Trauma, Memory, and History: 
A Study of the Southern Fiction of Trauma

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Introduction
The 20th century saw a flowering of the American Southern Renaissance which was nurtured by the disruptive memory of its history. As participants in the unfolding history of the South, the Southern writers were not only willing and active consumers of southern collective memories, but also speakers for the traumatic past of the region. Traumatic memory plays an important role on two levels in these writing: on the plane of motif, the novel locates trauma in terms of individual and collective memories, where trauma activates the Southerners’ retrospection and interpretation of the past; while on the plane of narrative form,
trauma expresses conditions of belatedness, repetition, dissociation and latency of characters' psychological sufferings. The Southern writers rely on distinctive techniques, such as flashback, duration of time and stream of consciousness, to represent the traumatic memory and to demonstrate the painstaking self-shaping of the south. In light of these common characteristics, this body of work will be characterized as the fiction of trauma in this paper. The Southern fiction of trauma demonstrates how a traumatic event disrupts attachments between the self and others by violating the social and traditional order. Such novels portray the rupture of historical time, the dissociation of the self, the transmission of trauma memory and discourse between generations, the unclaimed experience of traumatized characters, and accordingly the self- and collective-reconfiguration of the region.

I. Trauma and History in the South

Freud describes trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as a violent event that returns in fragments in the unconscious even if it is not consciously remembered by the person who experiences the episode.\[1\] For Freud, trauma occurs—as with veterans in World War I or survivors in a train collision—when the victims are unprepared for an accident and retrospectively, through dream work and repetitive phenomena, attempt to assimilate the unexpected event that was “missed” in its implications and horror when first witnessed. Cathy Caruth explains that trauma “is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on.”\[2\] This definition explains why victims suffer from the haunting of the events, or even more, traumatic latency may precede haunting. On individual memory, trauma comes back through nightmares, flashbacks, and repetition; while on collective memory, it produces a compulsion to go back to the past, a desire to return to the original, traumatic event.

The Southern memory just registered in the traumatic memory. To explain the southern writers’ compulsive of returning to the past, we have to take a retrospect to the origin of Southern Eden legend. Posed at the turn of the century, Southerners were perplexed by the discourse between two sheer dissidents. Jeffersonian idealism of plantation system has been long disapproved by Hamilton’s pragmatism on industrialization. After the Civil War, Northerners further believed the Southland was sinned by the slavery, or rather by the pride. For the Southerners, however, the
past was only an elegy on Paradise Lost. The twilight of the lost world cast a shadow to the ex-empire which had once honored its people and land. It was a nation older than the United States, a land imbuing with dream and myths. In the 17th and early 18th centuries, "explorers from Virginia expected to find the Great South sea somewhere to the southwest and they believed its shores would be a land like Eden".[3] And in 1737, William Byrd II of Westover, Virginia, published "an alluring promotional tract under the title of Neu-gefundenes Eden [New Found Eden]".[4] Later the image of Eden has occupied all southerner's mind.

In the decade of the 20's, however, a kind of neoabolitionist myth of the Savage South was compounded. It seemed that the benighted South, after a period of relative neglect, suddenly became an object of concern to every publicist in the country. "Fundamentalism, Ku Kluxery, revivals, lynchings, hog wallow politics—these are the things that always occur to a northerner when he thinks of the South."[5] Obsessed with outside evaluations, the Old South was immersed into the dilemma of self-judgment. These two strong and contesting discourses gave a vent, for example, in The Sound and the Fury, when Quentin recalled Shreve's comment about Deacon's presence in the parade: "There now. Just look at what your grandpa did to that poor old nigger."[6] And his response to this remark of Shreve's indicated Quentin's rejection of the simplistic Northern stance toward emancipation, the War, and his grandfather's guilt with respect to the blacks. "Yes, now he can spend day after day marching in parades. If it hadn't been for my grandfather, he'd have to work like whitefolks."[7] As a Southern bystander and commentator watching a Northern Victory Celebration, Quentin's position as a perpetual outsider was strongly confirmed. Thus memory became an instrument of torture rather than redemption. The remembrance of traumatic past has haunted Quentin; it hardly liberated him. Whereas Northern religion possessed the possibility of rebirth arising from death, the South could worship only death.

II. The Formation of Southern Fiction of Trauma

The Southern fiction of trauma was produced in the transitional time between the disappearance of the Old South and the deterioration of the new South. The economic failure of the New South Creed and the political disempowerment generated a sense of loss among many in the region. In the face of the social crisis of memory, the Fugitives developed into the Southern Agrarians, committed to the recovery of the past both through contention with others and introspection within
themselves. In doing so, their discourse started a new historical mode for Southern memory. They intended not to sentimentally repeat the code of honor or cavalier tradition of the Old South; rather, each of them had quite different memories of the past. In their dispute and discourse, the grand history of the South was deconstructed, opening a space for more individual and particular memories. The southern fiction of trauma thus emerged from this deconstruction of monumental historical consciousness by explicitly acknowledging the existence of historical trauma, and by an encounter with history as well as an exploration of personal stories.

The search for the self has to take a backward glance. The Southern writers thus anchored the individual experience within a larger historical context and represented the formation, transmission and reconstruction of the Southern traumatic memory. More importantly, all these writers belonged to the third generation of the survivors in the Civil War, and they recognized themselves as inheritors of a lingering and difficult memory. In 1929, with publication of Thomas Wolfe’s *Look Homeward, Angel!* and William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, a Southern literature renaissance was advent. Thomas Wolfe described Eugene Gant’s growing-up story in his *Look Homeward, Angel!* He also registered enormous changes both in tradition and social life in the city of Altamont. This novel is a great piece of memory which examines both bodily suffering and psychological distress caused by the interplay of family and social trauma. Although this novel does not bear the same heavy historical burden as other Southern novels, the traumatized children in the Gants enrich a store of traumatized characters, whose life is immersed in loss and searching, and symbolized an ambiguity of identity in the South. Similar to Wolfe, Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* is also an elegy of a Southern family tormented by the past that haunts the present.

It’s not a coincidence to see the Compsons’ family ritual imitated some real stories in history in which nothing but honor was emphasized in southern tradition. During the war of 1812, Sam Houston joined the army. His mother, who had urged him to do so, handed him a musket. Houston recalled her saying, “I never disgrace it; for remember, I had rather all my sons should fill one honorable grave, than that one of them should turn his back to save his life.” Then she presented him with a plain gold ring, “with the word ‘Honor’, engraved inside it”. The ritual presented by this Southern mother embodies an ideological condition which transcends spiritual immortality to physical existence. With this exchange between the grand
ceremony and the anxiety of the loss of family reputation, Southern identity is then represented by the individual’s understanding of who he is and where he belongs in the ordered ranks of society. Therefore, it is not a coincidence to find the Father’s presenting of the watch to Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury*. Quentin recalled:

> It was Grandfather's and when Father gave it to me he said, Quentin, I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it's rather excruciatingly apt that you will use it to gain the reducto absurdum of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father’s. I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it. Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools.[10]

In contrast with the mother’s intention for memory, the Father’s presentation demonstrates the wish for forgetting. Nevertheless, neither the Father nor the son could escape from the paw of Time. The evocation of the oblivious glory ghostly haunted the two generations and transformed time metonymically into a kind of regulation. The repetition of the Compsons’ tragedy, however, reveals a traumatic hallucination of the past in the present. To the Compsons as well as to the other Southerners, the trauma is not ended, or in other words, the present persists in trauma.

**III. Transmission and Repetition in the Southern Fiction of Trauma**

Accordingly, historical trauma caused by the Civil War and reconstruction was transmitted intergenerationally, and it penetrated respectively into the Southern collective memory, constituting the frame of individual, family and cultural memory. In 1936, Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* represents the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory in Southern families, and builds a particular history of an individual’s Lost Cause. As a witness of the Civil War and reconstruction, Miss Rosa offers testimony as the first generation, and Mr. Compson does as the second generation, while Quentin, as the third generation, accepts the traumatic memory from their telling, and also commits himself to the will of Southern memory, namely, “You will never forget”. Quentin inherits this family memory and attempts to understand Sutpen’s historical traumatic story. In this way, a family memory is passed by telling through generations, and the repetition becomes a dominated way for restoration of memory. As the third
generation, Quentin realized that repetition was the only way for his generation to know the story and the world:

"Am I going to have to hear it all again;" he thought "I am going to have to hear it all over again; I am already hearing it all over again; I am listening to it all over again; I shall have to never listen to anything else but this again forever."[11]

Quentin used five "all again" to describe the repetition of memory, and this repetition became not only a way for the inheritance of the traumatic memory, but also an existence of his generation.

Embedded in the traumatic memory, the young generation has suffered from narrative plight caused by the belatedness of trauma and the historical consciousness caught between the old and the new. In 1938, Tate published *The Fathers*, which also encounters the formation of historical and structural trauma in the South. Laney’s father Major Buchan belongs to the established family in Virginia; while his spiritual father Posey stands for a lonely modern person from the North. Laney’s dilemma in his choice of these two fathers reveals the writer’s puzzlement as well. As Laney finds: "That was all I ever knew but I suppose I could have known more; I didn’t want to know any more. Didn’t I know what had happened? I thought I did, and I still think what I then thought, which was what any man would have thought."[12] Laney here admits his thought, as well as his narrative, jumping between past and present, as Lynette Carpenter pointed out,

He[Laney] participates in it both as an original participant and in the retelling. Moreover, he is continually reminding us that it is his story—by contrasting his awareness in the past with his awareness now, and by organizing the events as they are associated in his memory rather than as they actually occur in chronological sequence.[13]

Carpenter clearly pointed out how Tate, as well as other Southern writers, displayed their talents to organize material in the way of arrangement of memory, but not in the order of chronological sequence. And this struggle was also an attempt for the healing of traumatic memory, since when the trauma can be told out or be organized in narrative, the victim regained the ability to know the world. After two decades writing, the Southern trauma novel achieved maturity in the 1940s, when Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men* both consolidated earlier insights and developed his own new perspectives on the trauma of history. The Depression deepened the
rupture between the past and the present, and brought awareness of a discordant note in the continuity of Southern history. Jack Burden’s investigation of the history results in a return of the past, and a destruction of the people he loves. Attacked by the trauma of both the past and the present, he escapes into the Big Sleep and the Big Twitch, which can be read as symptoms of dissociation and numb in trauma. Burden finally finds the historical origin of trauma and a path toward redemption in Cass Maston’s confession, and determines to enter history by taking responsibility for the past. The novel represents Burden’s self reconfiguration and his determination to reconstruct history, placing emphasis on the relation between Mastern’s testimony and Burden’s own story, since the former becomes a burden for Burden, and the latency of the historical Southern trauma hinders Burden’s further understanding of the past. Therefore, Burden’s retrospect is also introspective, only through this recollection of the past can he, as well as the other traumatized characters, “rejoin the world” (to borrow Allen Tate’s word). The Southern imagination can end the haunting of trauma and finish the narrative of history from a safe position by distancing themselves from the past.

**Conclusion**

Engaged in the repetition of these traumatic memories, the Southern writers attempted to reconstruct the history of the South through the portrayal of typical traumatized characters. The individual trauma of these characters is often connected to larger social factors, to cultural memory and to social ideologies. Although trauma narrative explicitly involves only personal suffering or family tragedy, the sub-text often suggests that these traumatized characters are an “everyone” figure of the South. In this regard, the fiction of trauma raises deep questions concerning the interplay of individual and society, trauma and reality in the Southern historical context, and marks a significant moment in the development of Southern fiction.

In conclusion, these Southern novels create a range of traumatized characters, rebuild the history of the South, and thus help to promote social healing. The representation in Southern trauma novel can be arranged in three phrases, namely, repetition, interpretation, and reconstruction. The initial traumatic repetition greatly disturbs the survivors, and during their whole lives they and their family will inevitably encounter the trauma replica. While the second generation inherits this memory and realizes a similar rupture in their lives, they also find their identities shaped by the collective traumatic memory. To understand their shared life demands
an interpretation of the trauma. The belatedness and latency of trauma, however, makes their interpretation full of ambiguity and ambivalence, which results in their narrative dilemma. The phase of reconstruction brings a reinterpretation of the relationship between past and present after the intergenerational transmission in the crisis of memory and the reconfiguration of the self. The Southern fiction of trauma supply examples of the social and historical transmission of traumatic memory, and achieve a literary representation of Southern history. A further study is called to pursue the Southern writers’ cultural ideal embedded in their writing, and examine the conflicts between authorized, grand historical consciousness and individual, fragmented, diasporic and repetitious traumatic memory, in order to establish a structured academic study of this period of Southern literary writing.

Notes:
[1] Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle (London: Hogarth, Vol. 18), 13.
[2] Cathy Caruth, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.
[3] George B. Tindall, “Mythology: A New Frontier in Southern History”, in Patrick Gerster, Nicholas Cords, eds., Myth and Southern History (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 2.
[4] Ibid., 3.
[5] Michael O’ Brien, The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 125.
[6] William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury (Mitcham: Penguin Books, 1964), 101.
[7] Ibid., 102.
[8] John Ransom, organizing his students, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Donald Davidson, etc., published the famous I’ll Take My Stand in 1929, which was regarded as an attack to the north by the Southern Agrarians. And this cultural movement was also a retrospect to the old Southern life, the tradition, value, and ideal. But in this collection, the twelve Southern writers disagreed with each other, and each had a personal, unique, individual way to interpret the past. For more information, see Allen Tate, “The Fugitive, 1922-1925: A Personal Recollection Twenty Years After”, Princeton University Library Chronicle, III (April, 1942), 84. See also Donald Davidson, “I’ll Take My Stand: A History”, Southern Writers in the Modern World (Athens, Ga., 1958), 29-30. Richard Gray, Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), William C. Harvard and Walter Sullivan, eds., A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians after Fifty Years (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1982).
[9] Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1982), 51.
[10] William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (M itcham: Penguin Books, 1964), 95.
[11] William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 222.
[12] Allen Tate, *The Fathers*, (Athens: The Ohio University Press, 1990), 227.
[13] Lynette Carpenter, “The Battle within: the Beleaguered Consciousness in Allen Tare’s *The Fathers*”, in *The Southern Literary Journal*. 8.2 (Spring 1976) 3.

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