

Down South: ‘Southern Races’ and Southern Questions in Woolson’s Fiction

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The first point of this paper is to provide a close observation of Woolson’s attitude - in her fiction - towards the ‘Southern races’ (“Dorothy, 26). She deals with them, both American and Italian, in ways which have some similarities, and, of course, some differences.

The other point must be put as a question, to which this paper will try to give some answers, without presuming to offer definite solutions: why did Woolson, whose interest in the recent epochal events of American history was extensive, so completely neglect Italian modern history, which was, in many respects, like the contemporary history of the United States, full of dramatic, vital events?

My first intention was to deal with these two points as distinct subjects. But, after a while, the project had to be revised, since it is not always possible, and often unnecessary, to separate racial prejudices and bias from historical problems in Woolson’s texts. The two points are in many cases intermingled, especially as regards *Rodman the Keeper: Southern Sketches*.

It comes out, from her letters, notebooks, and fiction as well, that Constance Fenimore Woolson lived the American Civil War as a passionate unionist and abolitionist.

In a letter to Hayne (1875) she wrote: “What days they were! After all, we lived then”. In “A Pink Villa” (1888) Fanny, the main character,

uses almost the same words: "What days they were! We lived then. I sometimes think we have never lived since" (93). After so many years the enthusiasm for that fundamental event in American history was still strong and strongly felt. Anyway, she wrote very little about the war: in "Crowder's Cove", described by the title as "a Story of the War" (1876), we find an emblematic comparison between two girls, a Northerner, the pale, little, precise Elinor, and a Southerner, the big, careless Sally. When the moment of action comes, however, each girl is ready to ride at break-neck speed in order to inform the soldiers of her own side of a forthcoming incident. Perhaps Woolson had then in mind that the Southerners were very able on horseback: "how, fearless and dashing, the men of the South afforded the best possible material for cavalry" (Wilson, 300); so the slow, lazy Sally wins the race.

When Woolson went South after the death of her father (1869) in search of a better climate for her ailing mother and for a less expensive way of living, her enthusiasm is likely to have diminished while having to face the troubled reality of the mid-Reconstruction South. "In the Cotton Country" (1876) can be considered a story of the war, as well. Here the tremendous losses of the war are seen from the point of view of a southern woman who has lost everybody and everything in it. She speaks of cruelty, of burning, of the great march to the sea and of the march through South Carolina; she expresses her - probably Woolson's as well - critical point of view about the blacks' "glories of freedom... In six months half of them were gone. They had their freedom - to die! For... their masters, those villainous old masters of theirs, were no longer there to feed and clothe them" (147). From the beginning the reader understands the woman's hopelessness and despondency: "I am only dead... Torpidly I draw my breath through day and night... *You Northern women would work; I can not*" (140, italics mine). And the reader witnesses her real incapacity in her few household tasks: "She swept the room, for instance, every day, never thoroughly, but in a gentle, incompetent sort of way..." (137), a delicate hint at the different way of reacting - and of working - between northern and southern women.

In "Rodman the Keeper" (1877) the South is seen through the New England eyes of Rodman himself"... he had seen... the magnificence and the carelessness (of the South)..., her splendour and negligence, her wealth and thriftlessness... Everywhere magnificence went hand in hand with

neglect..." (78). Then Rodman meets an ill Confederate soldier and helps him, "for a soldier is generous with a soldier" (92), though he was "a man belonging to an idle, arrogant class he detested", and in spite of the opposition of Bettina, his rancorous, proud, obstinate cousin, who, like many other southern women, cannot forgive or forget. The same obstinacy and haughtiness and pride we can find in little Gardis, the main character in "Old Gardiston" (49). It seems to be a constant attitude of the southern women portrayed in Woolson's southern fiction.

One year later, in 1878, Woolson wrote "King David". The story is almost a summary of Foner's history of the Reconstruction and of Woolson's reflections about the American southern question: emancipation, the difficult existence of the Freedmen's Bureau, landowners' bitterness, Southern and black suffrage, lack of northern understanding, labour, color and religious problems, the Liberian experiment, the sad and strange position of poor whites, corrupt policy and corrupt 'carperbaggers', the incompetent northern teachers, and so on; everything has been taken into consideration. Various problems are posed in order to express different critical and historical points of view: of the indifferent northern farmers: "Going down to teach the blacks?... We 've paid enough to set 'em free... Let the blacks take care of themselves" (106); of the bitter, disenchanted, patrician born planter: "The Negro with power in his hand, which you have given him, with a little smattering of knowledge in his shallow, crafty brain... will become an element of more danger in this land than it has ever known before. You Northerners do not understand the blacks. They are an inferior race by nature; God made them so" (112); of the young, confident, hopeful, northern, Calvinist teacher from New Hampshire, who, came down, all alone, with such aid and instruction as the Freedmen's Bureau could give him, asking himself "What are you going to do with tens of thousands of ignorant, childish, irresponsible souls thrown suddenly upon your hands... But he said to himself: 'I can at least begin... It seems to me that our first duty is to educate them...' For, abolitionist as he was, David King would have given years of his life to restrict the suffrage" (106-107). When the schoolmaster tries to make his black students work in his cotton field for good wages, they refuse. The planter's comment is obvious: "The Negroes would work only when they pleased, and that was generally not at all. There was no doubt but that they were almost hopelessly improvident and lazy" (108). Of course, New Hampshire-born David is thrifty and

handy. In the end, the sad conclusion: David leaves. "Didn't find the blacks what he expected, I guess", so gossip ran in David's village (122).

In 1879, after her mother's death and after the collapse of Reconstruction - "a tragedy, for the nation as a whole, that deeply affected the course of its future development: racism became more deeply embedded in the national culture and politics", (according to Foner, 604)¹ - Woolson left America, never to return. Burdened with her personal distress and the historical domestic "lesson of a failure" (King D., 122), she landed in Europe and went to Italy.

Italy was then struggling for her own survival as a united state. Her unification was very recent. Divided into a lot of small states and having been ruled by different foreign powers for many centuries, Italy had her *Risorgimento* in the course of the nineteenth century. Little Piedmont was her bridge-head, and Cavour, Piedmont's Prime Minister, the political genius of the situation, while Mazzini, with his radical and republican views and revolutionary attempts, and Garibaldi, with his extraordinary ability to understand people, to command his volunteers and to act as a strategist, were the necessary counterparts.

Three wars of Independence, Garibaldi's expedition against the "*Regno delle due Sicilie*", the seizure of Rome after two failed attempts, the liberation of Venice, had not been painless or easy tasks. Besides, on Woolson's arrival in 1880, Italy was undergoing her own southern question: "...there was a cleavage between upper and lower Italy; a cleavage which was geographical, climatic, social, economic, cultural, linguistic, political and even racial" (Mack Smith, 328).

Annexation in 1860 had been too hasty. Sicilians, whose proud contention was that they possessed the oldest parliamentary institution in Europe, resented the very word 'annexation'. The ex-ruling class, whose feudal system was a mixture of exploitation, neglect, and bureaucratic misrule, and whose land property was particularly vulnerable in times of disorder, had been very anxious for an end to the social war. They had hoped, however, for a unitary but federal state like the American one. They thought that "fusion would turn Sicily into the Ireland of Italy, while the American system would conciliate all Sicilians" (69).

The lower classes were always on the brink of revolution, not out of liberal sentiment, since they were quite indifferent to any forms of government, but as an excuse to pillage the property of their disinterested and

absentee masters. They had hoped that annexation would have meant land distribution.

The plebiscite for an unqualified annexation - instead of the almost unanimously required representative assembly - had been felt almost as an unconditional surrender. In any case it had not been a good method of testing the will of the people: "The middle and upper classes were too lazy and too disinterested in this incomprehensible device,... to wait in a queue for a quarter of an hour with their inferiors" (59). "The ignorant peasantry had fled to the mountains under the impression that voting was only a plot to press them for military service; the complete illiteracy of almost all the peasants made a secret ballot impossible" (387).

In the Neapolitan region the situation was only slightly different as regards the social and economical structure. Neapolitans and Sicilians hated each other because of old historical reasons, but substantially they both - only the wealthy people among them, of course - had hoped for the same improvements: more public works, educational advances, credit for the development of agriculture and industry, release from the ecclesiastical mortmain² and soldiers to keep order. The peasants of Sicily and Naples had wanted freedom from poverty and servitude - almost slavery - and land distribution. A few weeks of the new regime had sufficed, in Sicily as in Naples, to arouse the old antagonism and to quench much of the enthusiasm for unity that Garibaldi had aroused.

The titular landed aristocracy had been thoroughly disappointed: over the trodden rights of property, over the necessary requisitioning and conscription, over inflation, over the high taxes, over the failure to restore order and prosperity.

The peasants were even more disappointed. They had hoped - Garibaldi had let them hope - in a radical division and distribution of land. They had taxes - never paid before - and conscription, instead.

Cavour's ignorance of the southern regions favoured the tactless tendency to exasperate Sicilians and Neapolitans by treating them as conquered people who had to submit to the will of the conquerors. The situation already foreboded a revolutionary secession of the South if the northern system of union was imposed too unyieldingly.

The early appearance of public discontent compelled Cavour to use the method of repression. By the end of the year (1861) Naples was in a

sorry situation: brigandage was assuming 'grave proportions' in the Abruzzi; passive opposition was growing everywhere.

On June 1 Cavour died suddenly, when his political genius was most needed, as Lincoln would die at the end of the Civil War. Nobody can say how things would have developed if these two extraordinary statesmen had lived longer, but most think that they would have dealt in a more effective way with their respective difficulties. As Mack Smith writes: "...If only these provinces had been administered sensibly and kindly by persons sympathetic to the people... there would have been none of that boycotting of conscription in Sicily, nor the brigandage which raged in the Napoletano" (444).

Conscious as I am of the danger of making any analogies, particularly between two such events, I dare say, however, that almost the same thing could be said about the American southern regions after the Civil War.

The United States and Italy found themselves, in the same period - the United States and young Italy were almost the same age - in a great crisis of conscience. The Italian southern question, within its limitations, could be seen as the counterpart of the American one, which, on a vaster scales and in tragic dimensions, is known as the Reconstruction period. Some similarities are even too obvious: servitude/slavery or freedom, feudal landownership or land distribution, single-crop system or intensive farming, racial bias and educational advances, limited or universal suffrage, unionism or federalism, even the sudden death of the statesmen who could have helped the nations recover from the tremendous difficulties.

I know that it is not methodologically correct to ask an artist why he or she did, or did not do such and such. However, I think it a legitimate curiosity from an affectionate Italian reader and student of Woolson to investigate the reasons for the absence of any reference to Italian contemporary history in Woolson's Italian short stories, while in *Rodman the Keeper: Southern Sketches* history is always present.

As Buonomo writes in "The Other Face of History in Constance Fenimore Woolson's Southern Stories": "Woolson was able to explore the changes in race and gender roles and relations that resulted from the upheaval of the great conflict, as well as their interaction with the confrontation between northern and southern culture" (2). In these stories, in fact, Woolson is particularly attentive and responsive and her understand-

ing is both deep and extensive: no one could seriously question the importance of history in the shaping of those works. Thus it seems all the more strange that Woolson completely neglected the important events which were taking place in Italy during the fourteen years, on and off, she lived there.

On the contrary, “the confrontation between northern and southern culture” (2) can frequently be found, and it is not flattering for Italians - the same can be said about American Southerners - and is often plagued with stereotypes. Luckily, the effectiveness of Woolson’s irony - as in “The Street of the Hyacinth”, for instance, about the way the Roman people throw their rubbish from the windows, and sometimes of self-irony, as in the manichean contrast between the New Hampshire-born Prudence and the inhabitants of Assisi in “The Front Yard” - restores the balance. We find the same self-irony in “King David”, where the shortcomings of the blacks are counterbalanced by the New Hampshire schoolmaster’s obstinate barrier between his northern world and habits and his pupils’. A similar northern shortcoming is apparent in “Rodman the Keeper”. As Sharon Dean has justly pointed out, in this story the New Englander Rodman displays his “inability to respond” (1986, 277) to the southern world as well.

In some cases, the irony is absent and Woolson’s deprecation bursts out in full force, as in “Dorothy” (1892):

The flat highways down in the Arno valley, west of Bellosguardo, are deep in dust even as early as April; the villages, consisting for the most part of a shallow line of houses on each side of the road, almost join hands, so that it is not only dust alone that afflicts the pedestrians, but children, dogs, the rinds of fruit and vegetables - *all the far-reaching untidiness of a Southern race that lives in the street.* (italics mine, 26)

as it had in *East Angels* in 1886, voiced by the dying Mrs. Thorpe, in Florida:

Oh, these southern lacks... Oh! I so hate it all - the idle, unrealizing, contented life of these tiresome, idle coast (219)... I, a New England girl,... abolitionist to the core... (223)

One more aspect seems to link Woolson’s American and Italian Southerners: the natural propensity for sudden bursts of violence. We find it in “Felipa” as in “A Christmas Party” (1892) and in “A Waitress”

(1894). The descriptions of these outbreaks are very similar; one example will suffice:

...her face glared at them in the moonlight. It was like nothing human; her head was thrust out, the eyes were narrowed and glittering, the nostrils flattened, and the lips drawn up and back from the set fierce teeth... she was like a wild beast who has made one spring and is about to make another. (Waitress, 100)

So we have come full circle, and the picture is clear enough. There are many similarities in her description of Sally, the Southern girl in "Crowder's Cove" and a Pisan housekeeper in "A Transplanted Boy"; of the local people in "Rodman the Keeper" and the inhabitants of Assisi in "The Front Yard"; of the people of Beata in "Miss Elisabetha" and the tenants of "The Street of the Hyacinth". From her New England point of view, Woolson sees them all as full of shortcomings: they are careless, negligent, indolent, untidy, idle, and so on. Some of them are also aggressive and murderous; paraphrasing the American Declaration of Independence, we could almost say that "All Southerners are created equal", as regards Woolson's fiction; she does not even change her mind with the passing of time, since Miss Elisabetha, in the homonymous story (1875), shares the same opinions about the 'Southern races' with Rodman in "Rodman the Keeper" (1877), Miss Thorpe in *East Angels* (1866) and Felicia in "Dorothy" (1892).

Both Robert L. White and Sybil B. Weir, in two essays edited by Cheryl B. Torsney, accuse Woolson of ambivalence; the former refers to the Italian tales, the latter to the southern fiction. Both are right, but the ambivalences they are speaking about have different fundamental aspects in the two different series of works. In her southern fiction Woolson expresses her interest, understanding, and "sympathy for the plight of frustrated and impoverished (American) southerners," which "does not prevent her, however, from exercising her critical judgment"; besides, "in her postbellum southern fiction, the losers become individuals with a name and a story... to tell" (Buonomo, 2). The same never happens in the Italian tales, except for Modesta and Carmela, both waitresses, in "A Waitress" and in "A Christmas Party" respectively. In her Italian narrative Woolson is divided between her sympathy for Italian nature and art and her criticism of Italians in general. In these stories - we can define the genre as "international-episode" fiction - Woolson is above all interested in Americans in

Italy. Woolson even gives up “her usually adopted method in acquainting herself with an unfamiliar region”, as Kern writes: “*first she studied the history of the section*, and then complemented this knowledge with close observation of the place about which she had read” (58, italics mine).

Henry James himself, in a page of the essay on Woolson (1887), a page omitted in the same essay reprinted in *Partial Portraits* (1888) and afterwards thoroughly edited by Joan Weimer (1992), expressed his wonder about the absence of any reference to European - and, of course, Italian - history, in Woolson’s Italian stories:

Miss Woolson has, I believe, of late years lived much in Europe, and *yet there is nothing about Europe in her writings*. She has not pressed it into service; she appears to have an unassuming suspicion that she can get on without it... Has she a story about Europe in reserve... or does she propose to maintain her distinguished independence? It will be interesting to see, and meanwhile we may note this independence as an unusual phenomenon, taken in connection with her personal familiarity with Rome, Florence, Venice... (292, italics mine)

By that time (1887) Woolson had written, and published, at least five short stories set in Italy: “Miss Grief” (1880), “A Florentine Experiment” (1880), “The Old Palace Keeper” (1880), “In Venice” (1882), and “The Street of the Hyacinth” (1882).

So, we could say, as a first hypothesis, that she was so imbued with American history that the histories of other peoples seemed to her as not having any relevance to her vision of the world. A confirmation comes from Woolson’s own letters:

In 1883, for instance, she wrote to Hamilton W. Mabie:

I am afraid I shall hardly be able to write upon a European background - as you suggest... And so though I should stay years over here, I remain as I was when I first landed; and American scenes - at least in serious work - are all, I fear, that you will ever have from me. (Moore, *Constance* 126)

In April of the same year she had written to Stedman on the same topic:

...I am so American! I didn’t know it until I came over here. I see, now, that, though I should stay in Italy ten years longer, I should never be anything but American; should never write any but American prose. The reason is - not that I do not appreciate all the beauty here; I do; I adore it. But... all the deep feelings of my existence are inseparably associated with home-scenes... (126)

More intriguing is a second hypothesis, suggested by A. William Salomone in his enlightening essay about the American discovery of nineteenth-century Italy. First of all we find out that Woolson's was not an isolated case. Salomone's main question is, in fact: "Why was the history of modern and contemporary Italy so conspicuously neglected by American writers and scholars?" (1360). According to Salomone, American historiography on modern Italy had strangely tended "to pit a fixed American consciousness of Italy, against a series of moving, changing realities in contemporary American, European, and Italian history" (1364). The "happy few" or the "passionate pilgrims", as Henry James later styled them, who lived from the definitive close of the age of the democratic revolution to the eve of the Civil War, were drawn to Italy by a common need for a spiritual background, for a sense of the past, and by "an almost irresistible quest for 'eternal Italy'" (1366).

Thus, most of the American pilgrims were profoundly shocked and surprised when revolutionary Europe of 1848-49 "burst in their face" (1373). The Italian revolution of 1848 and, in particular, the Mazzinian experiment of the Roman Republic in 1849, shattered the American vision of Europe. Only a few Americans, such as Theodore Dwight, William Wetmore Story, but above all Margaret Fuller, who eyeswitnessed the days of the Roman Revolution, perceived that myth had been transmuted into history. Fuller had even understood how the American dream of paradisaical Italy had been for Italians an infernal reality.

"The shock of the European revolution was destined to be differently experienced at home through to the bitter end of the American Civil War. When the American intelligentsia once again returned to Europe, it was slowly to discover that Europe, too, had been transformed during the two decisive decades 1850-1870 by forces that were at the same time similar and yet subtly different from those that had led to the mortal collision between two social and cultural worlds in a bloody conflict which changed the face and the spirit of old Emersonian America" (1378).

They had perhaps hoped to avoid the harsh realities emerging in post-Civil War America. They returned to Europe only to be almost immediately struck by the fact that the Continent and Italy, too, were themselves undergoing a similar process of historical metamorphosis. The tendency on the part of these returning or new dispassionate pilgrims to Europe and Italy then lay in the opposite direction: toward a kind of escape from those

European realities that now seemed to resemble too closely the harsher realities of America itself. "There was inescapable evidence that a radical transformation had changed the pristine American ahistorical response to Italy into an essentially negative, almost antihistorical, attitude toward modern Italy and its epochal moment, the *Risorgimento*" (1390). Thus, in the postbellum era in America, Italy was metamorphosed into mythos, an island of resistance against the dark vortex of historic forces that had shaken and changed both old Europe and new America.

So, "For some of the most representative old and new pilgrims, among them Norton, Adams, and James" - we could add Woolson - "a cathartic projection of self occurred, which, in their case, redeemed cultural despondency into fruitful intellectual activity and artistic creativity" (1390).

A third, very suggestive, hypothesis - which could perhaps be considered an extension of the second one - is proposed by two articles, by Levine and Shumaker respectively, on Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*: would it be possible to consider Woolson's Italian stories - even though Woolson more than once defined herself as a "realistic" writer - as a symbolic transcription of American contemporary history?

In his "Antebellum Rome in *The Marble Faun*" (1990), Robert S. Levine, for example, maintains that Hawthorne uses in this romance allegorical strategies with the purpose of deflecting attention from the ways in which his portrayal of the tense political and cultural scene in Rome speaks of the similarly tense scene in pre-Civil War America. *The Marble Faun*, it is useful to remember, was Woolson's favourite book; she used it as a sort of Baedeker during her visits to Rome (Kern, 115). Hawthorne himself asserts in the preface that "Italy, as the site of his romance, was chiefly valuable to him as affording a sort of poetic or fairy precinct, where actualities would not be so terribly insisted upon, as they are, and must needs be, in America" (3). "In Rome", Levine suggests, "Hawthorne, like other American travellers of the period, discovers an absence - the spiritual void resulting from the passing of the America's heroic Revolutionary fathers and their founding ideals" (33). From this perspective the postbellum Rome in Woolson's "Miss Grief" could be read as a more desolate void, symbolic of the tragic outcomes of the American upheaval.

Conrad Shumaker, in his essay about American history, still on Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*, explains the way Hawthorne's contemporaries viewed history and the way Hawthorne adapted that view to his fiction. According to Shumaker, "in the first half of the nineteenth century, Americans, like their Puritan ancestors, tended to see their history as an ascending spiral engineered by God³, a spiral that originated in the Old Testament and would lead ideally to a millennium of some kind, an era in which America will fulfill its destiny and its role as the guardian of freedom" (66). Like the Puritans, Shumaker maintains, Hawthorne believed that New England should be a place of "hightened moral seriousness, a step heavenward from Old World vanities" (69). His portrayal of Hilda, the heroine of *The Marble Faun*, as a daughter of the Puritans, "*free, tender (after her own fashion), proud and artistic*", reminds us of Ettie, the heroine of Woolson's "The Street of the Hyacinth"; in this vein, the foreboded destruction of the old houses in the street of the title in order to make way for the Pantheon could be interpreted as the necessary collapse of the old regime of slavery in order to reconstruct the new United States. Following Shumaker's lead, New Hampshire-born Prudence Wilkin Guadagni, the main character in "The Front Yard", with her honesty, her sense of duty and spirit of self-sacrifice, could well be seen as an example of New England's "hightened moral seriousness" and America's role and destiny.



- 1 "Racism became more deeply embedded in the nation's culture and politics after the collapse of Reconstruction" (Foner, 604). In any case, race and racism were then up-to-date topics. In the 1880s, for instance, as John David Smith writes in a recent essay, the renowned Austrian anthropologist and ethnologist Felix von Luschan (1854-1924), who delivered paid lectures and conducted research at sixteen American universities, began comparing the physical, mental, and linguistic characteristics of peoples worldwide. While he dismissed "race" as a meaningful concept, he was nonetheless committed to measuring skulls and recording skin shades. Though Luschan did not equate skin color with notions of racial superiority. Woolson was not always so impartial.
- 2 Mortmain, in Italian "manomorta", refers to condition, now abolished, of estates which, belonging to churches and convents, were not subject to the payment of taxes and could not be alienated or converted.
- 3 It reminds me of the typological reading of history inherited from the seventeenth century and of *Principi di una scienza nuova d'intorno alla natura delle nazioni per la quale si ritrovano i principi d'altro sistema di diritto naturale delle genti* by G.B. Vico (1668-1744). Investigating sacred and profane history, Vico discovered a universal and eternal history - a cyclic, repetitive process of courses and re-courses (sensitivity - imagination - reason) - with which he compared all the histories of the peoples.



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