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Paul Carmignani

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“JORDAN COUNTY : GOING BACK TO THE ROOTS”

P. CARMIGNANI
Université de Perpignan

America : “a colossal recipe for the creation of arrears” (H. James)

WITH SUCH BESTSELLERS AS PH. LABRO'S *L'ÉTUDIANT ÉTRANGER*, M. Denuzière's *L'Adieu au Sud*, and lastly, J. Green's *Les Pays lointains*, the American South has made an unexpected comeback on the French literary scene. The republication under the title of *L'Enfant de la fièvre*, of *Jordan County*,¹ Shelby Foote's fifth book, contributes a highly idiosyncratic touch to this composite picture of Dixie, for it manifests the original vision of an author who owes his “Southernness” not so much to the fact that he was born and bred in the State of Mississippi and lives currently in Memphis (Tenn.) as to his acute sensitivity to the problems and difficulties that beset the South.

What is *Jordan County* ? Part of the answer is supplied by the subtitle that figured in the 1954 original edition and was inexplicably removed from subsequent printings and translations into French : “A landscape in narrative”. *Jordan County* and its capital city, Bristol, are fictionalized counterparts of Washington County (Miss.) and Greenville, the author's hometown. Like W. Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, *Jordan County* is both a fictitious locale and a narrative deeply rooted in a particular place. The deleted subtitle highlights the essential interrelatedness of a landscape that is brought into being by writing and of a narrative that brings to light its secret and partially repressed history. *Jordan County* probes space – which has been defined as « some sort of unconscious of civilizations² » – and is both the tale of a place and a tell-tale place, a territory through which a crucial quest unfolds : the quest for the Origins and Truth.

As S. Foote made it repeatedly clear, writing fulfills a heuristic function : “What I want to find in a novel is truth and part of the truth always seems to me to be an examination

1. *Jordan County* was first published in 1954 by Dial Press, New York. All references in the text are to the second printing in *Three Novels* (New York : Dial Press, 1964).

2. G. Mairet, *Le Discours et l'historique*, (Paris : Mame, 1974) 123.

of the milieu.”³ Thus, far from being a landscape that is merely surveyed or gazed at leisurely, Jordan County is scrutinized, pored over, deciphered like an old manuscript. But unlike a printed page, which is read from top to bottom, this particular landscape is read the other way round, for the exploration of space is also a journey back in time, a retrogression. Besides, space is neither bare nor innocent ; it is covered with marks, vestiges of days gone-by : the charred hulk of an *Antebellum* plantation house, a patch of primeval woods, a dilapidated fence or an Indian mound serve as the archives of the county, and the truth they reveal is gruesome. It is a tragedy involving three characters : Space, Time and Man, and its consequences still weigh upon the South long after the final curtain. But in this particular instance, the standard hierarchy prevailing in fiction-writing, *i. e.* the subservience of the first two elements to the third (Space and Time usually serve as mere backdrop to the deeds of Man), is somewhat upset and the three elements share top billing : the county itself achieves the status of one of the *dramatis personæ* as witness S. Foote's statement that “this novel, if it is a novel [...], has place for its hero and time for its plot. [Jordan County] is the main character in the novel — the land itself. And you go backwards through time to find out what made it what it was”⁴.

The author's restrictive remark (“if it is a novel”) raises the question of the nature of a book presenting itself in the form of a compilation of seven stories⁵ that saw print at different dates (from 1947 down to 1954) but that nevertheless achieve a striking unity of impression. In spite of S. Foote's reservations about the short-story (“It's a form that's unsatisfactory to me unless it's tied in with other things. Then I can get some interest. But to create a perfect little thing doesn't interest me at all” [Harrington, 357]), *Jordan County* is nothing less than a typical story cycle. Although its seven narratives can be read as independent slices of life and history, they are “tied in” and reveal, in spite of the variety and alternation of narrative strategies, underlying unities : unity of place (all narrated events take place in the county) ; secondly, unity of theme. *Jordan County* explores in different degrees and ways the themes of alienation, conflict (whether racial, ideological, or personal), uprootedness, exile, and violence, not

3. E. Harrington, “Interview with Shelby Foote”, *Mississippi Quarterly*, 24 (Fall 1971) 357.

4. J. Carr, ed., “It's Worth a Grown Man's Time : Shelby Foote,” in *Kite-Flying and Other Irrational Acts : Conversations with Twelve Southerners*, (Baton Rouge : Louisiana State UP, 1972) 19.

5. The seven narratives are : “Rain Down Home”, “Ride Out”, “A Marriage Portion”, “Child by Fever”, “The Freedom Kick”, “Pillar of Fire”, “The Sacred Mound”. The number is rich in connotations since it symbolizes, among other things, “the whole of space and time” ; seven also stand for “cyclic repetition and renewal [...] the key to Apocalypse” (J. Chevalier & A. Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, Paris : Seghers, 1974).

to mention solitude and lovelessness. This brief survey accounts in part for the author's choice of a more congenial form to work in than the novel, for if the short story, as some theorists have it, is a genre whose fragmentariness "reflects the disturbed, fragmentary quality of modern life" and whose function is very often "to challenge contemporary social and moral assumptions,"⁶ then it is ideally suited to S. Foote's purpose, *i.e.* to expose the widening gap between the promise and the actuality, and to press upon the reader's mind an awareness of a historical drift away from some fundamental American ideals.

A writer speaks through form, and the short story is allegedly "a finer means of expression in our age of unrest, disbelief and distrust, than either the novel or poetry." (228). Thus, this short story cycle is a further step forward towards the attainment of a goal S. Foote defined as follows :

My bedrock intention, or hope, was to understand my homeland by studying these composite individuals who had lived in it before me. I knew even then, away bak in the dark ages of the Thirties, that there were things that were dreadfully wrong about that land, just as I knew there were things that were good and could be enjoyed, and I tried my best to examine it from all the angles I could imagine. [...] I was quite consciously trying to cover and comprehend this patch of earth called Jordan County...⁷

At this stage, an example of how the various pieces relate to one another is in order, and a discussion of the first and last texts will throw some light on the way connections must be inferred to grasp the overall pattern and meaning of *Jordan County*.

In "Rain Down Home", a story set in the 50's, the town of Bristol is the locale of an ironic and tragic tale of homecoming. Pauly Green, an ex-serviceman, finds himself an exile in his own hometown and tries in vain to establish meaningful human relationships with his fellow-citizens. In response to the hostility of Bristol, the veteran starts shooting people and things and is eventually locked up in a mental home. The following stories end as tragically as the first and the reasons for this repetition of failures and frustations only become apparent with the last narrative, "The Sacred Mound". With this seventh story, the reader reaches the outermost limit and the heart of this inquiry into the past which, "not unlike all Southern investigations into history almost presupposes a metaphysical premise : why is the South labouring under a curse ?"⁸ The answer is to found in a legal document where a scrivener has noted

6. V. Shaw, *The Short Story : A Critical Introduction* (London : Longman, 1983), 229 & 221.

7. Preface to *Tournament* (Birmingham, Alabama : Summa Publications, 1987), n. p.

8. M. Gresset, "La Tyrannie du regard ou la relation absolue", Thèse de Doctorat (Paris III), 4 vols. 1976, 119

down the confession of a Choctaw Indian, Chisahahoma, who was a party to the sacrifice of two white trappers on the moonlit sacred mound. The Indian's statement covers a long span of time, from 1797 back to 1540, and chronicles, from the point of view of the casualty of civilization, the history of the South from H. de Soto's exploration of the lower Mississippi to the annexation of this Spanish province by the United States. These two events supply the prologue and the epilogue to a four act tragedy – military conquest, Christianization, economic exploitation and the legal sanction of the spoliation of the conquered – which has turned primitive Eldorado into a Helldorado.

An outcropping of the past, the sacred mound evokes a sacrifice and above all a sacrilege : the advent of the Conquistador who brought evil in his wake. Between the Indian and the European there is no possible communion. Trade takes its place : the Red-Skin swaps his gold for trash, his land for money and his God “Nanih Waiya” for “the Man on the Cross” ; he is given civilization and smallpox in the bargain. The two victims are affected, and the contaminated tribe is soon decimated by this terrible curse.

What the Indians's statement makes perfectly clear is that spoliation of their lands constituted the main sin of the Whites :

— Then, lo, they began to ask a strange thing of us, seeking to buy the land. Sell us the land, they said : sell us the land. And we told them, disguising our horror : No man owns the land ; take it and live on it ; it is lent you for your lifetime . are we not brothers ?⁹

This is the most outrageous desecration for the Indians ; the land is a sacred trust, a communal good, indivisible and inalienable, but the white man is going to carve up and parcel out the land ; the tellurian matrix is turned into a cadastre/cadaver. Evil sets in : the Indian and the white man have become warring brothers ; Cain, the European, the tiller of the soil, gets the better of Abel, the indigenous nomad.

Thus, Jordan County might have been a biblical enclave, a Promised Land ; its very name harks back to the “the land that floweth with milk and honey” (cf. “I pray thee, let me go over, and see the good land that is beyond Jordan... [Dt, 3:25]). But the search that motivates the narrative shows how the South, “a geographical paradise (a pastoral space), was turned into hell by history (a long record of spoliations).”¹⁰ Foote's story cycle evinces an obvious tendency to debunk the pastoral of the New World that made America the place where careworn, corrupt humanity could be rejuvenated, a second eden where Man might have set up,

9. “The Sacred Mound”, 287.

in the fold of redeeming Nature, an ideal society innocent of all the evils afflicting the Old World. Ph. Freneau, the apostle of the American Revolution, gave expression to such a dream :

Here Paradise anew shall flourish, by no second Adam lost,
No dangerous tree or dreadful fruit shall grow,
No tempting servant to allure the soul
From native innocence...

The time-honored celebration of the founding myths of the American republic is offset in *Jordan County* by the account of her founding crimes, viz. the displacement of the Indian, which was compounded, in S. Foote's words, by "the double sin of slavery and mistreatment of the land."¹¹ The Jordan River after which the county is named symbolizes the inaccessibility of the American Dream – the ideal is for ever beyond reach, on the opposite bank – and spells out the indictment of the South, for the biblical river also stands for "Doomsday" ; it is, according to Cruden's *Concordance*, "the River of Judgment." Thus, landscape becomes, as is often the case in Southern literature, the basis and pretext for a moral fable : topography evolves into metaphysics (the question of evil) and archeology into teleology (What is the general trend of Southern history ? What goal can one assign to it ?). At the end of this journey back in time, one reaches the climax of the tragedy : the intrusion of the Conquistador into the New World. The harmony prevailing between the Aboriginal and the American Continent is forever disrupted when the European enters the stage and introduces evil whose nature (the negation and spoliation of the Other successively embodied by the Indian, the Negro, the rebel, and the Foreigner) and origin *Jordan County* exposes mercilessly. "Evil does not exist of itself, but through man's agency. Evil is not being but doing,"¹² such is the underlying philosophy of S. Foote's work. At that very moment, America entered, or more appropriately, fell into History ; out went pristine innocence and sweet pastoral.

10. M. Gresset, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 692.

11. "Pillar of Fire", p. 270.

12. P. Ricœur, *Le Conflit des interprétations*, (Paris : Le Seuil, 1969), 269