

The Enabling Structure: *Figures of the Hero* *in Southern Narrative*

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Figures of the Hero in Southern Narrative. By Michael Kreyling. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987. 197 pp. \$20.00.

In recent years a variety of critical studies of Southern literature have looked specifically at the first half of the twentieth century, that period known today as the Southern Renaissance. Michael Kreyling counters this trend by tracing the development of the narrative hero from its inception by George Tucker and William Gilmore Simms to its use by contemporary writers like Walker Percy.

While most early critics of the Southern novel saw it as derivative from Scott and Cooper, Kreyling relies heavily on the theories of Theodore Ziolkowski and Edward Said to show the figure of the hero as the "enabling structure" of antebellum Southern narrative, "the linchpin of a powerful social, historical, and psychological myth, which supports the unanalyzed structures of individual and group awareness and behavior" (11). From its beginnings in such works as George Tucker's *The Valley of Shenandoah; or, Memories of the Graysons* (1824), Beverley Tucker's *The Partisan Leader* (1836), and William Alexander Caruthers' *Cavaliers of Virginia; or, The Recluse of Jamestown* (1834), the narrative hero embodies specific characteristics. His physical silhouette can be recognized instantly as that of a gentleman "by a waiting people" (14). He can face successfully the twin challenges of defeating a villain on the field of action and of finding and wedding his female cognate, often a cousin or distant relative of similar genetic and cultural heritage. And through this marriage he can perpetuate "the hero's blessed kind in the face of history, the ultimate foe of the hero and his people" (20).

Kreyling describes the heroes of William Gilmore Simms as primary examples with these traits. Simms "strove to solidify the

representations and, in the process, to create an identity between Southern writers and the hero" (32). In his full descriptions of Southern life and setting, Simms established the heroic narrative form as the culture's official narrative form. In a careful comparison of Cooper heroes and Simms heroes, Kreyling shows how Cooper's Natty Bumppo is a loner, unsocial, a man without a people. In contrast, Simms's heroes are able to "forge a corporate 'we' through love or mutual identification" (34). The Southern hero in Simms is interested in establishing a civilization that can survive the ordeal of history.

After the Civil War, the American reading public was offered a choice from two leading national heroes to be the embodiment of the American hero, Ulysses S. Grant or Robert E. Lee. Kreyling shows how on a national scale Henry Adams's *Democracy* and Henry James's *The Bostonians* describe these two alternatives. Adams's Southern hero becomes the "Genteel Tradition's ideal of postbellum national identity: the rebel purged of his slaveholding arrogance, restored to his pastoral honor, and ready to donate the latter to a northern (national) character too deeply immersed in materialistic concerns" (62). James's Southerner dons a chivalric mask in order to manipulate. W. J. Cash in *The Mind of the South* was later to describe this kind of Southerner as full of "pride, individualism, and a tendency to violence in the solution of problems and the fulfilling of desires" (68). Kreyling shows how James has used the myth of the hero but turns him into a cavalier who hides behind the cloak of gentlemanliness in order to gain power.

In the twentieth century Ellen Glasgow attempts to dismantle the traditions of the Southern heroic narrative in order to attack the prevailing chauvinism of her editors. By examining her six novels that provide a social history of Virginia from 1850 to 1914, Kreyling shows how the primary female character gains dominance over the male. By the end of each novel the hero has forfeited his social and secular power and is "reduced to the dependent status of a child" (88).

Southern writers during the Depression of the 1930s return to the heroic images of earlier literature to give their readers hope. Because main characters like Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths or Steinbeck's Joad family can face economic hardships successfully but remain bewildered victims of the modern world, these heroes offered little comfort or direction to Southerners. Douglas Southall Freeman in his biography sees Robert E. Lee as a "Moses who could lead them out of the bondage of economic failure" (106). Allen Tate sought similar solace in his biographies of Stonewall Jackson and

Jefferson Davis, but unlike Freeman, Tate could never bring himself to complete his biography of Lee. Although he wanted to, Tate could never make Lee the savior of the nation. His *The Fathers* explores fictionally this modern man's dilemma of being cut off from the past and tradition.

Kreyling's chapter on Faulkner comprises the major weakness of the book. He attempts to link Faulkner's early concepts of the Southern hero to the fin-de-siècle concept of Pierrot, the mild, innocent, white-faced clown who can only stare blankly at the folly of the world around him. Kreyling sees such Faulkner characters as young Bayard Sartoris, Quentin Compson, Gail Hightower, and Isaac McCaslin as embodiments of this figure. Although Kreyling focuses well on Faulkner's early poetry and play *The Marionettes* to develop his ideas, they are not convincing.

The strongest chapter of the work is Kreyling's discussion of William Alexander Percy and Walker Percy. Here he shows how William Alexander Percy sought the characteristics of the Southern narrative hero at a time when it was impossible for his generation to equal the heroic ideal embodied by his parents' generation. Percy saw the faults of his own time but always remained blinded to those of the preceding generation. Walker Percy, on the other hand, sees the faults of both generations, explores them, and through the character of Will Barrett in *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming* offers a plan for action, a plan whereby the hero can return to the paradigm within the "classical-Christian ground of Western civilization" (174-75) while knowing its strengths and weaknesses.

In a work which covers a limited number of representative authors well, the usual criticism suggests how authors who have been omitted do not fit into the paradigm. As much as possible Kreyling attempts to answer even this. His final chapter suggests how his ideas could be applied to such varied authors as Robert Penn Warren, Reynolds Price, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison. This reviewer still wishes Kreyling would have looked more deeply into such writers as Eudora Welty or Anne Tyler, but perhaps how the Southern female writer uses this paradigm can be for another book. *Figures of the Hero in Southern Narrative* is a welcome addition to the Southern Literary Studies series edited by Louis D. Rubin, Jr., and provides an intelligent paradigm for discussing the continuity that still remains in the Southern novel.