

Shelby Foote and the Art of History: Two Gates to the City

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Review

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Panabaker, James *Shelby Foote and the Art of History: Two Gates to the City*.
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A paradox of Southern modernism

Foote blurs the past and present of the Civil War

Shelby Foote certainly fancied himself an adherent to literary modernism's belief that art was the supreme conveyor of knowledge in a world where truth was subjective, qualified, and even arbitrary. And not surprisingly, Foote's work displays many of the canonical aspects of modernism. Most of his early novels are framed either by outside narrators or are produced through multiple narrators as part of Foote's efforts to question and destabilize the idea of any absolute truth.

But as much as Foote foregrounded the relativity of truth, he held as sacrosanct the corollary modernist tenet that the artist was the supreme maker of meaning in the modern world. As he wrote his friend Walker Percy, I said once I didnt [sic] think God would be hard on writers. We are the outriders for the saints; we go beyond where they wont [sic] go and tell them what we've found. If we burn for that, we'll take pride in our burning, our pain; the triumph wont [sic] be God's.

For James Panabaker, Foote's formal techniques represent his efforts to negotiate the deep-seated ambivalence that racked many Southern modernist writers. Foote's sthetic of limitations--his sense of modernist relativism within clearly demarcated, almost classical, narrative strategies, as he says in his Introduction, enables him to engage with the pieties of the Southern culture of memory while translat[ing] the unstable past into formal self-conscious narrative art. Foote's success in carrying this out thus provides a fitting endnote for the accomplishments of the Southern Renaissance.

That high place in the Southern literary pantheon puts Foote more in the vanguard than William Faulkner. While Faulkner, according to Panabaker, was unable to escape the effects of the Lost Cause myth, Foote's work admits little of the continual flux between the polarities of idealism and realism that condition Faulkner's myth of the South, Panabaker also writes in the Introduction.

What Panabaker misses is that Foote was more tortured than most because he was caught betwixt and between, fascinated by the Southern past with all of its romanticization, yet acutely aware of the injustices necessary to perpetuate that glamour. His own family situation produced in great part that internal divide. He grew up amongst one of the South's wealthiest and most powerful families, the Percys, yet his family of plantation owners had lost their money and, with it, their cachet. In short, he was tantalizingly close to being part of the inheritance of the Old South.

That marginalized position is critical to understanding Foote because it is a reminder that however much Foote tried to distance himself from his culture by transforming or transmuting it into his art, frequently the effort to provide that distanced critique signifies a longing for it. Panabaker believes that Foote's multiple perspectives serve as a liberating element, a reminder that narrative is a site for mediating between fact and hearsay. And while, along these lines, his readings of the early novels are compelling, they miss the point that the multiple perspectives often yield lifeless monologues because Foote's overriding desire to provide a sense of place and the history of the South represents an inability to ventriloquize the multiple voices of the South. Which doesn't mean that he didn't try. After *Tournament's* defense of the planter class (as I have argued elsewhere), Foote increasingly began to address some of the ugly underbelly aspects of the Southern ruling class, including the manipulation of poor whites and the underpinnings of the region's New South wealth. But the deeper that he moved toward grappling with these issues, the more he turned backwards toward the Old South, not so much for its nostalgia, as for the fact that it provided a steady still point from his frustrated encounters with modernity.

The Civil War was a godsend for Foote, an opportunity for him, at the height of his artistic maturity, to write about a subject he loved and, more importantly for his excessive authorial control, to write about an event where the actors had already, in a sense, provided their lines. In other words, Foote was essentially freed to just play shaper and marionette, which enabled him to fully utilize his beloved Proustean quality of vision, the blurring of past and present, of

subjective comprehension and objective situation. Since the plot of the Civil War already essentially existed, Foote could create a pregnant tension between, as Panabaker says on page 134, centrifugal force and chronological imperative.

Panabaker's book is without question best on *The Civil War* because the trilogy offers him the clearest opportunity to explore and develop his thesis about Foote's notion of truth being not only contingent but necessarily subjective. After exploring Foote's dramatization of Union Gen. George McClellan's struggle to understand the nature of his opponent in the Peninsula Campaign, Panabaker writes on page 163, Indeed, the ambiguities raised by Foote's balancing of event and individual perspectives suggests a tacit recognition of the limitations of his own narrative's ability to establish a definitive truth about the past.

Panabaker also does a beautiful job describing how Foote's sense of contingency is not limited to the writer, but implicates the reader in the suspension of judgment (the principal reason why the trilogy continues to be so compelling). The narrative, as Panabaker writes on page 183, indicates through its intricate weave of incidents how the war generates its own particular memory and in doing so reshapes both the consciousness of the participants and the vision of the nation as a whole.

Panabaker's belief is that the driving force of Foote's work is to transform the chivalric, Victorian ways of honor and morality--the Cavalier code--into a Hemingwayan focus on the courage of the self. But Panabaker's elastic use of the Cavalier codes comes to incorporate any wrongdoing, hesitancy, or mistake. In a description of McClellan's praying at a church on page 159, during which he remembers that George Washington had worshipped there, Panabaker cites this action as one that Foote finds unattractive because it makes the General a sort of self-damning chivalric role-player (159). For Panabaker, this historical sense, ironically, is part and parcel of McClellan's general lack of moral courage.

That said, **Shelby Foote and the Art of History: Two Gates to the City** is still impressive. Panabaker elucidates Foote's modernism with great skills, but he never explains to my satisfaction the irony that Foote's full display of modernism almost depends on or requires a retreat to the 19th century. Perhaps that is what a Southern modernist, burdened with so much of the past, has to do.

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