
BOĞAZIÇI ÜNİVERSİTESİ DERGİSİ

Beşeri Bilimler – Humanities

Vols. 8-9 – 1980-1981

SOUTHERN LITERARY TRADITION IN AMERICAN LITERATURE: INTRUDER IN THE DUST AND THE WEB AND THE ROCK

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ABSTRACT

A sense of evil, pessimism about man's potential, a tragic sense of life, a sense of the interplay of past and present are some of the traits that make up what is called the southern literary tradition. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how these traits are applied in **Intruder In The Dust** and **The Web and The Rock**. The selection of these two particular novels was not arbitrary. **Intruder in the Dust** and **The Web and The Rock** reflect the world of two different Southern sub-regions. Therefore the approach and the tone of these two novels to the same topic are quite different. Since not all the traits stated in the above lines could possibly be included in these particular novels, the emphasis will especially be on the sense of evil, shame and guilt coupled with the need for an expiating action and closely related to the sense of evil, the Civil War and the Southern defeat, and finally the sense of the interplay of the past and the present as delineated through different tones in these two novels.

Both **Intruder in the Dust** and **The Web and the Rock** delineate the developing consciousness of the central characters, George Webber and Chick Mallison but the approach and the tone of these two novels to the same topic are quite different. According to Holman, this basic difference of approach and tone is due to the

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the fact that Wolfe and Faulkner do not come from the same Southern subregion. In other words, the impact of the culture of these two subregions yield varying views of the South that each writer depicts in his own novel.¹ The purpose of this paper is to analyze how some of the traits of what is called the Southern Literary Tradition are applied in these two novels reflecting the world of two different Southern subregions.

A sense of evil, pessimism about man's potential, a tragic sense of life, a sense of the Southern Literary Tradition.* Since all these traits could not possibly be included in these two particular novels my emphasis will be on the sense of evil, shame and guilt intermingled with the sense of Southern defeat in the Civil War and finally the interplay of past and present as delineated in these two novels through different tones.

While the basic organizing principle in *Intruder in The Dust* is the past, *The Web and the Rock* is free from the firm grip of the past. In *Intruder in the Dust* the past is unravelled and the invalidity of the social codes that reach out from the past have been proved by means of the values and codes belonging to that particular region. In *The Web and The Rock* the past is unravelled and the basic conflict caused by the clashing of the values belonging to the past and present have been delineated not within the frame work of values of a particular region, but through the condition of wandering of the self through different planes. This act of wandering and self seeking has not been completed when George Webber comes to a kind of self discovery at the end of the novel. We know that he will go through further experiences not by turning to past and digging the past but by reaching out to the future and searching for other planes. The condition delineated in *Intruder In The Dust* is a frozen moment of a slice of existence the meaning of which is nourished by the past. The unrealized lynching situation which is established as the central pivot point of the plot gives one a sense of lurking of the traditions reaching out from the past which gives its meaning to the present. In *The Web and The Rock* the past is a reminiscence because Webber views the South from a distance but in *Intruder In The Dust* the past is there; right in the middle of the present giving it its meaning. In *The Web and The Rock* one feels the sense of a flow from present to the future with a reminiscence of the past.

According to Holman's classification Faulkner belongs to what is called the Deep South² which came into being after the establishments of the Federal Union and geographically includes Western Georgia, Western Tennessee, Alabama, Missisipi. This semitropical region was settled by the wild frontiersmen of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries.³ and by those failures and malcontents of what is called the

* For a detailed information on the definition of the Southern Literary Tradition see Holman, "Diversity within Unity", Ibid.

Tidewater region.⁴ These people tried to reestablish their own version of the Tidewater civilization. The Deep South was previously called the old Southwest and represented the frontier in 1830's and 1840's it was entirely an Indian territory.⁵ During 1840's in Missisipi and Alabama there started to develop towns customs and plantations "vaguely reminiscent of the Ideal of Cavalier Virginia and Carolina."⁶ Religion in this region, unlike grim Calvinism of Piedmont South, was extremely personal, pietistic and superstitious. The tradition of honour transplanted from the Cavalier Virginia and Carolina turned into the code of violence.⁷ The general picture of this region was that of a harsh, violent and exaggerated world. This world which became the subject matter for the humorists of the Old South West and Mark Twain, is also the background material for the creation of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha country. Faulkner uses his native region as the material out of which he creates his universal drama of the history of a civilization in the roots of which lie the typical Southern sense of evil, defeat, guilt and shame. In short, the Deep South, rather than being a source of mere romantic delineation of the local color, is a stage for Faulkner's statements of cosmic significance about Man's strife for personal integrity in the midst of the doom of defeat. Chick Mallison and Lucas Beauchamp are actually symbolic figures implying more than their own life size. In other words the Southern material is composed into an epic drama like in *The Web and The Rock* though a different approach.

Holman says that Wolfe spoke of the Piedmont South and its people who are the product of the union of the Pennsylvania German and the Scottish Southern mountain settler.⁸ This region geographically includes Appalachian and Blue Ridge mountains, the backcountry of the Carolinas, Tennessee, and Georgia People of the Scotch-Irish, Scottish and German origin settled in these areas and their world was ruled by the grim Calvinism of the Scottish Presbyterians.⁹ These people of Piedmont created a grim mode of life entirely different from the Tidewater culture which was only a few hundred miles away. In this "grim social world" people were "quick tempered, impetuous inclined to work by fits and starts, reckless and given to too much drinking."¹⁰ When Webber moves to North, he carries most of these traits flaming in his blood. The novel ends with a vigorous sense of flight as a result of which George Webber has to stay in a hospital for a while. During this period of recovery Webber reaches a kind of self knowledge. "Their pragmatic view of life, their folk-version Calvinism, their anti-intellectual individualism."¹¹ created a frontier world favourable to the concept of egalitarian democracy. Thus, this particular subregion of the earth, not embracing the aristocratic pretensions of the Deep South and Tidewater reflects the characteristic spirit of America: that of an egalitarian man. It's unquestionable that this world had a creative influence on the emerging American character. The notion of egalitarian society found its roots in the American wilderness with its individualistic economy.¹² The individual is the center not because he differs from the masses but sums them up in his self. This idea of the individual summing up the characteristics of a whole nation has become a motif in the American literature starting

with the transcendentalists celebrating the individual freedom. Whitman in his "Song of myself" celebrates the whole American notion through the celebration of his self. This method of creating the whole American experience through the depiction of the experiences of the writer's self which becomes the symbol of the American epic hero is also seen in Wolfe's autobiographical novel, *The Web and The Rock*. Wolfe in *The Web and The Rock* states his version of the difference between Tidewater South and Piedmont South in terms of South Carolina and North Carolina (Old Catawba)

"You feel lonely in Old Catawba, but it is not the loneliness of South Carolina..., the hill boy helps his father ... as a great train rushes toward the cities of the East. And the heart of the hillboy will know joy because he knows all world-remote, lonely as he is, that someday he will meet the world and know those cities too. But in South Carolina the loneliness is not like this. They do not have the mountain cool... The people are really lost. They cannot get away from South Carolina, and if they get away they're no good."¹³

Wolfe's South is ready to open to the world. His Piedmont middle class is a new South embracing the future offered by the industrialism and capitalism of the North. George Webber, while leaving the South does not completely cut out his roots in the South. His individual quest is actually controlled by the pull between the South, "The Web of the Earth" and the North "the rock of the city." Thus day, by day, in the taut and tangled Web of this boy's life, the two hemispheres that touched but never joined...¹⁴ From the South, "the dark ruined Helen in his blood"¹⁵ Webber goes to the North, to his father's land. His mother was from the South and his father was from the North. Thus his going to the North gains a symbolic significance of search for the father to which Wolfe attaches a further meaning: search for the self.

"The deepest search in life, it seemed to me, the thing that in one way or another was control to all living was man's search to find a father, not merely, the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger..."¹⁶

The Image of the South with its dark picture of those decades of defeat and darkness instigates contradictory feelings of hatred and love in Webber's heart. Some critics believe that Wolfe "was born in the South but he shared with it little except the accident of birth."¹⁷ There is far more of the South running in the veins of George Webber than mere act of birth. The Southerner brings to the North "a warmth" that the North lacks.

Chick Mallison in *Intruder in The Dust* is a child unlike George Webber. Yet as Gold says, "childishness and maturity are never correlative with age in Faulkner's works,"¹⁸ Chick, the child, unlike his ancestors, does not cling blindly to the vices of his ancestors. Thus, Chick, not yet bound by the prejudices and the heritage of the past, is

capable of genuinely judging the individual as an individual without being totally bound to the racial distinctions. Chick, the child symbolizes the "the promising human being." Just like Chick, is meant to symbolize the ideal, George Webber is meant to represent symbolically the quest of the "national self."

George Webber's attainment of self knowledge is delineated through four major parts in *The Web and The Rock*. The first part deals with Webber's childhood in his hometown and reaches its climax with the Negro Dick's chain of murders and the resultant lynching act. These scenes well depict the main characteristic of his region: the underlying violence and brutality.

The second part deals with his departure from the South for New York where, while trying to write, he begins to believe that,

"everyman on earth held in the little tenement of his flesh and spirit the whole ocean of human life and time and that he must drown in this ocean unless, somehow he 'got it out of him.'"¹⁹

The third part deals with Webber's journey to Europe and his meeting Esther on his way back to America and his affair with her back in America. The fourth part deals with his going back to Europe and finally while staying in the hospital his attainment of some sort of self knowledge through accepting the human limitatinos, "What have we but the pinion of a broken wing to soor half-heavenword."²⁰

Chick's self knowledge takes place on a different plane. He, by digging the grave digs the past and finds the wrongs of the past thus proving Lucas' innocence.²¹ By this act he cannot erase the evil, the wrong, the guilt and the shame of the past but by proving that the "abstractions growing from the past, are wrong symbolically establishes his moral integrity."²² Digging the grave is a task given to him to find the truth for himself thus proving his self-reliance. The main conflict in Webber's life is the pull between the South and the North. The main conflict in Chick's life is the clash of the accepted social values and prejudices of the white society pushing him to a need for establishing his white superiority over the Negro Lucas by trying to pay him for the food Lucas had offered him and the humane impulse to prove Lucas' innocence, to regard him as an individual who shoul not be separated inhumanly by the codes of the society.

The sense of evil and suffering lurks both in the atmosphere of *Intruder in The Dust and The Rock*. This sense of evil is subtly related to the past, the sense of shame and guilt, Civil War, Southern defeat and ruin. This sense of evil disaster and suffering embodied in the Civil War and the defeat reaches out from the past of the South and lurks in the atmosphere of the present. Wolfe describes this sense of evil, suffering

and disaster through the image of an old house" that shone faintly through that tangled growth like its own ruined specter its door and windows black as eyeless sockets."²³ But this is neither Webber's south nor of the lives of his contemporaries. They did not know this South but they all somehow remember it. Now, Webber's South is a new South" with a kind of sunlight and of another century."²⁴ Though Webber's South has emerged from its retreat to the past into the reality of the modern world, the image of the Old South remains there deep in the corners of their mind. Faulkner in *Intruder in the Dust* says that its always there for "yesterday today and tomorrow are is: Indivisible."²⁵ For every Southern boy of fourteen that instant" on that July afternoon in 1863 is always there whenever he wants it."²⁶ For Faulkner the only salvation in this world of material defeat is the maintenance of the integrity of this spirit²⁷ as manifested in Chick's proof of Lucas' innocence and questioning the validity of the social codes reaching out from the past. The communion of the white boy chick with the Negro Lucas regardless of the inhuman distinction of races isa suggested salvation for man – a humane existence but still " the shame will still be there of course. "²⁸ Since the ideal condition of the commission of the Negro and the white man cannot be realized immediately,

"Someday Lucas Beauchamp can shoot a white man in the back with the same immunity to lynch-rope or gasoline as a whiteman,... But it won't be next Tuesday."²⁹

the only thing left to Faulkner is to praise and respect Negro's power of endurance.

Closely related with the sense of evil is the sense of guilt and shame coupled with the need for an expiating action. Holman suggests that this sense of guilt may be the "product of the poverty and suffering that the region has known. He further adds that the region has known. He further adds that it's in part the result of the guilt associated with slavery in the nineteenth century and the Negro's second class citizenship in the twentieth century.³⁰ Miss Warsham in *Intruder in The Dust* says that Lucas' wife and she had grown up together as sisters would. Irving Howe suggests that this sad reminiscence of the past is a confession of failure in the society.³¹ The humane relation between the negro and the white child is destroyed by racial distinctions. It's this white superiority over the Negro:: treating the Negro as a second class citizen which underlies the sense of shame and guilt that needs some kind of an expiating act. The white man's shame subconsciously leads him to further humiliating the Negro hence ironically lowering himself morally. It is this guilty conscience that hovers among the white people in *Intruder in the Dust*. Chick overcomes the influence of his environment to further lower his white man morality by trying to humiliate Lucas and chooses to question the codes of his society through the digging act.

This sense of shame and guilt is kindled by the firm grip of the grim Calvinism of Weber's hometown. His past together with the shame and guilt enhanced by his

poverty and suffering in Weber's life unconsciously leads him to torture Esther by accusing her and her society of deception and chicane. Esther, while defending herself, says that he projects his own shame and guilt on others.³²

As I have suggested at the beginning of this paper, the sense of the interplay of the past and the present is quite different in *Intruder in the Dust* and in *The Web and the Rock*. Faulkner in *Intruder In the Dust* writes of the Southerners living in their hometown founded on the heritage of the past. He analyzes the codes of this particular region reaching out from its past in terms of the framework of values and experience intrinsic to this particular region. The tradition of the past lives everywhere and embraces the characters. Lucas Beauchamp, who has blood ties with the old white family McCaslins, embodies the remnants of the past running in the blood of the white man and the Negro.

Georger Webber, on the other hand, born in a region which had no strong ties with the prewar Southern aristocracy, leaves his hometown and goes to North early in his youth. He casts the Southern fruits of his childhood experience against the framework of another society. Hence the implications of the past depicted in the *Web and The Rock* is not like that of Yoknapatawpha country at the end of the novel it precipitates into a sad remembrance of Webber's hometown. "So many sunlights that had come and gone since morning, morning and all lost voices – 'Son where are you?' – of lost kinsmen in the mountains long ago... That was a good time then, 'Yes' said the Body. 'But-you can't go home again.' " ³³ In *The Web and The Rock* there is the sense of relative freedom from the past and the wandering of the "self" reaching out to other planes rather than being distinctively Southern. Finally one gets the sense of a glow from the present to the future with a reminiscence of the past in varying tones of anger, hatred, love, yearning and sorrow.

NOTES

- 1 C. Hugh Holman, "Diversity Within Unity" in *Three Modes of Southern Fiction*, (Georgia; 1966) pp. 8-10.
- 2 Holman, *Ibid.*, pp. 4-27.
- 3 Cash, Wilbur Joseph, *The Mind of the South*, (New York: 1965) p. 42.
- 4 The Third subregion as described by Holman, is the Atlantic Coastal South – Tidewater and Low Country generally settled by British colonists of Cavalier Meanings. Geographically the region includes Virginia, South Carolina, Tennessee, much of Georgia.
- 5 Colman, *Ibid.*, p. 28.

- 6 **Ibid.**
- 7 **Ibid.**
- 8 Holman, p.9.
- 9 **Ibid.**, p.9.
- 10 **Ibid.**, p.50.
- 11 **Ibid.**
- 12 Vernon Louis Parrington, **Main Currents in American Thought** (New York: 1930), p. 137.
- 13 Thomas Wolfe, **The Web and The Rock** (New York, 1940).
- 14 **The Web and the Rock**, p.90.
- 15 Holman, p. 245.
- 16 Wolfe, **The Story of a Novel**, (New York, 1936) p. 39.
- 17 Holman, "The Dark, Ruined Helen of his Blood: Thomas Wolfe and the South" in **Thomas Wolfe: Three Decades of Criticism** (New York, 1968), p. 17.
- 18 Joseph Gold "Intruder in the Dust" in **William Faulkner: A Study in Humanism from Metaphor to Discourse**, (Oklohoma, 1967), p. 77.
- 19 **The Web and The Rock**, p. 262.
- 20 **The Web and The Rock**, p. 693.
- 21 Gold, p. 87.
- 22 **Ibid.**, p. 84.
- 23 Wolfe, **The Web and The Rock**, p. 245.
- 24 **Ibid.**
- 25 William Faulkner, **Intruder In the Dust**, p. 194:
- 26 **Intruder in the Dust**, **Ibid.**
- 27 Holman, "The Dark Ruined Helen of His Blood", p. 34.
- 28 **Intruder in the Dust** p. 154.
- 29 **Ibid.**, p. 155.
- 30 Holman, "The Dark Ruined Helen of His Blood", p. 35

- 31 Irwing Howe "Outline of a World" in *William Faulkner: A critical Study* (New York, 1962 p. 101.
- 32 *The Web and The Rock*, p. 584.
- 33 *The Web and The Rock*, p. 695.

ÖZET

Güneyde Yazın Geleneği diye adlandırılan geleneği oluşturan niteliklerden bazıları, kötülük duygusu, insanın gizil gücüne karşı kötümser bir yaklaşım, trajik bir yaşam görüşü ve geçmiş ile bugün arasında bir etkileşim duygusudur. Ben bu yazımda bu nitelikleri Amerika'nın güneyindeki iki ayrı bölgenin düşünce yapısını yansıtan *Intruder in The Dust* (Faulkner) ve *The Web and the Rock* (thomas Wolfe) adlı romanlarda incelemeye çalıştım. Yukarıda sözünü ettiğim niteliklerin tümünün bu iki romanda bulunabilmesi olanaksızdır. Bu nedenle ben, daha çok şu soruya yanıt aramaya çalıştım: Amerikan iç savaşı sonunda yenik düşmesinden dolayı Güney'in edindiği yenilgi saptantısı ile içiçe gelişen kötülük, utanç, suçluluk duyguları ve kendini bağışlatma gereksinmesi, başka deyişle dünün bugün üzerindeki etkileri iki ayrı bölgeyi yansıtan bu iki romanda nasıl yansıtılmaktadır.