

Reviews

Jan Nordby Gretlund, *Frames of Southern Mind: Reflections on the Stoic, Bi-Racial and Existential South* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998), 286 pp. ISBN 87-7838-397-8 (paper); DKK 250.

Jan Nordby Gretlund's *Frames of Southern Mind: Reflections on the Stoic, Bi-Racial and Existential South* collects essays that the author has written over a period of some twenty years; some of them have been published in earlier and shorter versions, others are conference papers that have been rewritten/edited for this book. In addition the book contains an interview with Martin Luther King, Sr., and Gretlund also prints twenty-five letters that he and Walker Percy exchanged during the last nine years of the Southern writer's life. The book testifies to Gretlund's sustained interest in, and deep involvement with, Southern society, especially its literature, during all this time. There are seventeen chapters all told, most of them devoted to one writer, but some contain discussions of groups of writers as well as reflections on matters of methodology in Southern scholarship.

The literature of the American South, Jan Gretlund says, 'has for the last sixty some years argued about its revered stoic heritage, lingered on the region's biracial identity, and eventually dealt with universal existential questions' (9). In the Introduction he addresses the point made by some critics, notably Michael Kreyling, that the South should be read and understood in terms of cultural waves that originated outside of the South and then washed through its literature and changed it. Gretlund largely dismisses this notion and argues that the South must be understood from within, must be discussed and analyzed in terms of a distinct set of historical, social and cultural facts which are unique to the region. *Frames of Southern Mind* derives its structure from the tripartite focus indicated by the subtitle. Gretlund neatly organizes his materials into three parts each made up of five separate texts. The three sections are entitled 'The Stoic South,' 'The Bi-Racial South,' and 'The Existential South'; in addition there is a section consisting of two essays, entitled 'The Lagniappe,' which – tongue in cheek – Gretlund refers to in the Introduction as a gratuity, 'a bonus' to the reader. Here he offers his personal views on the situation in Southern writing and scholarship today.

The section on Southern Stoicism opens with a close reading of Allen Tate's well known poem 'Ode to the Confederate Dead,' which went through several revisions before it reached its final shape, as printed in Tate's *Selected Poems* from 1937. One might argue that this essay doesn't belong in Gretlund's first section at all, since the point of his analysis is that the speaker of the poem despairs at his inability to confirm for himself and his own times the type of commitment to a cause which the Confederate Dead typified. But the analysis offers a useful counterpoint for the essays to come: Tate's dramatization of the South's loss of a sense of direction in the first part of this century indirectly argues for a return to the kind of stoic awareness that had sustained the region in the past.

One writer who has responded to the call for renewed stoicism is Madison Jones, a sadly neglected author in Gretlund's estimation. His chapter on this Tennessee writer is a fine

introduction to his novels, which Gretlund places in the Agrarian tradition, in that they offer frequent dramatizations of the regret that accompanies 'the loss of inherited values.' Jones' fiction is marked by the typically Southern concerns of place, community and history; while bleakly aware of the limitations and inadequacies of modern life, Jones nevertheless manages to imbue his characters' lives with 'pride, courage and dignity' (55).

Madison Jones' novels are all set in the South. This is not the case with the fiction of Katherine Anne Porter, but Gretlund sides with Louis D. Rubin, Jr., who in talking about *Ship of Fools* has argued that the values by which Porter judges human character in general 'are quite "Southern"' (41). Gretlund's approach to his materials in this book is colored by an unmistakable sympathy for much of what the South represents, as well as his admiration for the writers he discusses, as revealed in the following characterization of Porter. She 'was brought up in accordance with the best of Southern codes,' he argues, and some of the results of this upbringing were 'a lack of sentimentality, an emphasis on decorum, a moral stamina, and an emotional stability, all of which helped her greatly as a fiction writer' (39). This set of values remained firm also during those many years that Porter lived outside the region. Gretlund's approach in this essay is unabashedly biographical; such an approach, he comes close to arguing, is a must with Porter. If critics had taken biography more firmly into account they would have avoided misreadings of the kind that George Hendrick is guilty of when he sees 'the Miranda stories as ending in "isolation and desolation"' (40). Citing Porter's comments in the margins of her own copy of Hendrick's book, Gretlund refutes the viability of such a reading; Miranda, Porter had noted, 'wasn't frightened, wasn't sad, only resolved. A very positive state of being' (40). Gretlund's essay constitutes a sustained defense of Porter's 'stoic' artistic credo: 'Porter's only faith was in her art and in her duty to tell the truth as she saw it. She saw lust, cruelty, contempt, egotism, and hate. And she had the courage to say so' (41).

A similarly un sentimental approach to life is found in the fiction of Flannery O'Connor. However, in his chapter on this writer it is less immediately clear how Gretlund wants his reader to understand the concept of stoicism. In his discussion of what he labels O'Connor's 'Social Stoicism' Gretlund again enters into debate with critical tradition. A common view concerning this writer is that she is predominantly a religious writer who takes but little interest in social matters. While acknowledging the overarching role of Christian issues in O'Connor's fiction, both short and long, Gretlund makes a case for seeing her also as a writer with marked social concerns, most specifically concerning issues of race and class.

The idea of a 'Stoic South' receives its most principled discussion in the last essay in the section, in a nicely argued and instructive examination of Walker Percy's Stoicism. Here Gretlund shows that the ideas of Classical Stoicism form an integral part of the Old South's value base. For instance, the Southern notion of *noblesse oblige* is heavily informed by Stoic ideals, which Gretlund summarizes as follows: 'reason, a sense of duty, courage, justice, freedom, compassion, dignity, and self-discipline' (83). This was an intellectual legacy which was instilled in Percy by his foster father, William Alexander Percy, who from an early time gave his adopted son instruction in the ideas of Mark Aurelius and Epictetus as guides to authentic living also in modern times. As Walker Percy came of age, this secular humanism, with its stress on individualism, became too

constricting for him; in Catholicism he found a sense of community which he did not find in Stoicism. Some commentators have for this reason seen his novels as a wholesale denunciation of Southern Stoicism per se. Gretlund argues against this critical tradition: 'Stoicism and Christianity are not necessarily antithetical, although it took Percy some time (and his critics somewhat longer) to realize this. What Percy showed us about his ethical Stoic heritage is *not* that something is wrong with it but that Stoicism is not enough' (84).

Many of the concerns discussed under the heading of Stoicism reappear in the next section on 'The Bi-Racial South.' The first essay is a discussion of Katherine Anne Porter's unfinished story, 'The Man in the Tree,' where the subject is racial lynching. Another essay in this section provides an analysis of Eudora Welty's short story, 'Where is the Voice Coming From?' Welty wrote this story directly after the assassination in her home town of Jackson, Mississippi of Medgar Evers, the NAACP field secretary. Part of the South's Stoic legacy, as described by Gretlund, is an ability to own up to the horrors of its violent history. Both Porter and Welty do this in their fiction; in the process they put under scrutiny some of the social dynamics which underlie racial tension. Both of these writers have come under fire for a failure to speak up forcefully against the nasty facts of the South's racial history. In these two essays Gretlund argues that such a criticism is ill-founded. 'The Man in the Tree,' though unpublished, is 'so full of hideous images of racism' that they 'dispel any accusation of racism' against Porter (101). Welty's story describes the assassination of the fictionalized Black Civil Rights leader from the perspective of the assassin. Welty wrote the story out of 'shock and revolt' at the realization that she 'knew' the man (131); not his real identity, but the kind of man that he was. The story is among other things an attempt to describe and understand a representative of the violent South and is thus Welty's way of confronting, and thereby denouncing, the region's many acts of brutality in the name of race.

Race is obviously also a central concern for Ralph Ellison. In the chapter entitled 'In a Run-Away Buggy,' Gretlund provides an analysis of 'And Hickmann Arrives,' one of several fragments of a second Ellison novel that never saw publication. As in *Invisible Man* racial conflict is the central fact of this text. But rather than focussing merely on anger as a means of protest, Ellison always combines social protest and affirmation of Afro-American heritage. The fragment under discussion depicts among other things a dignified non-violent protest against racism in the US Senate by a group of Black elders, led by Reverend A.Z. Hickmann. As he does in his famous novel, Ellison in this story dramatizes, through skillful interweaving of plot and symbolism, the interdependence of black and white Americans, their fates forever interlocked by the facts of history, not least Southern history. Gretlund's interview with Martin Luther King, Sr. nicely complements the Ellison essay. The value of non-violent protest is stressed, as is the moral authority accompanying a firm sense of ethnic and national identity. But even though Martin Luther King, Sr. acknowledges that Afro-Americans have witnessed considerable progress since the death of his son, there are still problems; the high level of unemployment among young Afro-Americans is one of these problems, a situation which is ripe with potential for social unrest.

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judgements. Gretlund is a writer who is not afraid to take a stance *vis-à-vis* the material he treats. Nowhere is this more visible than in the essay entitled 'Silencing the Voice of the Past in Southern Fiction.' Here Gretlund addresses the thorny issue of political correctness and argues forcefully for liberality in adjudicating what constitutes acceptable rhetoric in speaking about, for instance, matters of race. Referring to the debate surrounding *Huckleberry Finn*, he places himself squarely in the camp of those who defend Twain against charges of racism. Similarly, he denounces the criticism levied against Welty for using the word 'nigger' in 'Where Is the Voice Coming From?' The story, Gretlund remarks, is after all told from the point of view of a racist.

In his third section Gretlund addresses what he calls 'The Existential South.' He never defines what he understands by this phrase. Generally the term seems to refer to a set of writers who foreground their characters' crisis of self, these characters' sense of alienation and psychological dislocation. However, he also sometimes uses the term 'existentialist' without distinguishing between this and the more general term 'existential,' which seems unfortunate. My dictionary reserves the former term for the philosophical movement of that name. So when Gretlund speaks of 'Eudora Welty's existentialism' in reference to her depiction of Laurel Hand's crisis of self in *The Optimist's Daughter* (171), 'existentialism' does not seem a good term to use. If by 'existentialism' is understood the notion that existence precedes essence, then Welty takes rather the opposite view. Welty, Gretlund points out, grounds her approach to character in fiction on 'an aesthetics of place' (188 et passim). Gretlund quotes her essay 'Place in Fiction' to this effect, and he offers this elaboration apropos of the fiction of Josephine Humphreys: 'In important respects our minds are products of our native place, its history, its atmosphere, and its *essence* of place' (225; my italics). This minor objection as concerns terminology aside, under the heading 'The Existential South' Gretlund offers convincing and thorough readings, in two separate essays, of the fiction of Eudora Welty (especially *The Optimist's Daughter*) and Josephine Humphreys as dramatizations of contemporary experiences of alienation and psychological isolation – existential problems indeed. Antidotes to this type of anxiety are for both of these writers an ability to face the Southern past and sensitivity to the healing power inherent in a sense of place.

The essays about Welty and Humphreys in this section are complemented by Gretlund's correspondence with Walker Percy, a chapter on contemporary Southern poetry, and a discussion of the fiction of Larry Brown. The Percy letters will be received with interest by students of this writer's fiction in that several of them address key ideas in his oeuvre (especially the role of science), but the published correspondence also allows considerable room for Gretlund's reflections on Percy's works. A.R. Ammons, James Dickey and Donald Justice are poets who exemplify what Gretlund singles out as a distinctive phase in Southern literary history. This phase is marked by a shift in focus from the communal to the individual. 'The general tendency in Southern literature after 1968,' says Gretlund, 'has been a concern with loneliness and the disintegration of minds, lives, marriages, families, relationships, and communities' (163). Larry Brown, an exciting but uneven writer in Gretlund's opinion, dramatizes many of these types of personal crises in his stories and novels, with a typical Southern attention to the importance of place. Brown reappears in the essay entitled 'New Frames of Southern Mind,' placed in the section

Gretlund calls 'The Lagniappe,' but the chapter might as well have been placed in the previous section in that the writers mentioned here share the thematic concerns that Gretlund labels 'existential.' 'New Frames of Southern Mind' offers an overview of some fifteen Southern writers of fiction currently publishing. The essay takes the form of a status report, and Gretlund likes what he sees: 'The writers referred to in this chapter exemplify the continuity, change, and excellence of Southern fiction in the 1980s, and their output was impressive' (261).

The last essay in the collection Gretlund calls 'Frames of Southern History, Biography, and Fiction.' Here Gretlund addresses the growing awareness in the academic community of the collapse of genre boundaries between historiography, biography and fiction. In the first part of the essay he rehearses, and supports, the view of Hayden White et al. that a writer of history of necessity has to make use of the narrative strategies of fiction to make readerly sense, historiographers' insistence on non-fictional 'objectivity' notwithstanding. The second part provides good illustrations of how a writer of biography/ autobiography – in casu Eudora Welty in *One Writer's Beginning* – does the same. These viewpoints are well established in the literature by now and will raise few objections. However, the last part of the essay, where Gretlund seeks to demonstrate why 'without pleasure, [he has] found that *modern fiction is (auto)biography*' (274), he is a little less convincing. His views here seem somewhat sweeping and are less cogently argued and illustrated than in the first two parts of the essay.

Each of Gretlund's seventeen chapters has a small preface which explains the circumstances that produced the text in question; read together these prefaces constitute a form of autobiography of the author as Southern scholar and tell of a varied activity as researcher, speaker and commentator, editor, and conference organizer. *Frames of Southern Mind* is only one of the many fruits of that labor. The book suffers here and there from repetitions and overlap, which must be ascribed to the fact that these essays were written over a long period of time, for a number of disparate occasions. Some minor misgivings noted along the way notwithstanding, this remains a highly stimulating book. Gretlund has an impressive grasp of his materials. He convinces both in his close readings and in his ability to survey the larger field. The fact that he is never afraid of taking a strong stance vis-à-vis writers and issues should be productive of fruitful debate.