

PUTTING THE DYNAMIC PAST TO EVERYDAY USE IN THE FICTION OF SOUTHERN WOMEN WRITERS*

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ABSTRACT

From its beginnings American literature has displayed an ambivalent coexistence of the idealistic impulse to eradicate the past and a conservative reverence for it as a sacred guide for the present and the future. Southern writers have traditionally stood out for their love-hate relationship with their region's past. This essay traces some of the ambivalences with respect to the past in southern women writers. Both Ellen Glasgow and Bobbie Ann Mason, from different periods and backgrounds, initially made their break with the past and tradition central to their identity as writers. Glasgow came to reject modern values later in her career, whereas Mason has recently become much tamer in her rejection of the past and has come to cherish the family tradition as a source of personal renewal and as a guide for the present. Other contemporary southern women writers, like Lee Smith or Alice Walker, also see the past not as an altar on which to expiate the guilt of their region's history but as something directly related to them and as a useful source of renewal for their present lives and those of their characters.

KEYWORDS

American South; southern fiction; southern women writers; Ellen Glasgow; Bobbie Ann Mason; Lee Smith

From its very beginnings, American literature has carried within it an ambivalent coexistence of the idealistic impulse to eradicate the past and the conservative practice of revering it as a repository and guide for the present and the future. Nathaniel Hawthorne, arguably the most representative American writer of the nineteenth century, is simultaneously the romantic who in his famous novel *The Scarlet Letter* admires the spiritual freedom of Hester Prynne, when she urges her secret lover, the Puritan clergyman Dimmesdale, "Let us not look back. . . . The past is gone! Wherefore should we linger upon it now?"¹ and the conservative who condemns Hester's free thinking and disrespect for tradition and social codes as a threat to the very foundations of the social structure. Almost a century later, the same idea was expressed by William Faulkner through Gavin Stevens in *Requiem for a Nun* when Stevens tells Temple Drake, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."²

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1. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, in *Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 292.
2. William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1951), 92.

For Hawthorne, the Puritan past of both his region and his family was as inescapable as his own shadow, and his case is proof that southern writers are not alone or anomalous in their concern for history in a nation which has made a fetish out of existence in the here and now, which often sees the past as something dead and the future as something to be created afresh.

Many of the writers of the Southern Renaissance viewed change with a divided mind, maintaining a painful love-hate relationship with their region's past. A precursor of the Renaissance, Ellen Glasgow, moved from an initial denunciation of the dangers of fossilization to a more timid belief that there is a point beyond which changeability means devotion to nothing beyond the self. Hawthorne, interestingly, came to be the only American writer to secure Glasgow's complete admiration. She started out as a fierce defender of new standards, new ideas of beauty, and new rules of conduct. In her autobiography *The Woman Within* she wrote about her consuming desire for freedom from her "inescapable past,"³ and she remained convinced that the past "is not a place in which we should live and brood until we become like that ancient people whose 'strength was to sit still.'"⁴ Glasgow shocked the gentry of Richmond, the capital of the late Confederacy, when she became an outspoken feminist, demanding suffrage for women. Early in her career she made her rebellion against the formalized traditions of the Old South and the break with the past central to her identity as a writer, and she relentlessly attacked the many social and intellectual inadequacies of the South. In her first really accomplished novel, *Virginia* (1913), Glasgow strongly satirizes the characters who are unable to accept the present or to acknowledge those unpleasant realities which contradict their idealism. The protagonist's father, an Episcopalian priest who persistently closes his eyes to modernity and progress, has always "directed his energies toward the whitewashing of the actuality." Both for him and for his wife, "taking a true view of life," as they call it, "was to believe what was pleasant against what was painful in spite of evidence." In his persistent wish "to regard the period before the war in Virginia as attained perfection, and the present as falling short of that perfection only inasmuch as it had occurred since the surrender," he represents the attitude of so many of Glasgow's contemporaries who could not accept defeat in the Civil War. And "his sole hope for the future" was "not progress, but a return to the 'Ideals of our ancestors.'"⁵

Virginia traces the tragic life of this man's daughter, Virginia Pendleton, and certifies the death of the myth of the southern lady, which she embodies. She represents the "evasive idealism" of the Victorian period which the author so fiercely attacked. Virginia is tragically unable to adapt to a dynamic time and benefit from the forces of change, because she cannot admit to it; she

3. Ellen Glasgow, *The Woman Within: An Autobiography* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 221.

4. Ellen Glasgow, "The Dynamic Past," *Reviewer* 1, no. 3 (March 15, 1921): 74.

5. Ellen Glasgow, *Virginia* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 26–27.

does not have the intellectual fortitude to deal with the strange and the unexpected. She clings to her high standards and noble intentions, but these have become irrelevant in the new age, and she becomes the tragic victim of the very processes of life and change.

Ellen Glasgow's firm rejection of the myth of True Womanhood and the myth of the Old South was a shock to the many people in her social circle who were still fighting the Civil War, those whose imaginations were still nourished on the illusions, myths, and legends propagated by the southern romances of the period in which she herself made her appearance as a writer. Glasgow committed herself to a fictional realism untried by previous southern writers, and refused to be the southern lady she was expected to become. The idea of a young southern lady being a serious writer was something of a scandal, a secret vice, for many in early twentieth-century Richmond. A few weeks after the publication of *Virginia*, the author received a visit "from one of the perpetual widows of the South," who asked "with patient sweetness," "Do you really think, my child, that a young girl could be inspired to do her duty by reading *Virginia*? I do not deny that there is truth in your book; but I feel that it is a mistake for Southern writers to stop writing about the War." After a pensive sigh, the widow continued, "If only I had your gifts, I should devote them to proving to the world that the Confederacy was right."⁶

Probably the main reason for Glasgow's exclusion from the modernist canon was her pronouncement against modern values later in her career. In her writings after the mid-1920s she began to show her conservative and elitist vein more and more. It is in the Richmond section of her novel *Vein of Iron* (1935) that Glasgow most blatantly reveals the reaction that she came to share with the Agrarians against the increasing urbanization and modernization of the South. Glasgow, who had initially brought to southern literature a vibrant critical spirit that had been absent for so long and that made the South forget those romances in which the Civil War was fought over and over again (and which the South always won), herself became engaged in fighting the war again when she joined forces with the Agrarians in their defense of traditional rural values. In the Richmond of *Vein of Iron*, Glasgow paints a dreadful picture of a mass society which has lost the "vein of iron," the fortitude inherited from her Scotch-Irish Presbyterian ancestors of the Valley of Virginia that, as she says in a letter to Stark Young, "has enabled human beings to endure life on the earth" and "has enabled not only families, but races, nations, strains, to survive and even to forge (or weave) some continuing tradition."⁷ As Anne Firor Scott notes, in many respects Glasgow was always "the very model of the proper southern lady. And after the First World War, the woman who had called for a southern literature of 'blood and irony' was profoundly troubled by the disappearance of

6. Ellen Glasgow, *A Certain Measure: An Interpretation of Prose Fiction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943), 83–84.

7. Ellen Glasgow to Stark Young, Probably in summer of 1935, in *Letters of Ellen Glasgow*, ed. Blair Rouse (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 190–91.

the very manners and behavior that she had earlier seen as emblematic of the destructive grip of tradition on Virginians.”⁸

Ellen Glasgow and Bobbie Ann Mason are from different periods and from different social backgrounds, but they share several similarities. First, both made their appearance as writers in periods of transition, Glasgow in the late nineteenth century and Mason in the late twentieth century, and both are known for their psychological insight in dramatizing the private lives of their characters against a background of social instability and accelerating change.⁹ Second, they both started out firmly convinced that tradition endangers individual development and rejected a South with no modernity or critical values, thus excluding themselves from the literary traditions that preceded them. Third, both demanded and celebrated freedom and rights for women in conservative environments. Finally, a notable diminishing of their initial radicalism developed over the course of their careers.

Ellen Glasgow started writing when the South was entering the modern age, whereas Bobbie Ann Mason made her appearance in our own strange postmodern era, by which time the atomic bombs dropped on Japan had already obliterated to a large degree the living sense of the past, which would disappear further from view as the influence of popular mass culture increased. If in the postmodern age the meaning of the individual's identity in history became more uncertain than ever before, in the early work of Bobbie Ann Mason history is wholly lost. Her characters share the postmodern condition described by Fredric Jameson, characterized by the “disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve.”¹⁰ “Shiloh,” the story that made Mason's name, introduces a married couple who take a trip to the Shiloh Civil War cemetery in a desperate attempt to save their marriage, which is breaking up because of changing gender roles. Neither of them knows anything about the historical significance of Shiloh, nor do they care. Norma Jean is a new southern woman who takes advantage of all the new possibilities available for greater individual autonomy and self-realization, even if the price is displacement from history and the loss of heritage and tradition. Her husband Leroy is unable to cope with the rapid social changes that are affecting his wife and his social environment, and he realizes that “the real workings of a marriage, like most of history, have escaped him.”¹¹

8. Anne Firor Scott, afterword to *Vein of Iron*, by Ellen Glasgow (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 405–6.

9. Many believe that the American novel of manners deals primarily with people's responses to changes, and Glasgow once wrote that her work as a whole was a “chronicle of manners, which is integrated by the major theme of social transition” (*A Certain Measure*, 66).

10. Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 125.

11. Bobbie Ann Mason, “Shiloh,” in *Shiloh and Other Stories* (London: Flamingo, 1988), 16.

The most sympathetic characters in Mason's early phase prefer the open road that may lead to untried locations and new opportunities to the inertia of home and tradition. For them, place is often not home but the road. Samantha Hughes, the adolescent protagonist of Mason's novel *In Country* (1985), travels with her uncle Emmett and her paternal grandmother from rural Kentucky to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC. She is thrilled by the "feeling of strangeness" of the road, which is where "[e]verything in America is going on" and feels "that everything is more real to her, now that they are on the road."¹² Another supposedly distinctive feature of the southern mind has been lost here: its comparative freedom from a belief in geographical solutions to life's problems, in contrast to the rest of the country with its restless movement, where, if things do not work out, you simply move on, or move elsewhere. *In Country* is a novel about history in the sense that the protagonist wants to unlock the secrets of her past. But that history goes back no further than the Vietnam War and it is a totally personal history because her father died in the war. None of the other characters has any interest in history. Uncle Emmett, a Vietnam veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, is like a southern version of the Hemingway hero who tries to maintain his sanity by forgetting the past and concentrating on trivial realistic details. He insists, "You can't learn from the past," and, "The main thing you learn from history is that you can't learn from history. That's what history is."¹³ For these people the past is no valid guide to the present, and thus it is that Samantha's mother exclaims, "But I can't live in the past. It was all such a stupid waste. There's nothing to remember."¹⁴ We are a long way from famous southern literary characters obsessed by the burden of the southern past, like Faulkner's Quentin Compson or Robert Penn Warren's appropriately named Jack Burden.

Mason's characters are people with no interest in the historical past and, as Fred Hobson says, "they have little in their world to make life meaningful beyond the here-and-now." And who can blame them? They do not have the tools, or the desire to see any deeper, "because they are products of a *society* that disregards history."¹⁵ Mason has always refused to see southern literature in a static way, characterized by the permanent "backward glance" of Allen Tate,¹⁶ with its emphasis on racial tensions, family, community, and religion. In an interview she said,

12. Bobbie Ann Mason, *In Country* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 17, 19.

13. Mason, *In Country*, 226.

14. Mason, *In Country*, 168.

15. Fred Hobson, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 18. Hobson's italics.

16. The famous phrase is from Allen Tate's influential essay "The New Provincialism: With an Epilogue on the Southern Novel," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1945): 272: "With the war of 1914–1918, the South re-entered the world—but gave a backward glance as it stepped over the border: that backward glance gave us the Southern renaissance, a literature conscious of the past in the present."

I'm not so sure those qualities of the Old South were all that terrific. . . . I'm not nostalgic for the past. Times change and I'm interested in writing about what's now. To me, the way the South is changing is very dynamic and full of complexity. There's a certain energy there that I don't notice in other parts of the country. It comes out of an innocent hope of possibility. My characters have more opportunities in their lives than their parents did, and even the parents are more prosperous in their old age than they ever were before.¹⁷

In another interview she said, "I don't think the people I write about are obsessed with the past. I don't think they know anything about the Civil War, and I don't think they care."¹⁸ In *Wilderness* (1961), Robert Penn Warren's historical novel of the Civil War, an elderly wise man says that "there's always a reason. That's what History is—the reason for things."¹⁹ In our individualistic age, with its emphasis on the private self, the escape from history is only a counterpart to the disappearance of community, the loss of the individual's role in the common human condition. In Mason's South, the individual has lost awareness of his interaction with society and of the importance of society as society. She considers "the chaotic life that we mostly live now" a blessing and welcomes the loss of "that baggage of the past" that restricts the individual.²⁰

Mason has not exactly turned conservative with the years, as Ellen Glasgow did, but there was a notable shift of emphasis, coinciding with her return from the Northeast to her native Kentucky in 1990. In her stories of the 1980s, such as "Residents and Transients" and "Love Life," she clearly advocated transience and the roving disposition, and she usually identified the "call of the hearth" and the "backward glance" with stasis and death, being one of the contemporary southern writers most firmly convinced that regional history or tradition are wholly ineffective as sources of identity in the fluid contemporary world. In some of the stories from her third collection, *Zigzagging Down a Wild Trail* (2001), Mason is much more ambivalent, and this ambivalence coincides with her discovery, on returning home to Kentucky, that it is when you return that you discover and know for the first time where you came from, that the place where you belong is where you know who you are. In her memoir *Clear Springs* (1999) she wrote: "Like many Americans, I long to know the past. There's a sense of loss in America today, a feeling of disconnectedness. We're no longer quite sure who we are or how we got here. More and more of us are rummaging in the attic, trying to retrieve our history,"²¹ a passage with echoes of Mr. Compson in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, who says that "we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now

17. Albert Wilhelm, "An Interview with Bobbie Ann Mason," *Southern Quarterly* 26 (Winter 1988): 37.

18. Wendy Smith, "PW Interviews: Bobbie Ann Mason," *Publishers Weekly*, August 30, 1985: 425.

19. Robert Penn Warren, *Wilderness: A Tale of the Civil War* (New York: Random House, 1961), 73.

20. Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver, "An Interview with Bobbie Ann Mason," *Contemporary Literature* 32, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 451.

21. Bobbie Ann Mason, *Clear Springs: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1999), ix.

merely initials and nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affection which sound to us like Sanskrit or Choctaw.”²² This rummaging in the attic, trying to retrieve history, is the theme of one of her more recent stories, “The Heirs” (from the *Nancy Culpepper* collection, 2006). But for Mason’s protagonist, the autobiographical Nancy Culpepper, it is simply a question of personal history, not the deep moral meaning and the social dimension of the black shadow of slavery and racial injustice that torments Faulkner’s Quentin Compson. Nancy is not a southern literary character engaged in a frantic attempt to understand the individual’s significant relationship with the entire culture of which she is a part.

In “The Heirs,” Nancy is fifty-nine years old, and much more nostalgic and ready to appreciate the heritage of her past than in the previous stories in which she appears. She is alone in Kentucky, disposing of her parents’ farmhouse prior to its sale to make way for an industrial park. She searches eagerly through a shoebox that she finds in the attic, looking “for family secrets, for clues that illuminate her own life.”²³ Like the photographer in Michelangelo Antonioni’s movie *Blow-Up* (1966), Nancy studies the pictures in search of the larger story of two great-great-aunts who lived during the Depression. Her behavior is like that of a historian (Nancy is a history graduate) who recreates the past from the scant sources available. And she does indeed recreate the story of the lives of the two female ancestors, who, in their dream of escape from the restricted world of the farm, fell victim to a con that promised to make them heirs to a substantial tract of land in New York State in return for regular sums of money. Artemisa, who survived her sister Nova, “felt her small life enclosed by the split-rail fences of [her husband] Bealus’s sixty acres”²⁴ and “[h]er mind wound around and around, craving . . . books to read, paper for writing, a man from a newspaper to talk to her about the world, to bring her news of the world, the world that spun around and around and around.”²⁵ The story’s title acquires a new meaning in relation to Nancy, who can now consider herself the heir to the aspirations of her great-great-aunts. Better socio-economic conditions made possible for her the exploration of a world denied to her female ancestors. The well-traveled historian of the present is, then, the product and the repetition of the past. Nancy has an epiphany in the story’s brief final section, when “the weight of her heritage came rushing through her mind, as if the [hot] brick [she, as a child, slept with on cold nights], a straight aim from those two desperate women, had been thrown at her.”²⁶ Thanks to the hoarding of the farm people, who never threw things away, Nancy has access to these treasures from the

22. William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, in *Novels, 1936–1940* (New York: Library of America, 1990), 83.

23. Bobbie Ann Mason, “The Heirs,” in *Nancy Culpepper: Stories* (New York: Random House, 2006), 180.

24. Mason, “The Heirs,” 200.

25. Mason, “The Heirs,” 200.

26. Mason, “The Heirs,” 201.

past, which give meaning and continuity to life: “Nancy saw herself in this group of people, lives that had passed from the earth as hers would too. She felt comforted by the thought of continuity.”²⁷ The farm has been sold, but in her memory and imagination it will always be part of her. For the rest of her life she will be the “heir” to the culture and the spirit it embodied. The self that Nancy—dissatisfied with the life on offer at home—left Kentucky in order to look for and to build was, as she has just discovered, more securely at home than she initially thought; but she would never have discovered this if she had not left, moved by the desire to keep her options open. She would never have imagined to what extent her present self was going to be enriched by her past.

The protagonist’s experience here is surprisingly similar to that of the country singer Katie Cocker in Lee Smith’s 1992 novel *The Devil’s Dream*, when she says to a BBC reporter,

*It took me a long time to understand that not a one of us lives alone, outside of our family or our time, and that who we are depends on who we were, and who our people were. There’s a lot of folks in this business that don’t believe that, of course. They think you can just make yourself up as you go along. . . . The hard part has been figuring out who I am, because I’m not like any of them [in my family], and yet they are bone of my bone.*²⁸

This observation describes Lee Smith herself, who, in her adult life returned, as a writer, to her own roots, to the isolated native place in Appalachia that she had wanted to escape from when young. She did not find her voice as a writer until she discovered in her provincial Grundy “the stuff of fiction,”²⁹ the substance and the authenticity that the writer finds in the materials available to her through her own experience.

Rather than their fiction being an altar on which to expiate the guilt of their region’s history, Mason and other contemporary southern women writers stress the idea of the restorative potential of the past. Lee Smith’s novel *On Agate Hill* (2006) deals with the postmodernist nostalgia for an irrecoverable past, for a source of regeneration in our lost and fluid world. It is composed of letters and diaries that tell the story of a woman in the years following the Civil War. They were found, together with a collection of bones and some other objects, at an old plantation house in North Carolina. Rather than becoming a source of guilt or a warning of the persistence of evil, the discovery of these documents from the past transforms the life of a woman, Tuscany Miller—Lee Smith’s alter ego³⁰—who appears in the contemporary frame of the novel. In fact, everything set in the present speaks about the renewal provoked by the discovery of this treasure from the past

27. Mason, “The Heirs,” 202.

28. Lee Smith, *The Devil’s Dream* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1992), 14. Smith’s italics.

29. Nancy C. Parrish, *Lee Smith, Annie Dillard, and the Hollins Group: A Genesis of Writers* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 173.

30. Lee Smith said that “Tuscany is always with me, sort of an alter ego, I guess.” Lee Smith, “Conversation with the Author,” in *On Agate Hill* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 2006), 380.

“in a secret room.” The “run-down plantation out in the country” is being renovated, turned into “a very fancy bed and breakfast.”³¹ This is a new venture, embarked on by Tuscany’s father and his lover Michael. In fact, Tuscany’s father has become a woman to marry Michael and has changed his name to Ava “because Michael loves Ava Gardner.”³² Tuscany’s life is being “renovated” as well: she has recently gotten out of a disastrous marriage, has a better relationship with her father than ever before, and is eager to return to graduate school and write her thesis on her findings. Tuscany says that “I GET it now, about history” and that “my horizons have been expanded by the contents of this box.”³³ Looking into the past of those who lived in her father’s new house has helped her look into her own past, and that “backward glance” provides a new understanding of life, human relationships, and new motivations that will help her in the future. Writing this historical novel was also therapeutic for Lee Smith, who at the time was suffering from depression and writer’s block caused by the death of her son Joshua.³⁴ Through their respective autobiographical characters, Nancy Culpepper and Tuscany Miller, Bobbie Ann Mason and Lee Smith express their awareness that the past is necessary to inspire our hearts and minds with its rhythm, when we learn to apply its lessons to the ever changing conditions of our world.

There are other contemporary southern women writers for whom the past is not an oppressive burden or a permanent source of guilt but rather a source of new life and spiritual nourishment. Alice Walker has repeatedly turned to her native South in search of “wholeness,”³⁵ and has invited her fellow African Americans to think of the South as their home. Her most famous character, Celie from *The Color Purple* (1982), becomes self-determining in Memphis, not in a northern big city like New York or Chicago. In her story “Everyday Use,” Walker advocates an art which should be put to “everyday use,” rather than hung on the wall of a museum or a living room, an art which should retain its connection to both the dead and the living individuals that together constitute the family and the history that it springs from. The quilts in Walker’s story, made of patches from different periods of the family history, and sewn together by different family members, are evocative of Uncle Venner’s patched clothes in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables*. This “man of patches” who is “patched together, . . . of different epochs; an epitome of times and fashions,”³⁶ is set up by Hawthorne as the counterbalance to Holgrave, the radical reformer who mistakenly thinks that

31. Lee Smith, *On Agate Hill*, 3.

32. Lee Smith, *On Agate Hill*, 2.

33. Lee Smith, *On Agate Hill*, 362, 363.

34. Lee Smith talks about this in her “A Short Note from the Author,” in *On Agate Hill*, 371–74. Originally published in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, September 17, 2006.

35. Alice Walker, “Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O’Connor,” in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 48.

36. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, in *Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 405.

the present “is destined to see the tattered garments of Antiquity exchanged for a new suit, instead of gradually renewing themselves by patchwork.”³⁷ The metaphor of patchwork, so dear to women writers and feminist critics in the late twentieth century, also appears in Lee Smith’s novel *Family Linen* (1985), in which the presence of the past is a central theme, including a house in which a corpse is buried somewhere, as in *The House of the Seven Gables*. But the present and the future triumph over a past of secret crime, corruption, and guilt which does not trouble the present generation very much. The past is made useful when the deceased matriarch’s family mansion itself is renovated, becoming a comfortable modern home, and the old well that concealed a corpse is converted into a wonderful swimming pool. The matriarch’s granddaughter, meanwhile, makes her wedding dress out of one of the grandmother’s old lace tablecloths, to suggest that family tradition is neither rejected outright nor allowed to imprison or suffocate; rather, it is renewed, and Karen makes a beautiful wedding dress out of the family linen.

In Mason’s story “The Funeral Side,” from the collection *Zigzagging Down a Wild Trail*, the female protagonist, who has always “valued change” and stayed away from small-town Kentucky for many years, returns home to help her widowed father recover from a stroke. Back home she comes to a new appreciation of her native place and her past when she sees her great-great-grandfather’s furniture that her father has “restored” and “refurbished” for her, and she is delighted by “the modern simplicity of the furniture,” which “resembled something in a Sundance catalog.”³⁸

These contemporary southern women writers would no doubt concur with Ellen Glasgow, who, in her essay “The Dynamic Past,” wrote that “we preserve the past more perfectly when its rhythm in our hearts and minds inspires us to action, not when we stand and gaze backward.”³⁹ What is needed is the clairvoyance to perceive the difference between the heritage that is toxic and unusable, and the one that is valid if it is adequately renovated. The simplistic dichotomy between tradition and innovation is inadequate, and the most reasonable stance toward tradition is perhaps what Piotr Sztompka calls the “tradition of critical traditionalism.” It is a dialogical strategy that avoids on the one hand “the fallacy of blind traditionalism, the uncritical following of tradition informed by the mistaken equivalence of past with good,” and on the other “the opposite fallacy of dogmatic antitraditionalism,” which ignores “the beneficial role that tradition as such, and some traditions in particular may play in human society.”⁴⁰ Not only is the coexistence of tradition and modernity possible but modernization itself may strengthen tradition. After all, nostalgia for those suddenly rediscovered charming

37. Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 507.

38. Bobbie Ann Mason, “The Funeral Side,” in *Zigzagging Down a Wild Trail* (New York: Random House, 2001), 122, 137.

39. Glasgow, “The Dynamic Past,” 80.

40. Piotr Sztompka, *The Sociology of Social Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 68.

elements of traditional society is a recognizable feature of our modern society, and the partial fascination with the past that we have observed in the fiction of Bobbie Ann Mason and Lee Smith is, paradoxically, just another feature of the modernity that they have embraced all along. In this sense they have placed themselves within the postmodernist paradigm which subverts all the binaries (home/journey, inside/outside, past/present, etc.) that seem to be necessary for analysis and explanation, and which considers all identities as paradoxically both located and mobile.

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