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Bertram Wyatt-Brown. *Hearts of Darkness: Wellsprings of a Southern Literary Tradition.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002. xxvi + 235 pp. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2822-0; $27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8071-2844-2.

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High Anxiety Down South?

Bertram Wyatt-Brown's title announces a discussion of the "Wellsprings of a Southern Literary Tradition," and in the course of his discussion the author maintains that Southern literary art arises largely from Southern literary depression. He provides a rich accumulation of detail about a considerable number of authors who are from the South or who have strong connections to the region, and he assembles extensive biographical support for the claim that these authors shared a kind of personal trauma which shaped their literary art. His assiduity in collecting this material must be admired, and all readers will find something new in this sequence of mini-biographies.

In his closing pages, Wyatt-Brown explains: "My purpose has not been to condemn these writers' dark preoccupations, but to marvel that by a creative probing of death, ruin, and inner turmoil they could disclose so much about the human condition" (p. 228). Here one might begin to question the book's premises, for this argument may be problematic, since it suggests an intellectual detachment which does not seem obviously compatible with depression, "ruin," or "inner turmoil." And if it is true that the literature of the South derives its power from the peculiar neurotic predicament of those who have written it, does this circumstance particularly distinguish Southern literary art from any other regional or national literature? Poetry has been linked to madness throughout the Western tradition, and such clinical cases as those of Jonathan Swift, Christopher Smart, and Robert Lowell are as familiar as the devotion of numerous gifted artists (F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway, just to mention twentieth-century Americans) to alcohol. Wyatt-Brown acknowledges this possible objection when he comments: "The bells of melancholy tolled mournfully throughout the works of many artists in Western society, especially when romantic subjectivity opened new but not yet wholly self-revealing expression" (p. 64), and he goes on to stipulate that the form of psychological dilemma faced by the Southerner was in part a result of guilt about slavery and in part a fear of impotence:

"Southerners who could not claim a degree of virile honorableness would lose all favor in the eyes of peers. That sense of masculine respectability rested largely in the hands of relatives and neighbors. Therefore almost everyone was a willing participant in a society that required all its members to conform or suffer unpleasant consequences, the outcome being a suppression of genuine individuality whenever it might arise" (pp. 66-67).

Does this mean that Southerners found their society to inhibit their egoism? If so, is that not what society does? Whether one subscribes to a theory of social contract or to the prescriptive power of common law, an essential premise of both is that the good of the individual depends to some extent upon the common good, and that consequently the individual must sacrifice some immediate self-interest in behalf of that greater good. Yet this sacrifice does not always result in great literature, does it? Thus, one question about the primary argument of this book is that of what sets the creative anxiety of Southern writers apart from that of other writers in other places. If many Southern writers are neurotic, are there neurotic Southern non-writers? What about non-neurotic Southern writers? Why does Professor Wyatt-Brown not establish the existence of a body of literature that provides a contrast to what he represents as the neurosis-based literature of the South?

Aside from these questions, one objection to this book's procedure concerns the issue of scholarly rigor. Again and again one encounters poorly supported generalizations, weak logic, and puzzling shifts of viewpoint. For example, in his discussion of *Huckleberry Finn*, Wyatt-Brown quotes Huck, who says, "I got so downhearted and scared, I did wish I had some company." Wyatt-Brown goes on to comment, "The last line undercuts the ending of the book. For all his bragging about being free and lighting out for the territory, Huck Finn yearns for a father who would actually love him" (p. 173). The citation of Huck occurs at the beginning of the novel, as Huck has retired to his upstairs room at the home of the Widow Douglas. He has spent the day being educated by Mrs. Douglas and her sister, and he is now awaiting the arrival of Tom Sawyer, who has promised to invite Huck to join "a band of robbers." It is quite a stretch to claim that the sentence quoted reflects Huck's yearning for a father or that it undercuts the ending of the novel.

Another logical problem follows when, on the next page, Wyatt-Brown continues:

"[Tom Sawyer] knows all along that Jim has been freed but pursues his own joke in a heedless way by compelling Jim to continue as a fugitive slave. This surely is a racist and thoughtless violation of trust, risible though Twain meant it to be. The deviation from Twain's sense of justice is almost out of character. In choosing his charities, the author did much for the uplift of the black race. He publicly denounced the increasingly frequent practice of lynching and dramatized his ridicule of it in the Sherburn-Boggs incident in *Huckleberry Finn*. Nonetheless, he was a southerner and could not escape his race prejudice in Tom Sawyer's conscienceless tease of the long-suffering Jim. Tom's behavior serves to undercut the moral centrality of Huck's more compassionate treatment" (p. 174).

For a careful reader, this argument is somewhat shocking. Wyatt-Brown suddenly singles out the character Tom Sawyer, a fictional child, and not only identifies him as the personal spokesman for Mark Twain but takes his perspective as clear evidence of Twain's racism, his only concession to the demands of logic being his use of the word "surely." Surely such a radical assertion demands more convincing support.

Wyatt-Brown's treatments of other Southern (or "Southern") authors (Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, James Henry Hammond, Edmund Ruffin, William Gilmore Simms, Thomas Holley Chivers, Mirabeau Lamar, Theodore O'Hara, Abram Ryan, Sidney Lanier, Henry Timrod, William Sydney Porter, Joel Chandler Harris, Constance Fenimore Woolson, Kate Chopin, Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow–with further comments on Abraham Lincoln and John Esten Cooke) feature some similar lapses of attention. One minor but persistent indication of the lack of rigor characterizing these discussions is the tendency to cite quoted quotations instead of going to original sources. For example, early in his discussion, Wyatt-Brown quotes Friedrich Nietzsche, but as his source he cites Jeffrey Meyers's book on Poe (pp. 3-4, n.1). While this may be a valid scholarly procedure, what Wyatt-Brown is really saying is "as Jeffrey Meyers says Nietzsche says…." If we use citations for support, why not eliminate indirection and thus clarify that support? This type of citation occurs too often in this text, and it establishes some uncertainty about the level of care with which the documentary background has been prepared.

All in all, given this distinguished author's evident wish to generate a credible synthesis of history, psychology, and literary criticism, the carefree procedure here does much to prevent his success. Since, as Charles Joyner's blurb on the dust jacket of this book points out, psychology itself tends not to be characterized by scientific rigor, the burden of Wyatt-Brown's arguments rests upon his representation of history. With that, I find no fault. Yet, as I have pointed out, the misrepresentation of texts here does pose a significant problem for the reader interested in an accurate representation of Southern literature. One also senses that a final attentive and energetic reading of the text might have eliminated such sentences as the following: "For too many would-be or actual suicides, including creative writers, death offers a remedy" (p. 207). And when, at the conclusion of the book, Wyatt-Brown argues, "We should look upon the evolution of southern literary alienation and inner heartbreak as something to acclaim rather than deplore" (p. 228), this reader, unconvinced, suspects that Professor Wyatt-Brown has a frog in his pocket.

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