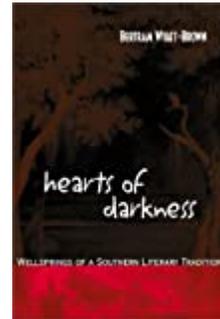




Bertram Wyatt-Brown. *Hearts of Darkness: Wellsprings of a Southern Literary Tradition.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002. xxvi + 235 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2822-0; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8071-2844-2.



Reviewed by John Grammer (Department of English, University of the South)

Published on H-SHEAR (June, 2004)

The Sad Case of the Southern Writer

Bertram Wyatt-Brown is, of course, one of the major figures in the historiography of the American south, and his many books, most particularly *Southern Honor* (1982), are indispensable texts in the field. But as he informs us in the preface to *Hearts of Darkness*, literature has always held a special fascination for him. He came by the affinity honestly. When he was a college student at Sewanee, his teachers and their friends included many of the stars of the southern literary renaissance; as a graduate student at Cambridge, chance brought him into a literary circle that included young Sylvia Plath and her future husband, the poet Ted Hughes. This latter association, considered in retrospect after Plath's suicide, led Wyatt-Brown to ponder the relationship between depression and literary genius, a subject he went on to explore at length, as it was revealed in the brilliant Percy family of Mississippi, which included at least two significant writers and several suicides. In *Hearts of Darkness*, an expanded version of the Walter Lynwood Fleming Lectures in Southern History which he delivered at Louisiana State University, he takes up the subject again, this time in reference to a large gallery of writers of the nineteenth-century south. He sketches the careers of well-known authors like Edgar

Allan Poe, Mark Twain, Kate Chopin, and Ellen Glasgow, as well as lesser ones like Henry Timrod, Mirabeau Lamar, Thomas Holly Chivers, and Theodore O'Hara. In an interesting wrinkle, he throws in two men not usually thought of as literary (Edmund Ruffin, the propagandist of secession who killed himself when Confederate defeat became inevitable) or even southern (Abraham Lincoln, the Kentucky-born melancholic who often quoted poetry and, it turns out, wrote a bit as well). In all these cases, Wyatt-Brown finds symptoms of the pathology variously called melancholy, neurasthenia, hysteria, "the English malady," and "the hypos," or depression as our own day has learned to call it, and in all of them he asserts an essential connection between that condition and the creativity that brings the writers to our attention in the first place.

The idea is more surprising than it may at first appear. Of course, the tormented artist is a well-established cliché of modern culture and there is a very familiar Dixie variant. In Quentin Compson, Faulkner created the most memorable portrait of the alienated "southern Hamlet," plagued by longing for a lost past, hatred of his own

time and place, and a debilitating sense of personal inadequacy. Plenty of real-life southerners, including many of the major writers, answer this description. But we expect to find these writers where Faulkner found Quentin, firmly ensconced in the twentieth century, two generations after the lost war. Before that, according to a well-established historical narrative, southern writers were confident spokesmen for their culture, rhetoricians defending the plantation system and attacking the rival industrial order of the north, who had neither the inclination nor the ability to question themselves or their world. They were whole and happy, but they paid the price for their happiness by producing a literature of little lasting interest. Odd exceptions like Poe simply proved the general rule. It was not until the 1920s that a generation of southern intellectuals learned irony and self-doubt, and so could kindle the love-hate relationship with their region that informed the great southern books. Thus Wyatt-Brown, with this gallery of nineteenth-century depressives and malcontents, does the useful work of complicating a familiar picture. The argument will remind many of the one Drew Gilpin Faust made in *The Sacred Circle* (1977), which concerned five antebellum southern intellectuals and their problems. Wyatt-Brown cites Faust's book respectfully and extends its argument by finding many more southern intellectuals, before and after the Civil War, afflicted by a feeling of alienation from their society. Though his book records little original research—most of the data he adduces are familiar and readily available to anyone willing to read published biographies—it manages, by bringing all the material together, to create a convincing group portrait of alienated and, in effect, “modern” artists where there were not supposed to be any. The sheer accumulation of sad and essentially similar biographies, one after another—literary disappointment, business failure, debt, drinking problems, early death—persuades me that Wyatt-Brown must be on to something. A survey of, say, New England writers of the same period really would look very different: plenty of eccentrics, but relatively few certifiable depressives. Emersonian serenity would outvote Melvillean *sturm und drang* by a pretty wide margin. In the south, Wyatt-Brown shows, it was otherwise.

But why? Here the historian offers a few possibilities, the most ingenious and persuasive of which is that the south, with its culture of honor, its emphasis on the public self and its public reputation, made it very costly for any person to confess publicly, or even to face privately, his or her own weaknesses, self-doubts, or excesses of emotion. Wyatt-Brown assumes that such matters are

the unavoidable subjects of imaginative literature; writers inhibited from expressing them by the code of honor would thus be fatally hamstrung before they began. How could writers working under this handicap not be unusually frustrated, hopeless, and depressed?

I think this is a plausible idea. It is true that the people in whom Wyatt-Brown is interested lived, like their contemporaries in the North and in Britain, under the literary authority of romanticism, which indeed made the author's private self an essential topic of literature. The convergence of this aesthetic with the code of honor could well have been, in the cases of some southern writers, a fateful coincidence that guaranteed at least frustration, if not despair. Neither the introspection that must precede romantic utterance nor the self-revelation that made up such utterance could come easily for them, and these authors, to the extent that they were governed by the aesthetic of confessional romanticism, were thus denied full access to their own literary resources. The best they could manage would be a kind of disabled romanticism, in which the weak and suffering self is revealed, but indirectly, in a way that could leave the author's honor intact.

The picture, though, needs to be complicated a bit. Even in the nineteenth century, after all, romanticism was not the only available mode; like their peers elsewhere, southern writers could have turned in other literary directions, as indeed some did. Some made a point of living in the literary past, deliberately invoking the public and impersonal aesthetic of the Augustan Age (the approach, e.g., of William Grayson in his long didactic poem “The Hireling and the Slave”). Others, like Poe, anticipated the twentieth-century rebellion against romanticism, adopting their own version of T. S. Eliot's dictum that poetry was “not the expression of personality but an escape from personality.” Poe himself insisted that imaginative writing, far from being the cry of an anguished heart, was an entirely technical activity, a matter of controlling the elements of verse or prose so as to achieve maximum effect on the reader. The subject of a story or poem—where one would be tempted to find disguised autobiography—was, he claimed, just one of those elements, to be chosen for its contribution to the overall purpose. (Though he devotes a long chapter to Poe, Wyatt-Brown does not seem to know this about him and, indeed, in one of the few glaring errors of his study, asserts the opposite, namely that Poe “believed poetry had to spring from the heart.”) Though both Poe and Grayson, as it happens, were unhappy men, the relationship between their moods and their writing must be something other

than the one Wyatt-Brown establishes as a general pattern here. Writers like them must be considered exceptions to the pattern, as, I would think, would many of the region's female authors. Though Wyatt-Brown makes no important distinction between male and female writers, his thesis would seem generally to apply more readily to men than to women. The problem with self-doubt and unguarded confession, after all, as with imaginative literature itself, was that they all seemed effeminate. This may explain why Wyatt-Brown pays little attention to the most prominent female southern writers of the period, including those sentimental novelists who helped make the middle decade of the century (in the phrase of Fred Lewis Pattee) "the feminine fifties." E. D. E. N. Southworth is barely mentioned, nor are Augusta Evans and Caroline Hentz; Susan Petigru King, Marion Harland, Caroline Gilman, and Sarah Barnwell Elliott are absent completely. The ones he does treat at length—Kate Chopin, Ellen Glasgow, and Willa Cather—really belong to a later generation than do most of his men (and in the case of Cather, barely warrant inclusion in a gallery of southerners). They seem like special, rather than representative, cases.

So I would make some exceptions to the generalization Wyatt-Brown states, but these exceptions still leave a substantial population of male (and, of course, white) would-be romantics who, for one reason or another, lived unhappily and produced little of lasting import. To our understanding of these writers, who at one time were considered the most important figures in the region's literature, Wyatt-Brown's hypothesis is a significant contribution, one that could provoke further discussion and exploration by literary scholars and historians alike.

Those who are inclined to take up this discussion can learn even from the difficulties Wyatt-Brown runs into. For there are some, though I think the overall argument survives them. Most of these troubles arise from the inherent ambiguity of the evidence, biographical and literary, he must rely upon to sustain his arguments. It will always be hard to diagnose depression posthumously, especially when the putative sufferer lived before the term received its modern definition. Since it can only be a matter of guesswork and inference, the researcher who expects to encounter depression everywhere may easily persuade himself that he is seeing it. I think Wyatt-Brown is guilty of this at times, drafting into the ranks of the depressed some writers (see particularly his treatment of William Gilmore Simms) who, on the biographical evidence, seem just occasionally disgruntled or disappointed. The same kind of problem is in-

herent in his use of textual evidence, the published work of his writers. He assumes that depressed writers will give themselves away somewhere in their writing, but also that—bound by the culture of honor—they will do so only covertly and indirectly. Thus he must try to hear what the author makes a point of not saying. Again there is a danger of projecting one's expectations on ambiguous evidence. I frequently find Wyatt-Brown's readings of particular texts to be forced, to treat the texts as nothing more than displaced autobiography, and thus to ignore their artistic purposes. For instance, he assumes that the speaker in Poe's best-known poem, "The Raven," must be the poet himself in paper-thin disguise, and the bird's warning that grief will end "nevermore" is simply the poet's diagnosis of his own incurable depression. But this overlooks the deliberate artfulness of the poem and its self-conscious relationship to poetic tradition. If there is a self-portrait in "The Raven," it is certainly an ironic one; Poe makes his speaker a self-dramatizing fool whose first impulse, when a bird flies through the window, is to begin asking it questions. Once he learns what word the bird can utter, he carefully frames questions to which "nevermore" will be the most depressing possible answer. The poem thus satirizes the romantic habit of projecting one's own obsessions onto a supposedly meaningful natural world: the speaker is a caricature of the overwrought mind enshrined in romantic verse, and the raven, squawking its truth from atop a bust of Pallas, is a send up of all those nightingales, skylarks, and albatrosses that conveyed prophetic knowledge to such minds. This is not to say that Poe was not himself an overwrought romantic mind, or that the grieving speaker has nothing to do with the grieving poet. But in "The Raven," as in most of his work, Poe does much more than helplessly display his infirmities in transparent disguise; by controlling the forms of art, he achieves a distance from them that allows recognition and judgment. So do many of the authors Wyatt-Brown treats, though most of them are considerably inferior to Poe in artistry and intelligence. I think acknowledging such artistry—recognizing that literary texts reveal conscious meanings as well as symptoms, and that fully grasping the latter requires taking account of the former—would strengthen the argument in *Hearts of Darkness* and make the overall thesis more persuasive.

This may be a way of saying that literary critics have something to contribute to the discussion Wyatt-Brown has initiated here; if so that might be a self-serving judgment on my part, since I belong to that tribe. Nonetheless, I hope some of my peers will take up the challenge.

By paying careful and serious attention to an understudied and under-rated body of literature, the author has given us good reason to do so and a provocative argument to respond to.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/>

Citation: John Grammer. Review of Wyatt-Brown, Bertram, *Hearts of Darkness: Wellsprings of a Southern Literary Tradition*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. June, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9496>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.