

RECENT SOUTHERN WRITING IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT

IGOR MAVER

Universidad de Ljubljana, Slovenia

(Resumen)

Es posible rechazar la palabra postmodernismo a nivel teórico porque tiende a representar una "bolsa de etiquetas" dentro de la cual se vierte toda la literatura producida alrededor de la última década. La estética del postmodernismo está asegurada en los trabajos de las escritoras sureñas contemporáneas por las técnicas de yuxtaposición, arbitrariedad, producción literaria entre géneros, multiplicación de perspectivas en un "collage", fetichización en los fragmentos, etc. Las actitudes establecidas, las suposiciones y los valores que fueron el instrumento utilizado durante el Renacimiento Sureño han cambiado gradualmente, y las escritoras Bobbie Ann Mason, Anne Tyler y Lee Smith, aquí estudiadas, muestran, en contraste, una falta relativa de auto-conciencia sureña aunque, por otro lado, hacen uso de las técnicas literarias postmodernistas. Reexaminan la tradición sureña americana en un sentido postmodernista al introducir a sus personajes dentro de una cultura no específicamente sureña (televisión, música rock, cine), estos personajes desafían la percepción sureña tradicional y sus mitos.

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Postmodernism or a Definition "Marqué"

One of the most representative works for the consideration of postmodernism is *La Condition Postmoderne*¹ (*The Postmodern Condition*) by Jean-François Lyotard, where the word 'condition' signifies an actual state, as well as a literal condition for the existence of postmodernism in, according to Lyotard, a 'postindustrial' society. There is a constant wish to dismantle and to do away with tradition while constantly creating a new one by juxtaposing the very bits of the past tradition and the present. In literature,

¹ Jean François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne* (Paris: Les Editions Minuit, 1979).

however, more emphasis is put on the language (Wittgenstein) and myth and less on the mimetic representation of reality, whereby a specific postmodern sensibility is being developed,² one that essentially abandons the artistic search for unity.

Instead, the often incongruous juxtaposition of everything against almost everything emerges, the "pastiche" and constellation of styles and tones, the mixing of levels and forms as well as genres. This is the result of the postmodern techniques of "collage" and "montage", which are the foremost objects of contemporary 'post-criticism': the former as the transferrance of material from one context into the other and the latter as the dissemination of the borrowed material against a new background. According to some, postmodernism is rather a process of the dismantlement of sense comparable to the modernist disruption of appearances (as in Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulations*, 1981.) Are we, then, to reject the term postmodernism on the theoretical level merely as a 'label bag' that includes the literature produced over the past decade or so? The description of a postmodern strategy is, so it seems, more in order: one based on historical replay and fragmentation of the subject, presenting the past as an integrant part of the contemporary condition.

Whether or not the innovative contemporary American fiction, also described as 'postmodern' or 'postmodernist', represents a development of modernism or a new movement altogether is a question much discussed by critics and writers. Postmodern techniques usually refer to the contemporary fiction, which is characterized by formal experimentation and which unabashedly presents a literary "oeuvre" to the reader as essentially fictive, as an artificial construct of the writer's mind. Postmodern fiction thus often resembles a game between author and reader through a naive, childlike narration with episodic structure. Fictional characters tend to be rather flat or two-dimensional, and the works generally display scintillating irony and persuasive satire. Plots as well as characters are grotesque, rendered absurd through exaggeration and repetition. It is further significant that the elements of fantasy, fairy-tale, or myth are present, combined with the parody of traditional fiction and popular genres such as the thriller, Western, Gothic romance, and the like.

American postmodern, minimalist, non-specifically Southern fiction discussed here, sometimes labelled as 'fabulation' or 'irrealism', is represented, for example, by the

² See Ihab Hassan, "Culture, Indeterminacy, and Imanence: Margins of the (Postmodern) Age," *Humanities in Society*, 1978/1, 51-58. *The Anti-Aesthetic - Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983).

'fabulators' William Gaddis, Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, Donald Barthelme, William H. Gass, etc. For the three discussed Southern writers, Bobbie Ann Mason, Anne Tyler and Lee Smith, the postmodern tenets, "mutatis mutandis", hold true, although their writings show an interesting combination of the cosmopolitan postmodern elements and the traditional embeddedness into Southern context.

The Myth of the American South Revisited

Old stereotypes abound and die hard; especially in the American South or, more precisely, about the South. To be a Southerner today is to be an heir to a complex set of attitudes and affinities, assumptions and instincts, which are, as always, the product of specific historical circumstances acting upon geography. Is Quentin Compson's response from *Absalom, Absalom!* still valid today, as to what made Southerners what they are: "You can't understand it. You would have to be born there"?

The number of mellow accents in Washington is increasing, and the United States has another Southern President. The fact remains: from the seventies onwards it has become common to speak about the burgeoning 'Sun Belt' states, and its newfound economic prosperity represented a new impetus for the reexamination and reaffirmation of Southern identity. The traditional North vs. the South myths are still around, but the economic breakthrough was also reflected in literature which depicts a changing South, an industrializing South, the Old South that is slowly slipping away. Contemporary Southern writers are thus more bent on a partial escape from the Southern community that featured in the works of Faulkner, Wolfe and the Southern Agrarians. Still, they are fascinated with history, with the Southern (regional) past, the influence of which upon the present is greatly acknowledged.

With the discussed three writers, Bobbie Ann Mason, Anne Tyler and Lee Smith, it is safe enough to say that they feel it is impossible to depict the present condition of the south without an awareness of the past and the myths that generated the Southern cultural expression, as well as a clearly Southern sense of family, religion (the 'Bible Belt' states), closeness to nature and "genius loci", including the picaresque tradition in the Southern black literature (Gaines, Wright). They also seem to have developed from the Southern Agrarian literary tradition. However, there has been an impact of Northern ideas on the Southern way of life. The North usually stands in the mind of the Southern people for a society which has always had pragmatism as its main

principle as opposed to Southern idealism and chivalry, and the confrontation between these two worlds has left a deep scar that still has not entirely healed. As the nature of national problems changes, the myths of the nation must also change. Consequently, the old Cavalier plantation myth is following the nowadays democratically unacceptable pattern of race relations and aristocratic elitism in the South. Recent Southern writers are trying to break this particular and the later derived patterns of thinking and behaviour.

Recent Southern Writing as a Sign of the Rise of a New Southern Mentality.

This study discussed the literary "oeuvre" of three Southern writers: Bobbie Ann Mason, Ann Tyler and Lee Smith. Bobbie Ann Mason writes mostly about the contemporary inhabitants of Kentucky and deftly manages to grasp the New South, depicting the assertion of its mentality. She depicts the predicaments and occasional pathos of people raised in the traditional rural society, who are trying to get used to all the novelties of the cosmopolitan 'postmodern' world: shopping malls, TV evangelism and women's lib. Mason subtly portrays the changing social conditions of the New South with special emphasis laid on the crumbling intra-family relation. "Shiloh", the title story of her warmly received collection of stories *Shiloh and Other Stories*³ shows how well she knows the Southern (Kentuckian) small-town world, which has become 'dangerously' postmodern and is no longer steeped solely in the traditional Southern context: suffice it to think of the preacher's wife who falls under the spell of video games (O tempora, o mores!), or the driver of the county bus who lives out his fantasy of being a New Wave disc-jockey through the medium of the radio network.

A movie, "That's Entertainment!", is on TV. Sandra stands in the doorway to watch Fred Astaire dancing with Eleanor Powell, who is as loose as a rag doll. She is wearing a little-girl dress with squared shoulders.

"Fred Astaire is the limberest thing I ever saw," says Mama.

"I remember his sister Adele," says Grandmother. "She could really dance."

"Her name was Estelle," says Mama.

"Estelle Astaire?" says Sandra. For some reason, she remembers a girl

³ Bobbie Ann Mason, *Shiloh and Other Stories* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982).

she knew in grade school named Sandy Beach.⁴

Mason's other novels likewise reveal her double indebtedness: to the South as well as to the postmodern features that grow beyond the Southern locale (*Nabokov's Garden*, *The Girl Sleuth*). In the novel *In Country*⁵, Bobbie Ann Mason presents the life story of a 17-year-old girl whose father had been killed in Vietnam before she was born. She tries to imagine the hardships of her father in Vietnam by drawing analogies from her favourite TV programme, MASH. In the coming-of-age her consciousness is filled with the images and sounds of American (non-specifically southern) pop culture, especially rock-and-roll, which is why the author (as in her other works) acknowledges the permission to reprint various famous pop lyrics by Lennon, McCartney, Springsteen, Morrison, etc. We witness the rural Kentucky undergo a dramatic change of social reality and cultural identity, for it becomes just another part of the plastic, TV-and-movie, interstate-highway crisscrossed America. Through her stories we become aware of the distinction drawn between authentic and reported-about experience, as lived and as perceived through the mass media. Mason has indeed made good use of television news coverages and serials, of popular music and its stars, because as a 'minimalist' she selected from reality those items that can be used as telling cultural symbols (Bruce Springsteen's song "Born in the U.S.A.", for example, functions as an important catalyst for the heroine of the novel *In Country*). Mason's recent short novel *Spence + Lila*⁶ recounts an unusual love story, a history of mutual affection, sexual attraction, loyalty and forbearance. The postmodern element in it (leaving aside the illustrations as a visual extra-literary component) is the literary exploration of a specific culture shock in America -the confusion of an alienated modern hospital and medicine with its high-tech instruments.

Anne Tyler's first two literary triumphs were the novels *If Morning Ever Comes* and *The Tin Can Tree* which she wrote already in her early twenties. Her third novel *A Slipping-Down Life*⁷ portrays the relationship between two lonely, incongruous individuals, who are, however, both immersed in the rock, soul and pop music, one that again has very little to do with traditional Southern characteristics. There followed many

⁴ Mason, 58.

⁵ Bobbie Ann Mason, *In Country* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

⁶ Bobbie Ann Mason, *Spence + Lila* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

⁷ Ann Tyler, *A Slipping-Down Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970).

Tyler's books: *The Clock Winder*, *Celestial Navigation*, *Searching for Caleb*, *Earthly Possessions*, *Morgan's Passing*, *The Accidental Tourist*, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*. The recent *Breathing Lessons*⁸ shows the anatomy of a marriage: its expectations, disappointments and blissful moments. Very many words quoted from modern popular lyrics point to the novel's partial postmodern value.

Lee Smith has written seven novels, including *Oral History*, *Family Linen* and *Fair and Tender Ladies*, which are not typically postmodern. In 1990 appeared her collection of short stories *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse*⁹ depicting the lives of 'average' people (mostly in North Carolina) and their 'eclipses': illness, death, divorce, loss of faith and children. Although the most traditional of the three discussed Southern writers in terms of the themes, Smith's earlier novels are much more postmodern as far as literary technique is concerned. *Family Linen*,¹⁰ for example, combines many elements of the new Southern Gothic novel genre into a farce. The unraveling of a murder mystery abounds in television adventure, plane crashes, fires and floods. The motto of the book is revealing, for Lee Smith visibly takes a critical stance towards the Southern past: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." The Appalachian legends, history, songs and tales come alive in a "pastiche-like" novel *Fair and Tender Ladies*.¹¹ It clearly represents a daring attempt to create a Southern postmodern novel (given its fragmentary and epistolary structure, absence of punctuation and capitals, whole sentences in italics, etc), while still dealing with the unmistakable Southern reality:

Wyncken Blynken and Nod one night sailed off in a wooden shoe,
sailed on a river of crystallight and into a sea of dew I do not want any
bacon, I do not, I am too busy "there is a time for every purpose under
heaven" The hawk flyes round and round, the sky is so blue. I think I
can hear the old bell ringing like I rang it to call them home oh I was
young then, and I walked in my body like a Queen.¹²

⁸ Ann Tyler, *Breathing Lessons* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988).

⁹ Lee Smith, *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1990).

¹⁰ Lee Smith, *Family Linen* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).

¹¹ Lee Smith, *Fair and Tender Ladies* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988).

¹² Lee Smith, *Fair and Tender Ladies*, 317.

The three discussed woman writers, in dealing with the changing contemporary South, do have in common certain characteristically Southern attitudes, assumption, fascination with the past and its values. However, their novels can only be referred to as postmodern in so far as they are a felicitous inter-genre literary "pasticcioes" of postmodern writing (including the elements of myth, fairy-tale, Gothic romance, fantasy, thriller, parody and pervasive satire) and the traditional Southern novel (Wolfe, Faulkner, Welty, McCullers, etc), preoccupied with old myths, stereotypes, history and, above all, the locale. As such they can be considered a new distinctive (postmodern) phase in the development of the American novel.

Bobbie Ann Mason, Ann Tyler and Lee Smith, albeit showing an apparent lack of Southern self-consciousness, contribute to the assertion of Southern mentality in the making, through the medium of literature. They are not blindly turned towards the past but rather towards the future, which they perceive in a postmodern sense as a new juxtaposed entity of the past and the present, the local and the cosmopolitan. Hence, they cannot be described as typical postmodern writers, despite the fact that their works display the usage of certain postmodern, less mimetic literary techniques. The crucial difference between specifically postmodern and contemporary Southern writers is in that the former are egotistically concentrated almost exclusively on themselves, while the latter are still imbued with Southern community. The postmodern multiplication of perspectives in American literature is assured and the margin-center and mainstream-fringe literature dichotomy thus gradually being dissolved.