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The Southern Disaster Complex

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The Southern Disaster Complex

Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up?

—William Faulkner, “Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature” (119)

1.

WHAT COULD BE MORE SOUTHERN THAN DISASTER? FROM EARLIEST European contact to Katrina, one way to tell the story of what is now the US South is as a series of disasters—natural, man-made, and otherwise. Consider the following selective but surprisingly representative time line. 1590: Disappearance of the Roanoke colonists. 1676: Bacon’s Rebellion, after which Virginia, in a particularly disastrous move, shifted away from indentured servitude in favor of race-based slavery. Slavery built the South into what would have been, had the Civil War turned out differently, one of the five largest national economies in the world; in the bargain, slavery also overworked and ruined much of the soil in the Upper South and deforested and depleted much of the Deep South, to say nothing of slavery’s even more catastrophic devastation in terms of human life, social relations, and democratic institutions.¹ After Reconstruction, which Southern blacks and whites agreed was a disastrous period (though for different reasons), the New South’s dependence on staple crops, particularly tobacco and cotton, blossomed into another environmental and economic disaster, further compromising the region’s natural resources and chaining it to an oppressive economic paradigm from which it would be virtually impossible to escape for the better part of a century. 1892: The boll weevil rolled north from Mexico into Texas, wreaking havoc on cotton for decades to come, and revealing the absurdity of the popular cry—now as well as then—for “border security.” 1893: The flowering of an economic depression that hit the South particularly hard, giving the region a three-decade head start, more or less, on the Great Depression. And in the twentieth century?

¹For comparative economic analyses before 1960, see Batemen and Weiss (27–48) and Wilson (xiii–xxii).

Racial segregation, lynching, xenophobia, political demagoguery, headlong resource extraction, unprecedented land use for urban sprawl, continuing pockets of deep poverty, and a desperation to attract even the most environmentally damaging industries to foster “growth”—coal plants, auto factories, oil refineries, nuclear reactors and waste sites. Welcome to Dixie.

The region’s annual and ever-more-powerful storms, and especially Katrina, invite the latest reckoning with the historical and aesthetic relationships between Southerners and their disasters. But something was missing from the media blitz in the fall of 2005 and the subsequent mainstream American appreciation, if that’s the right word, of Katrina. For the responses of many black and white Southerners to this most recent, and most disastrous, disaster were largely consistent with the long, robust discourse, generated over several hundred years and beginning to take its modern form in the late nineteenth century, with which the region has meditated on and portrayed its disasters. An appropriate name for this discourse might be the “Southern disaster complex.”

Most disturbing about the response to Katrina was the widespread confusion about whether it was a natural or a man-made disaster. This confusion continues even into the present moment, not days but years after the event. But as the early days of shock and horror turned into weeks, and then months, of numbing mass suffering and death and inept or nonexistent leadership in official responses, I began to realize that such confusion has been an integral part of the Southern disaster complex for a long time. From a certain perspective, more aesthetic than pragmatic, it is not just integral but highly desirable, even necessary.

The Civil War was certainly the greatest disaster in the South’s history as far as most white Southerners up through the Civil Rights Movement were concerned: it provided an inexhaustible mine of riches for this confusion, and continues to appeal to many Americans for the same reason. Shelby Foote remarks in Ken Burns’s 1990 documentary film *The Civil War* that Southerners realized too late that “defeat was foreordained” and opines at another point, “I don’t think the South ever had a chance to win that war.” In offering this thesis, Foote cites the war diary of Mary Chesnut, the wife of a South Carolina senator and Confederate officer, in order to compare the South’s experience of the war with Greek tragedy. A lot of white Southerners, and too many

professional historians, have bought this explanation over the years, as though everyone could see Southern defeat coming and there was no way to prevent it. This is bad history, but it isn't hard to see why someone like Chesnut would look to literature to understand the chaos and trauma of the immediate war experience. Classical tragedy, as a genre, organizes suffering and death into a formal aesthetic pattern even as it provides a broad interpretation of history itself. Chesnut doesn't name the Confederacy's tragic flaw—that past decision or event that precipitated the current disaster. She's focused more on the overall movement of the dramatic action and especially on the inability of individuals to influence the direction of that movement. Tragedy doesn't simply portray things going awry; it explains why they've gone that way in defiance of human agency. And while tragedy drastically limits the power of individuals to shape history constructively, what it does hold out is the opportunity for some kind of individual and group catharsis. That's about all Chesnut could hope for in 1865; and it seems to be about all Foote expects in 1990. This remarkable continuity of vision should come as little surprise in light of Foote's reverence for Greek thought and literature. "The Greeks knew better than anybody," he told interviewer John Carr in explanation of the classic generic forms that shaped his own fiction. "A man's own character is his demon" (24). In Chesnut and Foote's *Civil War*, however, that demon remains something of an abstraction, made perceptible only through the vast scale of misery that besets the South during and after the battlefield engagements.

The richness of catharsis here depends to some degree upon this particular awareness of scale. Paradoxically, however, it also depends upon the unimportance of fixing blame or, to be more accurate, upon the importance of *not* fixing blame on any specific persons or decisions. Meditating on the big picture, on the doomed arc of the dramatic movement, creates a circular and self-sustaining logic, both cause and effect, and a formidable aesthetic vision. Never was disaster more beautiful, more heroic, or more comforting. It seems best, in this spirit, not to define disaster too precisely, no matter what disaster we are discussing. So let's not refer to "Hurricane Katrina" or try to parse the cause or nature of the disaster. Katrina—one pleasant-enough word, a woman's name, an infinitely tangled mass of connotations, human, industrial, institutional, natural, and supernatural—will do wonderfully.

If this sort of treatment of disaster is to be expected from a figure like Shelby Foote, a white Mississippian who spent twenty years fashioning his three-volume narrative of the Civil War into what Walker Percy praised as “an American *Iliad*,” it is perhaps more surprising to come across it in the work of the filmmaker Spike Lee. Lee would seem to have neither Foote’s poetic appreciation (if not quite open defense) of the Southern cause and sacrifice, nor Ken Burns’s irrepressible penchant for Whiggish history. And while Lee’s *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, first screened in New Orleans on the one-year anniversary of Katrina, does not seek to celebrate the disaster as Burns’s film celebrates the Civil War’s positive impact on American history—the slaves were freed, democracy was saved, the march of progress was sustained, and so on—it does focus on the hardships of average people at the expense of any sustained alternative social or political vision. Over the course of the four-hour film, many individuals levy blame for the disaster, even as some defend their own actions, deflect accusations, and qualify the nature of the event itself. The cumulative effect of this mass fury and professional evasion is resignation, the film’s vague sense that the political processes, particularly at the local and state levels, could scarcely have intervened to good effect, even as the federal government neglected to intervene on a scale that would alleviate the suffering of thousands. At the same time, Katrina’s displaced persons speak freely of events closer to home. New Orleanians tell (and sing, and pray, and cry, and rant) about the strength of the storm, the absence of any help, the struggle to escape harm’s way, the experience of witnessing the deaths of loved ones, the brutality of police, the common decency and spirituality of strangers, the bureaucratic hell of the weeks and months that followed, the feelings of loss and abandonment and betrayal. Lee’s film is a rich document of vernacular expression, as well as an attempt to articulate a kind of inchoate populist rebellion.

Yet the film’s catharsis never leads to incisiveness. A litany of voices attacks President Bush and the corrupt, inhumane, and shadowy interests he seems to represent, even as the film remains, somehow, indecisive about the causes of the disaster and reluctant to advocate specific measures to be pursued in its aftermath. In the larger tradition of the Southern disaster complex, however, this uneasy coexistence between the film’s jazz-like chorus of victims and survivors, which does generate a kind of cathartic expressiveness, and the film’s murky

historical method and activist agenda is not anomalous but entirely representative, even traditional. Though it may seem inappropriate to set the film alongside Chesnut's Civil War narrative, or Burns's *The Civil War, When the Levees Broke* is perhaps not as politically radical as its righteous anger would imply. Its more fundamental ambition is to document and facilitate mourning: it is, as its subtitle truthfully advertises, a "requiem"—for the dead and for the loss of illusions about the nature of American identity. Pointing out that it stops well short of formulating any new discourse or platform, however, hardly counts as a critique. After all, the film registers a trauma still unfolding before the camera and is more focused on bearing witness to an emotional and psychological emergency than on the long-term legacy of the disaster. Perhaps the chorus of the suffering and outraged will rise up into a viable political movement with an agenda of fixed priorities, but such a possibility remains in the future, and offscreen. In the breach, and for as long as officialdom continues to fail and neglect so many citizens, catharsis will do.

2.

The full sense of tragedy that so many Southerners have perceived in their culture seems a particularly apt response to living in an environment where disasters of whatever origins occur with alarming frequency. Humility, an awareness of the smallness and cosmic unimportance of the human being, animates the Southern disaster complex; many of the South's best thinkers and writers have put this awareness at the center of their work. Theirs is the deepest of Deep Ecologies, by way of Sophocles rather than Gary Snyder.

C. Vann Woodward, the dean of twentieth-century Southern historians, does not employ a tragic model at the expense of historical analysis, as Chesnut and Foote do, but his work nevertheless apprehends a comparably tragic outcome in the course of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century Southern history. *The Origins of the New South* (1951), his most important book, portrays a disaster that is devastating even though it occurs not as one event but across several decades. Here Woodward laments the collective failure of late-nineteenth-century Southerners to draw on their greatest tradition, the region's Jeffersonian and Jacksonian egalitarianism, in the face of Gilded Age and Progressive pressures to modernize and maximize short-term profit. Racial injustice

as well as environmental damage, in this context, are partially (but not entirely, of course) local manifestations of a much larger cumulative disaster: the wholesale and corrupt selling out of Southern values to crass Northern and global economic motives. The disaster here is twofold: the South sells out and is underpaid in the bargain. Woodward's study of segregation, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955), chronicles, in parallel fashion but more modest scope, the many fatefully compromising decisions and desirable yet untried alternatives that contributed to the building of the South's disastrous racial regime after Reconstruction. It is not in the form of Greek tragedy but in the deepest grounding of history itself that Woodward's work is inflected by the Southern disaster complex. Summarizing what he calls "the inescapable facts of history," Woodward writes in his famous essay "The Irony of Southern History" (1960) that, simply enough, "the South had repeatedly met with frustration and failure." Subsequently he distinguishes the historical experience of the region from that of mainstream America:

It had learned what it was to be faced with economic, social, and political problems that refused to yield to all the ingenuity, patience, and intelligence that a people could bring to bear upon them. It had learned to accommodate itself to conditions that it swore it would never accept, and it had learned the taste left in the mouth by the swallowing of one's own words. It had learned to live for long decades in quite un-American poverty, and it had learned the equally un-American lesson of submission. For the South had undergone an experience that it could share with no other part of America—though it is shared by nearly all the peoples of Europe and Asia—the experience of military defeat, occupation, and reconstruction. Nothing about this history was conducive to the theory that the South was the darling of divine providence. (170-71)

Despite these sentiments Woodward is hardly resigned to accept the flow of "history" as the last word in the universal order. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* attempts to demonstrate that segregation did not emerge as an organic product of the slave system and that a historical vision attuned to how a people could make history might also envision how another people could make, or unmake, it—constructively, humanely, in the present moment. Woodward writes the passage above not in order to provide a rationale for Southern conservatism, stoicism, or inaction, but to point out that the South's historical experience has more in common, and might indeed be more useful, than that of mainstream America in a Cold War context in which understanding the

perspectives of other nations and peoples represents an essential task for human survival. Near the conclusion of the same essay Woodward calls for historians to make their work an active, intellectually honest contribution to that same Cold War milieu, which, paralyzed by cynicism and distrust, stands in great need of such work. This body of history, Woodward imagines, would “constitute a warning that an overwhelming conviction in the righteousness of a cause is no guarantee of its ultimate triumph, and that the policy which takes into account the possibility of defeat is more realistic than one that assumes the inevitability of victory” (190). Woodward’s “irony” is thus a sobering corrective in the larger contexts of the American nation and the world at large, a reminder that modernity, headlong in its progress, has not been equally kind to everyone in all places.

The South’s major fiction writers have largely concurred with Woodward, perhaps not least because the historical imagination of the young Woodward was shaped by the writings of William Faulkner. Throughout Faulkner’s fiction there resides a nervousness similar to Woodward’s regarding the relentlessness of modernity and its attendant arrogance and blind faith in success. But Faulkner resists, in a way that Woodward does not, looking at the pre-Civil War South, the slave South, as somehow superior or preferable to the modern South. In accepting the premise that the South’s Original Sin was there long before the fork-tongued Yankee entered the garden, Faulkner reads a kind of Old Testament wrath into Southern history. Indeed, his novel *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) reads the whole of Southern history much as Mary Chesnut reads the Civil War—as a Greek tragedy, though one in which the flaw is more readily acknowledged; here Faulkner brings the Southern disaster complex to its highest pinnacle of expression and literary achievement. In his other tales of more discrete disasters, such as a mother’s ten-day funeral procession through a most uncooperative landscape in *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and the 1927 Mississippi Flood as experienced by an escaped convict and a pregnant woman in *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem [The Wild Palms]* (1939), Faulkner systematically strips the visible trappings of modernity away from the South, bringing humans into crushing contact with the elements in order to dramatize the fundamental crisis of their existence and to invite them to their own sort of redemption, by flood and by fire. This approach, paradoxically, also enables Faulkner to explore the nature of modernity itself in more

complex ways. The definitively modern crime of lynching, for example, portrayed in the short story "Dry September" (1931) as well as in the novel *Light in August* (1932), is committed by young men, John McLendon and Percy Grimm, respectively, whose very violence and alienation make them crucial to the articulation of their society's identity. Just so, it is impossible to imagine the redemptive potential of Faulkner's work without the looming threat or actual experience of disaster. Even in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1950, Faulkner cannot build to his most famous and internationally celebrated conclusion—"I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail"—without first meditating on the foreboding presence and deathly effect of the atomic bomb on human consciousness (120).

Flannery O'Connor, though more modest than Faulkner in the scope of her historical and aesthetic imagination, is just as insistent about the need to acknowledge the force of disaster and is even more explicit than Faulkner about the opportunity for redemption that accompanies it. Many of her characters are Old Testament prophets, willing or not, who find themselves wandering in the mid-twentieth-century South. These souls, like Obadiah Elihue Parker in "Parker's Back" and Ruby Turpin in "Revelation," have special powers of insight to see through disasters and perceive a presence beneath them. They experience disaster as horribly painful but also as sacred and purifying—all of which is a good thing because, in the end, disaster is impossible to avoid. "We have gone into the modern world," O'Connor writes in one of her essays on Southern literature, "with an inburnt knowledge of human limitations and with a sense of mystery which could not have developed in our first state of innocence—as it has not sufficiently developed in the rest of our country" (847). Sharing Woodward's awareness of the South's exceptional experience in American history, O'Connor expresses the potential of this difference in a vision that is more theological than historical or political. "Mystery" is the dividend, and like Faulkner's humanist hope that man will prevail, it cannot exist apart from a close intimacy with disaster. The most surprising elements of O'Connor's articulation of the Southern disaster complex, in light of her intensely focused religious sensibility, are her refusal to fall back on rigid dogma and her disturbing sense of humor. O'Connor tends less to the grandeur of Faulkner's tragic arc than to the more familiar terrain of comedy. Hers is not a comedy of escape, however, but one of acceptance and dark

insight into the awkwardness of human affairs. O'Connor is both more explicit in her knowledge of the cosmic stakes of the contest and more willing to respond to them with howling laughter than is Faulkner. But then, she has more religion, too.

Whether organized or of the "do-it-yourself" variety identified by O'Connor, religion contributes a kind of Biblical intonation to the Southern disaster complex. The Israelites, of course, did not question whether their disasters were man-made or natural (I'm not sure that term would have any meaning for them); it was a choice between man-made and God-made in those days, and even that line was blurry because bad human decisions generally led to retributive divine ones. And there remains something of this sense of causality in our time. In January 2006, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin delivered his infamous "Chocolate City" speech as part of a program to commemorate Martin Luther King, Jr., Day. The speech itself is a marvel of ventriloquism, as Nagin imagines a conversation between Dr. King and himself on such topics as the poor federal response to Katrina and black political and social issues and provides Dr. King's verbatim assessments on each successive topic. Nagin then turns to an even higher authority: "Dr. King, if he was here today, he would be talking to us about this problem, about the problem we have among ourselves. And as we think about rebuilding New Orleans, surely God is mad at America, He's sending hurricane after hurricane after hurricane and it's destroying and putting stress on this country." Among God's motives, Nagin claims, is a special grudge against African Americans: "But surely He is upset at black America also. We're not taking care of ourselves." Later, in a rather surprising turnabout that envisions Katrina not as a punishment but as a reward for black people, Nagin predicts that, as a result of the disaster, New Orleans "will be a majority African-American city. It's the way God wants it to be."

The televangelist Pat Robertson has attributed such disparate disasters as the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and Katrina to God's displeasure with the secularization of American culture, hedonistic urban centers like New York and New Orleans coming in for particular scorn. In recent years he has also warned that Americans' acceptance of homosexuality might draw God's wrath in the form of hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, terrorist bombings and "possibly a meteor" (*700 Club* 1998). Even Robertson's newfound openness to dealing with

environmental crises has been cast in religious terms, as with his fall 2006 declaration that he had become a global warming “convert”:

I have not been one who believed in this global warming. But I tell you, they are making a convert out of me as these . . . blistering summers . . . [have] broken heat records in a number of cities already this year and broken . . . all-time records and it is getting hotter and the ice caps are melting and there is a build-up of carbon dioxide in the air. And I think we really need to address the burning of fossil fuels. If we are contributing to the destruction of this planet we need to do something about it. (*700 Club* 2006)

In light of his tendency to read the Book of Revelation into the daily flow of mainstream American culture, Robertson’s conversion represents more than an attempt to curb greenhouse emissions; it is a call for measures that will stave off a premature apocalypse.

Like other public figures, Nagin and Robertson, when criticized or pressed, often qualify or even apologize for making such remarks, creating much uncertainty as to the sincerity of both the original statements and the apologies, but there seems to be something more than political opportunism or willful fundamentalism at work here. Considered alongside the writings of Faulkner and O’Connor and the utterances of many other Southerners, such comments fit in an older and more mature tradition that seeks to make disaster legible, and to do so by keeping in mind the hard-earned wisdom of Woodward’s ironic conclusion about the South: “Nothing about this history was conducive to the theory that the South was the darling of divine providence.” Demonizing homosexuality, in the manner of Robertson and others, thus points not just to a conservative or intolerant view of sexual orientation or lifestyle, but to a much more comprehensive view of man’s precarious position in the natural and supernatural orders, which suggests just how difficult surmounting such attitudes might be. But then again, as Robertson, no less than O’Connor’s protagonists, has made manifest, converts wander among us, so perhaps the spirit of St. Paul will prevail in the fullness of time.

The popular pastime of auguring the decline and fall of the Southern empire is a distinguishing feature of Southern modernism. Disaster-as-metaphor has provided an impressively wide range of uses for world-weary Southerners, including those who don’t subscribe to traditional religious views. In his beautifully written 1941 memoir *Lanterns on the Levee*, for example, the self-identified “planter’s son” William Alexander

Percy utilizes a deeply nostalgic and wistful tone as he recollects his early life in the Mississippi Delta. Percy is hardly the evangelical type; he's a stoic, adopting a posture of honorable dignity as the idyllic world of his youthful dreams recedes implacably away. His chapter on the 1927 Mississippi River flood is remarkable not just for its depiction of the devastation caused by the levee breach—death, disease, starvation, crop failure, crime, greed, pettiness—but perhaps even more for his ultimate satisfaction with the flood's legacy.

As chairman of the local Red Cross and Flood Relief Committee, Percy had ordered thousands of African Americans to live indefinitely in tents on the levees even when ships for their evacuation had become available. Keeping the Delta's laborers close at hand, in other words, was a greater priority than ensuring their safety. His remark that "the camp life on the levee suited [the Negroes'] temperaments" (264) has the ring of Barbara Bush's notorious comments about Katrina's displaced people in the Astrodome: that they "were underprivileged anyway, so this—this is working very well for them" ("Houston"). Percy later conscripted blacks to perform forced levee maintenance and other manual labor, even at gunpoint, an order which led to the shooting death of one reluctant worker by a policeman. Yet at the end of the chapter, Percy calls the flood "an unqualified success." He mocks his inflated sense of authority as only a secure paternalist could and gives thanks for yet another validation of his stoic code of honor: "If I learned from [the flood] due humility as to my own indispensability and due wonder at that amazing alloy of the hellish and the divine which we call Man, I, too, should recall it only with gratitude" (269). This conclusion represents one of the most amazing feats of interpretation I have ever encountered. After all, it is probably not a great stretch to suggest that Barbara Bush was genuinely oblivious to the disastrous nature of Katrina and was, in her own clumsy way, doing her best to make Houston look hospitable in the eyes of the news media. Percy, however, is willfully overlooking the flood's cost in human lives lost and racial injustices perpetrated, things which he witnessed personally and for which he himself bore much direct responsibility, and instead is making the disaster conform to his rose-tinted view of the past and self-aggrandizing personal philosophy. It is difficult not to be impressed by the outrageousness and sheer audacity of Percy's prose here; it evokes the response that the Southern disaster complex most commonly seeks—

which is to say, I don't know whether to laugh or cry. As any reader of Faulkner or O'Connor or any viewer of *When the Levees Broke* has experienced firsthand, the only thing more Southern than this kind of ambivalence is disaster itself.

3.

In the same year of Percy's memoir, W. J. Cash published his classic study, *The Mind of the South*. The most notorious section of the book is Cash's discussion of the "Southern rape complex"—the widespread paranoia among Southern whites beginning after the Civil War that "any assertion of any kind on the part of the Negro constituted in a perfectly real manner an attack on the Southern woman" (116). With the rape complex Cash provides, all at once, an explanation of the South's tangled attitudes toward race, class, and gender during and after Reconstruction. In his formulation, white Southerners mindful of "the central status that Southern woman had long ago taken up in Southern emotion—her identification with the very notion of the South itself" (115-16), could hardly have responded otherwise than to conflate social transformation, including class upheaval, during the period with rape, that most disastrous of all possible social relations, since historical change itself appeared to question the inviolability of white Southern womanhood. Cash cites the rape complex as the reason why there was so much violence against blacks during the period, as "The better men in the South . . . let themselves go with fury" (117), and why segregation emerged as the modern South's most defining institution on the eve of the twentieth century.

I have some serious reservations about Cash, particularly about his claim that the North was responsible for this so-called "neurosis" and more generally about his inclination to seek psychological explanations for broad social and historical trends in a region whose great diversity and complexity he too often forgets. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., is sensitive to such concerns as well, remarking broadly that "it is probably a mistake to think of W. J. Cash as an historian at all, in the sense of having purported to offer an accurate presentation of what happened in the South over the past two centuries" (227). Not only is Cash's work not historically rigorous, it is a mass of contradictions. Along with its perceptiveness and clarity, *The Mind of the South* is rife with absurd, unsupportable propositions and sometimes embarrassingly dated

assumptions. Yet even with its lack of accuracy, rigor, and consistency, Cash's work cannot be summarily dismissed. For it is hard not to appreciate the way Cash situates the rape complex in a larger historical and social vision that is as sensitive to the struggle of the generation of whites that lost the Civil War to accept their defeat as to the generation of blacks that set about to rebuild their lives in a part of the world where racism would be the greatest disaster to be faced for at least another century. To give Cash his due, as Rubin does, is to acknowledge his powerful perception of "the evolution, the historical role, and the characteristics of an entity known as the Southern community, that for something close to two centuries has been a palpable and powerful force" (226) in every aspect of the region's history and culture. *The Mind of the South* is, somehow, and despite its glaring flaws, an indispensable work on the interdependence of historical forces and collective Southern identity, a singular articulation of what Rubin calls "the workings of that elusive but very real entity known as the 'mind' of the Southern community" (227).

In the context of my concerns here, Cash's intuitive approach to the experiences of Southern community expresses something vital that is also central to the Southern disaster complex. The elusive quality of the latter can be traced in the work of great artists like William Faulkner as well as in the halting efforts of such disparate contemporary gauges of the Southern mind as Ray Nagin and Pat Robertson. It is a quality that invites misrepresentation and exaggeration. Indeed, there almost seems to be something about the Southern disaster complex that requires, or at least strongly invites, its outright misuse, as though its existence may not be stated without being overstated. It is quite plainly inflected by the powerful tradition of anti-intellectualism with which the South (not alone among regions, of course) has struggled, or not struggled enough, for centuries. It seems at times to take on a momentum of its own, beyond the control of its human voices; and many of the forms of Southern expressiveness in which it is most perceptible—ecstatic religion, the blues, the "grotesque" fiction of Faulkner and O'Connor, political fanaticism, and perhaps even the rugged individualism that remains, despite all else, an article of faith at the outset of the twenty-first century—also have connotations of danger and excess and risk and seduction. Consider all this attention to disaster by so many people over so long a period: these extremes of feeling, these extraordinary insights

and fabulous aesthetic designs, as well as these overzealous miscalculations. It shouldn't be surprising to observe the way Southerners have come to resemble disaster, in all its complexity, in the dialect of their very being in the world.

It is the nature of disaster to create the impression that time has stopped, that connections have been severed, that precedents have become irrelevant. As *When the Levees Broke* reveals in starkly beautiful imagery and testimony, disaster invites, and often demands, short-term thinking. Survival is the first law of nature. How much time must pass, then, before Katrina becomes more fully intelligible to us? A decade? A century? Along with Spike Lee's film, another work from the fall of 2006 meditates on the struggle to survive, and to preserve human and historical connections, in the face of disaster. Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* benefits from and courageously advances the tradition of the Southern disaster complex, but in ways quite different from those on display in *When the Levees Broke*. McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel is deceptively complex, its existential questions submerged, but always only slightly, beneath its protagonists' struggle to survive for a few more days. Their struggle is not just elemental but virtually post-elemental, in that even their environment, their living vocabulary of sustenance and danger, has been stripped of much of its historical and traditional meaning and rendered into an ashen landscape of dust and death. And a father's death at the end of the novel, leaving his young son to fend for himself in such a world, is a disaster for which there are few words, but with which the son is able to live, when at last he has no other choice. McCarthy writes, in typically flat prose: "He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget" (241). In its closing lines the novel takes on the quality of a parable, and presents the memory of witnessing "brook trout in the streams in the mountains"—perhaps the Appalachian range from which the father and son set out on their journey to the coast, though McCarthy is careful not to place them there in any literal way. "In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (241). There is something oddly comforting about McCarthy's reach back into pre-human time, as well as his emphasis on the limits of human presence and understanding. With the term "mystery," that term most associated with Flannery O'Connor, McCarthy retreats from the seemingly inescapable hell of nuclear winter

and from the apparent endgame of time itself, into the familiar knowledge of memory.

The surprise is that even though people have disappeared from the space of the story, with the vital exception of the young son who “didn’t forget,” McCarthy’s landscape is finally marked by the continuity and collectivity of experience. The ending cannot be a “happy” one in any traditional or simple way, since it is really more of a non-ending, with its model of memory that is cyclical rather than linear, and eternal rather than finite. And besides, all through the narrative McCarthy breaks down language and meaning to such fine ash that “happy” has virtually no meaning—that is, virtually no context in which to derive meaning. Yet the parable, by way of its inexplicable perspective, projects an image of haunting beauty and warmth in explicitly spatial and natural terms. Once again it seems apt to invoke Deep Ecology, that most transformative integration marking time beyond the South’s dreams and nightmares, and to note its distinct permutation in McCarthy’s work. As ever, it matters not whether the disaster is man-made or a gift from divine providence. Such questions are moot in the living experience and expression of the Southern disaster complex. For this native Southern discourse has succeeded in imagining a history that becomes not just a resource for environmental protection, a political tool, a portentous spiritual and aesthetic wellspring, but a restorative environment in itself. Welcome to Dixie.

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