York: Vintage, 1991) 44.

3 Cash 46.

4 Cash 374.

5 Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York: Pantheon, 1965) 19.

6 Rollin G. Osterweis, *Romanticism and Nationalism in the Old South* (1949; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1971) vii; cf. Clement Eaton, *The Growth of Southern Civilization: 1790–1860* (New York: Harper, 1961). The perception of the antebellum South as a distinct "civilization" is also very pronounced in the writings of Genovese; see, e.g., *The Political Economy of Slavery*: "When we understand that the slave South

as an object of study and source of evidence to representatives of American liberalism, such as Clement Eaton, to protagonists of American Marxism, such as the early Eugene Genovese, and to champions of a new American conservatism, such as the later Genovese. At its best, the discourse on the "Old South" has provided compelling insights into the interrelationships between ideologies, social institutions and aesthetic developments. At its worst, it has postulated the antebellum South as a sealed-off monolithic entity, a doomed inversion of the course of history toward market pluralism or, conversely, as a heroic counterpoint to such a course.

Since the 1980s, the construction of Southern exceptionalisms has been interrogated in the light of shifting critical agendas and closer historical investigation. Thus, Michael O'Brien has pointed out that "the search for Southern distinctiveness" has frequently turned into "a logical nightmare."[7] However, antebellum southern history has continued to hold its fascination as a supposed antithesis to the general course of American history. This is evident from publications such as Genovese's post-Marxist *The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* (1994) or Ritchie D. Watson's *Yeoman versus Cavalier: The Old Southwest's Fictional Road to Rebellion* (1993). To be sure, the ideological thrust of the two books is as different as can be. Genovese seeks to construct a usable past for an American conservatism by arguing that "the social relations spawned by slavery" motivated "an impressive critique of modern life and American institutions," a critique that was "silenced" by the "northern victory in 1865" but, in certain respects at least, ought to be resuscitated.[8] Watson's evaluation of southern difference, on the other hand, is completely negative. He represents the antebellum South as an almost totalitarian system which "impressed" every single author into "disseminating" its reprehensible ideology.[9]

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developed neither a strange form of capitalism nor an undefinable agrarianism but a special civilization built on the relationship of master to slave, we expose the root of its conflict with the North" (35).

7 Michael O'Brien, *Rethinking the South: Essays in Intellectual History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988) 216; cf. Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature*.

8 Eugene D. Genovese, *The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994) 7–8; xi. Genovese continued his celebration of the southern conservative tradition with the publication, in the following year, of *The Southern Front: History and Politics in the Cultural War* (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1995). Cf. Wesley Allen Riddle's review essay on both publications: "Southern Conservative Universalism," *Mississippi Quarterly* 49 (1996): 819–828. Riddle's approving review involuntarily highlights the ideological pitfalls of Genovese's recent post-Marxist conservatism.

9 Ritchie D. Watson, *Yeoman versus Cavalier: The Old Southwest's Fictional Road to*

For all their differences, however, Watson and Genovese agree with each other—and with Cash—in associating the difference of the South with the role played by the literary imagination in its history. Thus, Genovese claims that the particular quality of "southern" conservatism can be comprehended only on the basis of "an understanding of the place of poetry and myth" in southern intellectual and social history.[10] Indeed, Genovese argues for reviving a "southern tradition" of opposing the persistent conventionality of literature to the dynamics of capitalist progress:

> The southern conservatives' insistence upon the importance of poetry to the struggle of a just society has, despite repeated misunderstandings, nothing to do with a demand for political poetry. They have turned to poetry for an aesthetic vision of an older Christian view of the flowering of the personality within a corporate structure, and they have counterposed that vision to the personalism of modern bourgeois individualist ideology.[11]

Genovese's ideas about the conservative ideological potential of the literary imagination and Watson's interpretation of southern literary, social and political history intersect in a most interesting manner, for Watson actually suggests that the tragedy of the antebellum South was caused by its insistence on making imaginative literature the basis of a social ideal and political rationale. He claims that their increasing alienation from a rapidly modernizing world led the people, or at least the elites, of the antebellum South to reinvent themselves in the light of clichéd "romance" fictions: "There was, therefore, a perfect sympathy between the time-transcending paradigm of the plantation romance and the implicit need of southerners to believe that their culture could escape the imperatives of modernity."[12]

Although they represent opposing critical schools and ideological objectives, Cash's *The Mind of the South*, Genovese's *The Southern Tradition*, and Watson's

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Rebellion (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1993) 104: "American ideals of freedom and equality could not serve as entirely suitable paradigms for a region committed to slavery and to the plantation system. Thus the South found it necessary to fashion a credo based on the concept of the lordly planter that would justify it to the nation and to the world at large. Southern writers were consequently impressed into the service of disseminating their region's aristocratic ideology, and no author, male or female, was exempted from service."

10 Genovese, *The Southern Tradition* 2.

11 Genovese, *The Southern Tradition* 2.

12 R. D. Watson, *Yeoman versus Cavalier* 83; cf. R. D. Watson, *The Cavalier in Virginia Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1985). See also Watson's essay "Frontier Yeoman versus Cavalier: The Dilemma of Antebellum Southern Fiction," *The Frontier Experience and the American Dream*, ed. David Mogen et al. (College Station: Texas A&M UP, 1989) 107–119.

Yeoman versus Cavalier can be considered different manifestations of a cohering interpretive tradition that links the exceptional character of the antebellum South to the peculiar character of southern literature, and both to the concept of "romance" as a form of consciousness and literary practice. Historicizing the antebellum literary discourse on "romance" and reconstructing its ideological implications, I will investigate this suspiciously neat triadic construction and test its potentials for shedding light on general questions concerning the social function of fiction and the relationships between genre and ideology.

A Poetics of Ideology

What, then, is a "romance"? The question is not an easy one to answer, for the term "romance" has not only been used in all kinds of contexts, it has also created confusion wherever it has been used. As Walter Scott pointed out in his essay on the subject, "romance" was originally a linguistic term that referred to the "popular dialects of Europe," which were "founded [...] upon the Roman tongue." Even at this early stage in the concept's career, however, confusion is evident: "The name of Romance was indiscriminately given to the Italian, to the Spanish, even (in one remarkable instance at least) to the English language. But it was especially applied to the compound language of France."[13]

Soon, "romance" came to refer to the narratives composed in the vernacular languages, which generally differed from those written in Latin by an emphasis on entertainment and a diminished claim to historicity. By the thirteenth century any kind of adventure story could be called a "romance." In other words, "romance" was an early term for "fiction"; specifically, it was the term by which fictional narratives referred to themselves in order to proclaim their fictionality. Ever since, "romance" has been used as a synonym for "fiction"—a tendency that is evident in figurative usages of the word to denote a distorted construction of reality.

At the same time, there have been more restrictive definitions of "romance" as a particular literary mode or genre.[14] According to these, the term either refers

13 Walter Scott, "An Essay on Romance," *Encyclopedia Britannica: Supplement to 4th–6th Eds* (1824); *The Miscellaneous Prose Works of Sir Walter Scott*, vol. 6 (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1834) 130–131.

14 Gillian Beer's *The Romance* (London: Methuen, 1970) is still useful as a short introduction to the concept of "romance." The most influential theorist of "romance," of course, was Northrop Frye; see *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) and *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of the Romance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1973). Fredric Jameson has incorporated Frye's concepts into his own political

to medieval fictions concerned with the code of chivalry and with a particular ideal of love, or it points to later works of imaginative literature which may somehow be understood as continuations or transformations of the medieval tradition. On the basis of the latter definition, an enormous variety of texts have been referred to—or have referred to themselves—as "romances." The list stretches from the "heroic romances" of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the modernist fiction of Joseph Conrad or the postmodernist narratives of John Barth.[15] It might include "classic" American novels by Brockden Brown, Hawthorne and Melville, usually regarded as artistic epistemological and moral probings, as well as twentieth-century "popular" love stories mass-produced and mass-marketed for an audience of readers who want to "leave behind daily cares and live out their secret desires and passions."[16]

Even if we should decide that the term "romance" applies to medieval narratives exclusively, we would be confronted with a variety of specimens that explodes any consistent definition of genre. As one scholar of medieval literature observed, "romances" can be "comic as well as serious, religious as well as amorous, psychological as well as objective, episodic as well as tightly organized," so that the "romance genre is by no means a unified monolithic type."[17]

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project of genre criticism; see *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981), esp. the chapter "Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism," which is based on Jameson's earlier essay "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre," *New Literary History* 7 (1975): 135–163.

15 *Romance: A Novel* (1903), co-authored by Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, or John Barth's *Sabbatical: A Romance* (1982) are among the numerous examples for the continuing relevance of "romance" concepts in twentieth-century fiction. Antonia S. Byatt uses Hawthorne's classic definition of "romance" from the *The House of the Seven Gables* as a motto in her novel *Possession: A Romance* (1990). Postmodern novels by Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme have been discussed as evidence of a twentieth-century "renaissance of the romance." See Winfried Fluck, "'The American Romance' and the Changing Functions of the Imaginary," *New Literary History* 27 (1996): 415–457. On cyberpunk as a modern variety of "romance," see Franz Meier, "Neuromancer/New Romancer: Cyberpunk and the Tradition of Romance," *Of Remembraunce the Keye: Medieval Literature and its Impact through the Ages*, ed. Uwe Böker, Dieter A. Berger, and Noel Harold Kaylor, Jr (Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 2004) 267–290.

16 Linda K. Christian-Smith, "Romance Novels," *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson and Linda Wagner-Martin (New York: Oxford UP, 1995) 766. On the contemporary "romance" of love and passion, see esp. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1984).

17 Morton Bloomfield; qtd. in Alan M. F. Gunn, "The Polylithic Romance," *Studies in Medieval, Renaissance, American Literature*, ed. Betsy Fagan Colquitt (Fort Worth: Texas Christian UP, 1971) 1.