

THE SOLID SOUTH?*

By GILBERT E. GOVAN

It may seem to some of you a little strange that I should open a paper to a group of southerners whose interest is largely in the history of the section with a quotation from a foreign novelist, writing about Europe and Europeans. But the truth contained in the quotation is important to all of us, and particularly to those of us who live here in the South, where even justifiable criticism or discussion of southern problems by outsiders is too frequently resented. The quotation comes from the last page of *The War Goes On*,¹ by the great contemporary Jewish writer, Shalom Asch.

"Beware walls," old Hans Bodenheimer, one of the book's principal characters, out of his wisdom tells his nephew, "your own walls as well as the other people's. For the walls you build around yourself are even more dangerous than the other kind. And always keep a vigilant lookout over your walls—remember that there are human beings outside them as well as inside." It is a wise and profound statement, the sort of fundamental truth man has grown accustomed to receiving through the centuries from his great writers. It comes at a time, too, when it is sadly needed, for tolerance and sympathy are not the qualities by which these immediate years will be recalled. The lesson Asch wishes to drive home is that antagonisms and hatreds are the destroyers; they must be avoided, destroyed themselves; that it is part of man's obligation to tear down the barriers which erect themselves between individual and individual, between group and group, between nation and nation.

But we have seen nations build higher and higher walls about themselves. There have been tariff walls to keep out the products of other peoples; there have been great physical barriers, military fortifications, erected for wars feared as inevitable. Those in charge of national destinies have created national or racial philosophies and have attempted to interpret the whole of the history of their people in terms of such ideologies, disregarding the contribution of all other groups and nations to a common civilization. Ruling authorities have even gone so far as to force their creative artists to exile themselves

*Delivered as an address at the annual banquet of the East Tennessee Historical Society at the Andrew Johnson Hotel, October 6, 1939.

¹Shalom Asch, *The War Goes On*. Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir (New York, 1936), 528.

or to prostitute their genius to the ends and desires of those in power, thus taking from them the high privilege of artists of all ages—that of elevating the spirit of man. These rulers have removed from their people the opportunity to know what the writers of other lands and times have written, unless it conforms to the established ideology, thus erecting intellectual as well as physical and economic walls about them.

Our civilization, though, is based largely upon the interchange of ideas as well as material advances between nation and nation, between people and people. We must have international standards of moral values as well as economic if we are to be able to live on terms of peace and understanding with our fellowmen. Those standards can only be established by centuries of testing under all sorts of conditions. It is not alone because we believe tolerance and mercy and honesty and truthfulness are good that we hold to them; it is also because through the centuries man has tested them against opposing ideas and ideals and has proved them good.

We live, though, in a period when these eternal values in some areas have been discarded. Not because they have been proved false, but because it is expedient for certain national governments to maintain that they are no longer valid, no longer true. Might, not truth, they say, is right and will prevail. In their hearts, they know—no less than you and I know—it is not so. And their peoples know it is not so. Temporarily, though, they have forgotten, and one of the reasons for their forgetting is that the rulers have taken away from the people one of the chief treasures of man's inheritance, the writings of the great literary artists of all times.

From the beginning, there have sprung up these gifted people. Primarily entertainers (and remember everything man does well has a quality of entertainment about it, so do not look upon my use of the word entertainment as containing any association of cheapness), they have been instructors as well. Through their use, the accumulated wisdom of the ages has been perpetuated and handed down. Nor is that all; they have also been recorders, historians. Fortunately, though, they have been more than historians. They record, not so much the fact itself (although they may also do that), as the circumstances and the emotions out of which the fact grew and which are a consequence of it. These may be obscure things, hidden to the eye which looks for and writes down such seemingly major events as a political election or a war, but they are equally important. It was

a wise man who said: "I care not who writes the laws of a people if I can write its songs."

Unfortunately, not everyone realizes the great historical contribution of the creative writers—the novelists, poets and dramatists—of the ages. It may be attributed to walls somewhat slighter in degree but no less regrettable than those of which I have spoken that we so largely leave other things than our immediate interests to other people. In our mechanized age of specialization, each of us is likely to become pigeonholed. And, too, our areas of effort seem to become more and more restricted. You know, of course, the rather well-worn joke about modern scholars tending to know more and more about less and less. It applies equally well to most of us. We leave music too largely to musicians, poetry to poets (one of them publicly bemoaned the fact not long ago and said that the audience for poetry had grown so small that poets had begun to speak only "the language of their friends"), painting to painters, and so on. If occasionally a fortunate individual is found who can get enjoyment from all these things, he is likely to be damned as an esthete, while those who damn him compliment themselves as practical men, rather than regret their shortcomings.

Factual writers—so called to distinguish them from the creative—are no less guilty of this than others. Secure in their belief that fact is truth and fiction is not, many of them have never understood the importance of the creative arts, aside from their esthetic values. The creative writer works no less from fact than does the historian. It is a mistaken though widely prevalent idea that the novelist, for example, reaches out into the air and pulls in some imagined circumstance and people whose like never existed to use as the materials for a book. The idea is ridiculous on the face of it. If you will stop and think you will realize that you can imagine nothing other than that which is real. Whatever your mind conceives is in terms of experience, your own or that of others. So is it true of writers: "Experience, observation, the looks and ways and words of 'real people,' all melted and fused in the white heat of the creative fires—such is the mingled stuff which the novelist pours into the firm mould of his narrative," says a fine American writer, Edith Wharton.² And you will find it confirmed by practically every other artist who has expressed himself on the subject.

The writer, if he be serious and the great ones are, creates out of problems which seem important to him. And they seem important to

²Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York, 1934), 212.

him because they seem important to his fellows, for—regardless of how aloof he may appear to hold himself—he is involved in the same mesh of circumstances that puzzles or pleases the rest of us. There is, though, one fundamental difference: he is a more aware and articulate instrument; so sensitive is he to currents of fact and emotion that he can imagine himself in circumstances he may never have actually seen; he can reproduce emotions which he has never actually felt except through the use of his imagination.

I never saw a moor,
I never saw the sea;
Yet know I how the heather looks,
And what a wave must be.³

So testifies Emily Dickinson. Stephen Crane wrote *The Red Badge of Courage* when he knew only at second hand what the sound of a bullet was like, but his understanding of how a human being feels under the torture and fear of that most unhuman of man's activities, war, was so vivid and complete that old soldiers have been unable to believe that he did not fight through the Civil War. I have had more than one veteran tell me that it was the best book on war he had ever read.

That is the important contribution of the creative writer. Historians have long recorded wars and the effects of wars; few of them, though, have been able to give us any conception of what war actually is like to those who fight it. That is not a portion of the fact, but it lends an understanding which makes the fact even more important. (You see, it is not my intention to minimize the importance of historians; only to attempt to make you understand that the function of the creative writer—usually not considered a serious writer by those who deal with so called facts—is of equal or occasionally of greater value.)

"Fiction is not fact," said Thomas Wolfe, "but fiction is fact, selected and understood, arranged and charged with purpose."⁴ It is true, I think, that there can never be such a thing as purely objective history. Each historian has a picture in his mind when he sits down to write which he wishes to present. He has chosen his material with an eye to that picture, and he is likely to omit material which will so distort his story that that picture will be obscured. I think this natural. Only gods, not men, could do more. Nor do I believe that

³Emily Dickinson, *Poems* (Boston, 1930), 163.

⁴Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward Angel* (New York, 1929), vii.

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all the material about any period or individual can be found. That always leaves the possibility of a new book coming along and invalidating any old one—from either a new point of view, a new picture, or because there have been newly discovered facts. Even a new action by a nation or an individual may change an old historical idea. In the last twelve or fifteen years, there had grown up the belief that the battle of Warsaw, in which the Russians were defeated in 1920, was among the great battles of all time; not in the size of the armies or the tactics displayed, but in influence: it turned the Russians away from Poland and toward the east. But what are we to say today? Without firing a gun (I think that is right) Russia has all of Poland she ever desired; she is again knocking at the door of Western Europe. Where now is the importance of the battle of two decades ago?

Once facts are "selected and understood, arranged and charged with purpose," though, they become more than fact; their use by a great creative artist makes of them a part of universal experience, something true as long as paper and ink stand, not merely a record which may be changed at the whim of fate or through the discovery of a letter or the signing of a new treaty. No account of that great and tragic circumstance, the French invasion of Russia in 1812, by biographer or historian, is comparable to Tolstoi's immortal *War and Peace*. In that book, the material is so shaped and used that it becomes something far different from a factual account of a military expedition; the characteristics of an entire people and their mystical attachment to their homeland are revealed in the pages of this, among the very greatest of novels. But more than that, war is seen to be the inconclusive, ineffectual thing we now recognize it to be, having fought a war to end wars, only to have another grow so quickly out of the embers of the old. We understand more about Russia and Russians and about war from *War and Peace* than from any other book that I know. It is again an evidence of the revelation of truth to be gained from the serious creative writer.

Not all the revelation, though, is about the past or about strange countries across the sea; there are the writers of our own section and our own time, and many of these are doing their best to break down walls which need demolishing. If there were need of proof that writers use problems which are of importance to their contemporaries, I know no greater than is offered by present-day southerners. Termed "economic problem number one" in the nation, the South has represented the classification. It is neither my intention nor my wish to

argue this question, but what testimony do we find from our writers? There was a time when most southern novelists placed their characters in great houses with beautiful wide verandas, on which typical aristocrats sipped their juleps and discussed events in more or less moral terms, mingled it may be with some little polite profanity. That South was truly presented, although it was never typical, but it did represent a rather universal longing among southerners who sentimentally evolved the picture to stand for a day gone by. For that South, as Henry Grady said many years ago, is dead. There is a South, as Mr. Grady continued, which looks no longer with eyes upon the past, but realistically upon the future.

I know that somewhat absolute statement can be argued. There are still sentimentalists among us, those who mistakenly contest honest criticism, but their number is daily growing less. And they contest the criticism because they have unconsciously adopted a slogan which I detest. I do not know where the phrase, "the Solid South," originated. Probably it was first used by a northern waver of the "bloody shirt," to express his contempt for all things southern. It is alliterative and it caught the popular fancy. But it is not true, however it may have affected sectional thinking (for it has had mental consequences on both sides of Mason and Dixon's line). I do not believe I have to point out to you that the South has never been a unit. Even during the Civil War there were dissensions and revolt. Certainly, the South has diverse economic interests, and ethnically it is by no means as unmixed as popular thought believes. Even on the suppression of Negro suffrage, the South is not completely in agreement; Negroes have voted freely in Tennessee since 1867.

No, there is not, nor has there ever been "a solid South," although we have had many evil consequences of the phrase, among them an inability, for many years, either to accept criticism or to develop that healthy self-criticism which is necessary for progress. If an opinion critical of the South were voiced, there were no attempts to examine it for its truth; immediately detractors of the section began to nod their heads and say, "I told you so," while its defenders—no less blindly—shouted as loudly as they could, "It isn't true." Both attitudes were and are—for they still exist—unreasoning. Everything which can be said about any section can probably be said about the South, but nothing which can be said in one book or group of books is the whole truth about either.

In other words, by accepting no criticism southerners help to create in those unfamiliar with the region an attitude of belief in all criti-

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cism. Like any other southerner, I dislike unfair criticism of the South, but I attempt to save my ammunition for defense when such criticism appears. For it is not only wasted in attempts to deny just critics, but it alienates the interest which prompted them.

In all fairness, one must remember that a writer does not always like to point to a sore spot in the life of which he is a part. I have heard people who should know better say, "So-and-so must be a horrible fellow; his books are so dirty." Actually, the very reverse is probably true. The reason So-and-so uses the material he does is because he despises the circumstances he describes and wants them changed. His method for accomplishing this is to call everyone's attention to them that he can. If we were wiser, we would direct our indignation at the things he hates, rather than at him, as we so largely do.

I use "we" here purposely, for I have done my share. For several years, I could not understand what Erskine Caldwell was attempting to do. I said many times that I could not believe the counterpart of old Jeeter Lester existed outside of an insane asylum. I resented such a picture of Georgia being broadcast. I thought Caldwell was guilty of allowing people to believe he was drawing a complete picture of Georgia life. I do not know that you are familiar with the decision read by the New York judge before whom the attempt to suppress the book and play was made, but he said that he was convinced that Caldwell had accurately presented Georgia life in the book. I was indignant, but it didn't occur to me until a great deal later that I—and a great many more like me—was at fault. I should have said immediately—as New Englanders did say when *February Hill*, much the same sort of picture of a decadent New England family, was published—that it was true, but of course not all the truth. And that Georgians were hopeful of doing something about such people.

I should like to leave the impression that I evolved for myself this idea, but would leave you with too great a belief in my intelligence. I was convinced only when a squatter with his family moved into a cabin on a place owned by my father not so many miles from the "tobacco road." There were the man, his wife, and eight or nine children. Two of the children were in the chain gang; two were in the insane asylum at Milledgeville; another poor unfortunate lay on rags on the floor of the cabin, screaming day and night, unable to answer a question or speak an intelligible sentence. The man, hardly worthy of classification as a moron, would do nothing to provide for his family, and seemed to enjoy it. My father bought seed for him

to plant a garden, and offered to hire a mule and plow for him to put it in. His only feeling about it was that it took too much effort. The seed rotted and the garden was never made. For two or three years, that family squatted on the property and was fed through the generosity of a few of the neighbors. The filth in which they lived is beyond my powers of description; they were guilty of all the moral and legal crimes of which they were capable, except, probably, murder. The only way my father could get rid of them was to lend the property to the county for use as a school, and the county did something with them; I am not sure what.

That was the circumstance which convinced me that Caldwell is no renegade, no traitor to the South. He probably has a greater affection for the South than many of his detractors, because he is not afraid to point out the South's shortcomings. He has the courage of his affection. He points out the sore spots, not because he likes to or likes them, but because he wants the South to be the place he believes it is possible for it to be, but cannot until such horrible circumstances are changed.

And everywhere one turns among the southern writers, he finds something of the same interest among them. We have few, if any, Thomas Nelson Pages now, and I do not intend that as a sneering remark. Mr. Page was true to his period, that which sentimentalized over a South which had gone. Even when our novelists of today turn back to Civil War days or before, they rarely fail to point this lesson out. From DuBose Heyward's beautiful closing scene in *Peter Ashley*, I take this passage (it is a description of the departure from Charleston of a troop of cavalry for the front in Virginia):

Out across the vivid green of the lawn, under the great live oaks, the column moved, plunging into shadow and again out into the dazzle of the morning sun. Two centuries had gone into the making of the little cavalcade. Axes had rung in the primeval forest, plantations had grown and spread, life had provided itself with its necessities, then had clothed itself in an appropriate and individual beauty. There had been a spaciousness about the days. Room for youth to ride untrammelled under the high St. John's sky, to love in privacy, to beget, to know the unrestrained laughter of children. And, at the last, room for a man to grow old gently and, still loved, to pass into the graveyard on the land that his feet had always trod. And down the years always, like the wand passed from hand to hand of runners in a race, the tradition of gentility, hospitality, loyalty to one's own. . . .

They were in the highway now, forming again for the march, beautiful lithe bodies flowing in rhythm to the antics of their thoroughbred mounts, drenched in a flood of June sunshine. But to Chardon the glory that lay

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about them was not that of high summer, but the light which slants long-shadowed across an autumn field.⁵

The sun has gone down—long since gone down—upon such scenes. If we have saved anything from their grandeur and glory, it is to be found in that short phrase of Heyward's, "the tradition of gentility, hospitality, loyalty to one's own." None of them is completely observed, I imagine, but we of the South can be a unit in wishing and attempting to achieve their accomplishment. One thing we have found out, if the evidence of our writers is to be believed, and I know that it should be; that is that "our own" includes all southerners, not one class or group. All over the South, there are writers who are telling us about the common man: the laborer, the tenant-farmer, the share-cropper, the Negro. Out of these depressed circumstances have come such beautiful and distinguished books as Elizabeth Madox Roberts' *The Time of Man* and Marjorie Rawlings' *The Yearling*. Equally sincere and but slightly below these in distinction are Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* and Paul Green's *This Body the Earth*. Caroline Miller won a Pulitzer prize with her faithful and moving account of the difficulties of the southern pioneer, *Lamb in His Bosom*, and James Boyd first attracted favorable attention with his stories of Scotch-Irish yoemen, *Drums* and *Marching On*. Emmet Gowen, in *Mountain Born*, and Victoria Halper, in *Thursday April* have used mountain people for less sentimental purposes than usual; there is no exaggeration of situation or dialect by either, but an attempt at genuine reproduction which gains belief and respect from the reader. Julia Peterkin and DuBose Heyward have told us in such moving stories as *Black April* and *Porgy* of the low country Negroes, while among the Negroes, themselves, we find a group of writers who are making a serious attempt to present their people as they are, not as they might wish them to be. Zora Huston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Are Watching God* are novels in which there is no suppression of fact to achieve effect; G. W. Henderson's *Ollie Miss* is equally serious in intention. These southern Negro writers participate in the same feeling displayed by the white novelists: first, the truth must be told in order that good may come; and second, there are equally sincere emotions among common men, and tragedy and heart-break equal to that found among more privileged people.

When our writers use the aristocracy, it is to show its sham and pretence, or to portray scions so decadent that one realizes the impermanence of its influence. William Faulkner of Mississippi—once

⁵DuBose Heyward, *Peter Ashley* (New York, 1932), 315-16.

Arnold Bennett said that he "writes like an angel"—is one example, and remember that old Lester in Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* is the grandson of a great plantation owner. Here I want to turn to a fine contemporary southern poet, one whose name will display her inheritance as far as blood is concerned, and her poem is no less obvious testimony of her thought about such things: it is "The Misses Poar Drive to Church," written by Miss Josephine Pinckney of Charleston:

Out from the tall plantation gate
Issue the Misses Poar in state.
Neatly darned are their black silk mitts,
And straight each stately sister sits.
Their carriage dresses, brushed and steamed,
Cover their decent limbs; they seemed
No finer, really, before the War
When money was free in the house of Poar.
The Negro coachman in beaver hat,
Slightly nibbled by moth and rat,
Smooths his frock coat of greenish hue,—
But fitting as trim as when it was new—
With which he stiffens his spine of pride
By tightly buttoning himself inside
To drive in this elegant equipage
A yoke of oxen of doubtful age.
(They've had no horses since sixty-four
When the Yankees stopped at the house of Poar.)

The ladies move to the square front pew,
Their Christian meekness in ample view,
And follow the youthful parson's word
With reverence meet for a legate of God
Up to the moment when he prates
Of the President of the United States;
Then, knowing full well that Heaven can't
Expect them to pray for General Grant,
They bury their noses' patrician hook
In dear great-grand-papa's prayer-book,
Wherein are found urbane petitions
To guard the Crown against seditions
Not that they hold King Charles so dear,
Although their blood is Cavalier,
But it suits their piety, on the whole,
And rest King Charles the Martyr's soul.
Better to pray for the Restoration
Than the overseer of a patch-work nation.⁶

⁶Josephine Pinckney, *Sea Drinking Cities* (New York, 1927), 73.

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I do not believe you can escape the ironic intention of that poem, but equally I do not believe you can help realize that the irony is directed at the silly sentimentalism displayed by the Misses Poar. Miss Pinckney is by no manner of means ashamed of her "Cavalier blood," nor of the actions of those Cavaliers from whom she is descended. It is, though, among the "strong black people" of whom she speaks in *Sea Drinking Cities* or the street vendors whose calls she celebrates in *Street Cries* that she finds her richest, most colorful, human material.

There is another fine southern poet, Anderson Scruggs, an Atlantan, who has found most of his inspiration in simple things and men; he knows and appreciates the appeal of old friends, of Negro houses, sagging, as he says, "with the heavy armor of the sun." And in one of his finest sonnets, he sings to the glory of the ordinary man.

Glory to them, the toilers of the earth
Who wrought with knotted hands, in wood and stone,
Dreams their unlettered minds could not give birth
And symmetries their souls had never known.
Glory to them, the artisans who spread
Cathedrals like broad lace before the sun,
Who could not build a rhyme, but reared instead
The Doric grandeur of the Parthenon.

I never cross a marble portico,
Or lift my eyes where stained glass windows steal
From virgin sunlight moods of deeper glow,
Or walk dream-peopled streets, except to feel
A hush of reverence for that vast dead
Who gave us beauty for a crust of bread!⁷

And from that greatest of southern poets and novelists, for he was both, although I do not know that he ever arranged a thing that he wrote as poetry, Thomas Wolfe, I take this section of *From Death To Morning*, changing the word "Catawban" to Southerner, and Catawba to South, for though he wrote of North Carolina, it fits equally well for great portions of the South.

No. The Southerner of today is not like this, nor would he want to be. He is not a colonist, a settler, a transplanted European; during his three centuries there in the wilderness, he has become native to the immense and lonely land that he inhabits, during those three centuries he has acquired a character, a tradition, and a history of his own: it is an obscure history, unknown to the world and not to be found in the pages of books, but it is a magnificent history, full of heroism, endurance and the immortal

⁷Anderson Scruggs, *Glory of Earth* (Atlanta, 1933), 95.

silence of the earth. It lives in his heart, it lives in his brain, it lives in his unrecorded actions; and with this knowledge he is content, nor does he feel the need of ballads or Armadas to trick him into glory.

He does not need to speak, he does not need to affirm or deny, he does not need to assert his power or his achievement, for his heart is a lonely and secret heart, his spirit is immensely brave and humble, he has lived alone in the wilderness, he has heard the silence of the earth, he knows what he knows, and he has not spoken yet. We see him, silent and unheralded, in the brief glare of recorded event—he is there in the ranks of the American Revolution, and eighty years later he is there, gloriously but silently, in the ranks of the Civil War. But his real history is much longer and much more extraordinary than could be indicated by these flares of war; it is a history that runs back three centuries into primitive America, a strange and unfathomable history that is touched by something dark and supernatural, and that goes back through poverty and hardship, through solitude and loneliness and death and unspeakable courage, into the wilderness. For it is the wilderness that is the mother of that nation; it was in the wilderness that the strange and lonely people who have not yet spoken, but who inhabit that immense land from East to West, first knew themselves.

The real history of the South is not essentially a history of wars or rebellions; it is not a history of politics or corrupt officials; it is not a history of democracy or plutocracy or any form of government; it is not a history of business men, puritans, knaves, fools, saints or heroes; it is not a history of culture or barbarism.

The real history of the South is a history of solitude, or the wilderness, and of the eternal earth; it is the history of millions of men living and dying alone in the wilderness; it is the history of the billion unrecorded and unforgotten acts and moments of their lives; it is a history of the sun and the moon and the earth, of the sea that feathers eternally against the desolate coasts, and of great trees that smash down in lone solitudes of the wilderness.

The history of the South is the history of millions of men living alone in the wilderness, it is the history of millions of men who have lived their brief lives in silence upon the everlasting earth, who have listened to the earth and known her million tongues, whose lives were given to the earth, whose bones and flesh are compacted with the earth, the immense and terrible earth that makes no answer.⁸

There is the common man's contribution to the South beautifully and completely stated. Thomas Wolfe also saw, as all our great writers see, the diverseness of the South. And he, as do they, pointed it out to us. Joseph Conrad, in the famous preface to his *Nigger of the Narcissus*, says: "My task which I am trying to achieve

⁸Thomas Wolfe, *From Death to Morning* (New York, 1935), 202-04.

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⁹Joseph

is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see!*"⁹ It is the intention of these contemporary southern writers, also, to make us see in the larger sense the land and the people in which and among whom we live. They are doing their best to rid us of the incubus of "Solid South" thinking. If the ordinary man in the ranks is inarticulate, as Wolfe has said, he has a hundred mouthpieces, all busy telling the truth as they see it. They are all crying to us, each in his own way, that "all men are brothers," to use the title of the American translation of a great Chinese novel. They are performing the age-old duty of the creative artist: they are informing us about ourselves and our fellow-men, and in so doing they are pointing out some of our southern "walls," and people outside them. They are calling our attention to some of the circumstances which have caused others to label the South an "economic problem."

Probably the most important interpretation to be gained from this evidence of interest by our writers, though, is that it signifies that you and I have become conscious to a greater extent than heretofore of southern problems. The common destinies of contemporary southern writer and reader point to this common interest. My wish is that both will continue to evidence it, and that, through the stimulation and assistance of the writers, the rest of us shall attack the problems as realistically as they have presented them. Among the first steps in this direction, in my opinion, is the ridding ourselves of the incubus of thinking of the South as a unit, of that old shibboleth "the Solid South."

⁹Joseph Conrad, *Nigger of the Narcissus* (New York, 1914), xiv.