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Masahiro Nakamura, *Visions of Order in William Gilmore Simms: Southern Conservatism and the Other American Romance* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2009, $39.95). Pp. xiii + 222. ISBN 978 1 57003 817 4.

William Gilmore Simms is the Rodney Dangerfield of southern letters: he just can't get no respect. From William Peterfield Trent's 1892 dishing onward, Simms has had to absorb the negative criticism that he wrote too much, wrote sloppily, was ignorant of revision, fell into stereotype and cliché because he lacked an original imagination, and was a pro-slavery hack and southern national chauvinist. Simms has his champions: John Caldwell Guilds, Edd Winfield Parks, James Kibler, Joseph Ridgely. I have myself written some kind words about Simms's work in *Figures of the Hero in Southern Narrative* (1987). Now, Masahiro Nakamura resumes the old battle.

There are several points crucial to Nakamura's defense. First, Nakamura hopes to position his work on Simms within "a remarkable renaissance of interest in the intellectual history of the American South" (1), signs of which he finds in the 1930s and 1940s (the era of the Agrarians and W. J. Cash) and once again in what he calls the "rise of postmodernism in the late twentieth century" (1). One problem with this mapping of the intellectual history of the American South – as it was filtered by a writer of fiction – is that Nakamura makes no mention of the generation of literary critics who have defined the latter or "postmodern" renaissance: Scott Romine, Martyn Bone, Leigh Anne Duck, Jon Smith, Barbara Ladd, and others. If he had wanted to make arresting interventions in the always-underappreciated Simms, he could have reread his fiction through the matrix of "the global south" or "the new southern studies." Such a perspective closer to the present could have made a significant impact on Simms's standing, for the new southern studies forces issues Nakamura mutes: race and slavery, gender, regionalism. His reading of *Vasconselos*, for example, suffers from comparisons with the myth of Jason and Medea when it should have tapped into Barbara Ladd's speculations about the Caribbean "South" (139–49). Instead, Nakamura's literary-critical gaze is retrospective; he fences with Guilds, Ridgely, Jon Wakelyn, and others who made their Simms cases more than a generation in the past. That was another country.

Second, "We shall see that [Simms] depicted the making of American history and society through the dynamic interchange between order and wilderness in terms of Southern conservatism" (3). Nakamura's version of southern conservatism is drawn from Richard Weaver's work, principally *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Time* (1964), from which he also borrows his title. Weaver's contribution, however, is not clear in Nakamura's Introduction, where the book's argument is laid out, but is delayed until the first chapter, where Weaver's formula for conservatism is brought to bear (25), and then more fully developed in the second chapter. With "southern conservatism," a lightning-rod term in so many discourses, central to the book's argument, Nakamura might have been wiser to acknowledge Weaver earlier and more fully before launching his reading of the conservatism in Simms's works.

Third, Nakamura is one of a party of literary critics and historians who insist that the forced enslavement of black human beings, when it appears in a work of fiction, may be taken thematically as a representation of, or metaphor for, a (southern)

worldview that is traditional-, family- and community- (rather than individually) oriented, rooted rather than rootless and innovative – i.e. conservative. For this interpretation he weaves Eugene Genovese and Bertram Wyatt-Brown. In his text and more densely in his "Notes," Nakamura straddles the chasm between, on the one hand, the deeply embedded guilt for slavery (the kind of psychological turmoil Robert Penn Warren imagined viscerally in *Brother to Dragons* and other work) and, on the other, slavery as merely part of the wider acknowledgement of inequality among all human groups in all places and times as the basis of the Southern conservative worldview (187–89). If Simms and his white southern conservative civilization (borrowing Toni Morrison's theory) "played in the dark," then, Nakamura seems to argue, we should too. This contention might be historically rigorous and faithful to Simms's moment, but as a literary-critical strategy it embalms Simms-the-novelist in inert readings that don't do much to get him the "respect" he might deserve.

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