Ernest Gaines and the New South

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Although the imaginative setting of Ernest Gaines’s stories is little more than a hundred miles removed from the Feliciana Parish of Walker Percy’s fiction, and though Gaines and Percy published first novels within three years of one another, the disparities in treatment of the New South by these two writers are remarkable. Unlike the fiction of Walker Percy, which in many essential respects returns to Agrarian modes of thinking about the machine, the works of Ernest Gaines couple a highly realistic depiction of technological change with an insistence on the value of connection with the past and the responsibility of the individual to communal needs.

Ernest Gaines began his career as a novelist in the late fifties, a period of turbulent social protest and unprecedented economic progress in the South. The issues of social and economic change are clearly in the forefront of Gaines’s fiction, a fact which a number of commentators have stressed. However, the diversity of critical opinion concerning the treatment of change in Gaines’s fiction invites a more detailed study of the author’s view of the New South and of the participation of blacks in the post-war boom of the region.

As a subject of fiction, the New South has occupied Gaines’s attention from the beginning of his career up to the present, as a detailed analysis of two of his works, the early collection of stories Bloodline and the later novel, In My Father’s House, will demonstrate. Furthermore, as in the case of Flannery O’Connor and other post-war southern writers, Gaines’s fictional treatment
of the New South has affected his narrative aesthetic. The distinctive features of prose style and technique in his fiction have evolved, at least in part, from the necessity of representing the subject of social and economic change. Where Gaines is most innovative, in the subtle effects of voice and point of view, he is often dealing directly with the impact of social and technological change on his rural Louisiana setting. Gaines also resembles O’Connor in the extent to which he has appropriated a highly developed southern literary tradition that suggests conventional responses to mechanization. There are important echoes as well of the major black writers, especially Charles Chestnutt and Richard Wright, who wrote into their works an often bitterly ironic response to the “New” South. Gaines’s accomplishment may well be to have brought together a black literary tradition, with its emphasis on ironic commentary and folkloric material, and the southern literary aesthetic of Glasgow, Faulkner, and O’Connor.

Historians such as George Tindall, John Hope Franklin, and Gavin Wright have documented the extent of social change in the post-war South, pointing to new deal policies and war-time expenditures as major factors in changing economic and social attitudes. The location of military bases in the Deep South provided new contact with thousands of soldiers from outside the region and provided the impetus for growth in such cities as Mobile and Norfolk. Despite a limited amount of integration within the services, military service opened up new skills and experiences for black enlisted men. Equally important, with 17.6 percent of the total expenditure for war plants going to the South, southern cities were rapidly transformed into industrial centers, and the phenomenal post-war growth of southern cities brought immigrants, many from Latin America, along with “internal immigration” from other regions of the country. As Wright has shown, the most significant effects of this development were the disappearance of the low-wage economy and the growth of investment in land development, which promoted civic improvements and investment in education and infrastructure. Significant for an understanding of Gaines’s fiction, the pace of development has been greatest in Louisiana and Texas. A very large proportion of war-time spending went to the gulf Southwest, where “more than half of the total investment went into Texas, Louisiana, and Alabama, in that order” (Tindall 699–700, 703).

As social historians have documented and as Gaines shows in his treatment of post-war black urban life, the effects of urbanization on blacks in the South were not entirely positive, especially in respect to unemployment and the family. As John Hope Franklin shows, “for many black newcomers to the city, employment failed to materialize. . . . Men were less likely to secure
employment than women, thus replicating the Southern rural experience where the perception of black masculinity was constantly challenged at home and in the workplace” (421–22). Nonetheless, despite the enormous pressure of social change and continued prejudice, the black family remained relatively stable until about 1970. As Franklin states: “The sharp rise in black female-headed households since 1970 was the most significant indication of the deterioration of the black family” (422).

As a writer of fiction, Gaines has realistically described the effects of urbanization on southern black community. Discussion of Gaines’s fiction has dealt frequently with two elements of his treatment of the transition to modernity: his representation of the black community and his stress on the black family. This critical approach has produced useful readings of the stories in Bloodline: for example, as Todd Duncan reads “Three Men,” Procter Lewis is charged by an older male with the responsibility for changing his own relation to the black community. Duncan writes: “Like the young college student [in “The Sky is Gray”] . . . Procter is rebellious. The problem is that Procter’s mind has been conditioned by an oppressive social situation and his energies confined to a circuit of peer-destruction which ultimately becomes self-destruction” (92). The origin of Procter’s self-destructiveness can be traced to the breakdown of family with the “deep sense of rejection” that he felt after the death of his mother, and there is no one in the family or community left to fill her role. Although he was on his way to becoming a habitual offender, a victimizer of his own community, Procter is saved by the paternal concern of Munford. As Duncan observes, the title of the story emphasizes “one of Gaines’s most important concerns . . . the connection between generations and the acceptance of the responsibilities of literal or symbolic parenthood” (94). Michel Fabre also centers his argument on the importance of a stable community: despite the increasing threat to order which mechanized agriculture poses, Gaines’s “universe remains a stable one” (113). Fabre also discovers a connection between the rural culture “where words are weighed” and a prose of “careful transcription by one who simply takes his time.” Stressing the patient use of repetition and “brief passages where meaning fills the gaps,” Fabre believes that a “waiting tension” which “explodes into tragedy” is characteristic of the Gainesian style.

The readings of Duncan and Fabre, along with the insightful criticism of Charles H. Rowell in “The Quarters: Ernest Gaines and the Sense of Place,” view Gaines as an author recording “a static world fiercely resistant to change” (735). Accordingly, these critics have treated Gaines as a writer whose prose aesthetic reflects the qualities of rural life. Certainly this analysis identifies one
aspect of Gaines's aesthetic; yet, increasingly, especially in his more recent fiction but also in passages in the early stories, Gaines explores the consciousness of those who are alienated from the rural community. Even within the same work, the laconic, impassive naturalism which Fabre identifies as "Gainesian" may suddenly shift into a hurried, discontinuous, expressionistic style.

In Catherine Carmier, for example, the oppressive "circling" style of the passage in which Aunt Charlotte questions Jackson about his loss of faith is followed closely by the scene in which Jackson walks the field, hardly recognizing it as the place where he grew up:

The old houses that had once stood back there had been torn down.
Many of the trees has been cut down and sold for lumber and firewood, and the places where he used to pick pecans and blackberries were now plowed under. Patches of corn, cotton, and sugar cane had taken the place of everything. (106)

When dealing with the subject of technology, the mechanized farming which has destroyed Jackson's home place, the prose becomes purposeful, analytical, and transparent, suggesting the "classical" influence of Turgenev on Gaines's treatment of landscape. Yet this scene is followed almost immediately by Jackson's meeting with Catherine: the style now becomes fragmented, excited by broken phrases and rapid monosyllables. If Jackson was unable to identify with Aunt Charlotte's religious faith, he is also separated from Catherine, whose meaning he attempts to read "behind" her ordinary words and facial expressions. She "seems" to be saying: "All right, nothing can come of our love, but we can like each other, can't we? They can keep us apart, but they can't make us stop liking each other, can they?" (125).

The richness and variety of this style derives from an attention to specific situation and character. Indeed, Gaines's prose may be far more complex and varied than the author himself admitted when he spoke of "writing as well as I can"—writing cleanly, clearly, truthfully, and making it simple enough so that anyone might be able to pick it up and read it" (Rowell, "Interview" 49).

Many passages in his work achieve nuances of style which reproduce the essential features of the subject. The frequency with which this subject is transition, not the static but the changing landscape of the South, produces an aesthetic capable of representing fragmentation, bewilderment, and despair.

Even in Bloodline, where stories such as "The Sky is Gray" appear to record the pre-industrial culture, a harsh but loving community with its lessons of manhood and its rewards of identity and social acceptance, Gaines injects an
inevitable “future” of modernity in which, albeit in his role as provider for his mother, James intends “next summer” to begin earning money by entering the larger economy as an agricultural worker. The town of Bayonne, a “little bitty town” with “the pavement all cracked” and “grass shooting out the sidewalk,” still manages to mark a transition from rural to urban setting, for the lesson of racial division is enforced just as well in Bayonne as in Baton Rouge. If James’s visit to the dentist represents the solace which he hopes to find “in town” and in the future of accomplishment which he dreams of in the world beyond Bayonne, the town is also peopled with enough prejudice and indifference to challenge the child’s future development. Danger comes not just in the guise of a pimp who approaches his mother in a cafe, but also in the decisive scene where a black student, politicized and questioning the existence of God, argues against the conventional beliefs of an elderly black preacher. As often, Gaines seems skeptical of the contribution of the black church, which, as one historian suggests, “operated largely in a context of fundamentalism that excluded the social and economic issues of the day” (Tindall 566). Instinctively, James feels that he wants to emulate the student, yet the student’s questioning of tradition and of the meaning of common language angers the listeners in the waiting room and puzzles James. Significantly, perhaps, we never learn the reaction of James’s mother, Octavia, for James’s attention is focused on the college student, who quite possible prophesies James’s future: “Faith—if not in your God, then in something else, something definitely that they can lean on” (Bloodline 102).

On their way out of this underworld of the town, Octavia and James are befriended by an elderly white couple, Helena and Alnest, whose grocery represents the old order of human relations based on community rather than the individualistic modern order of commerce. The “sale” of a quarter’s worth of salt pork turns out to be a gift rather than a commercial transaction, until Octavia insists on fair payment, asserting her own worth and providing a lesson for James. In this respect the story replicates the finding of social historians who conclude that traditionally the number of blacks on public assistance was proportionately smaller among rural than urban populations (Tindall 547). In other ways, traditional values seem to temper the ending of this story about a youth’s first awareness of urban life: the grocery is both home and business; Alnest, who is never seen, is ill and perhaps dying, but his and Helena’s humanity is passed on to the child; James himself is thinking of the comfort of home, although the story implies that his character will be tested in the city, perhaps in Baton Rouge, which looms in his memory as a place he once visited with his father.
In the story “Three Men” the setting shifts to the modern city, presumably Baton Rouge, although the scene could be any city jail. “Seven Spots,” the tavern where Procter murders another black in self-defense, also ties the story to the urban setting. It is a roadside tavern that men visit in automobiles, where there is jukebox music and dancing, and where sexual encounters are easily arranged. It is also the locale where, as Munford eventually forces Procter to admit, blacks are perpetuating a cycle of violence against other blacks, and where the “brutish” treatment of women is part of the same cycle of defeated expectations. Gaines might almost be paraphrasing John Hope Franklin, who found that for the urbanized black male, “unemployment and idleness brought on frustration, not infrequently culminating in abuse of the family at home and criminal acts away from home” (422). Going to the penitentiary is one way for Procter to break the cycle, not as a punishment but “to sweat out all the crud you got in your system” (141).

Munford presses Procter to consider, for the first time apparently, the question of his “manhood”—his responsibilities as an adult within a larger community. Although the paradigmatic setting for an understanding of community and of general responsibility may in fact be, as Charles H. Rowell states, the Quarters, the traditional lessons must be translated to the urban culture, for in the outline of modern history that Gaines implies, actual return to the rural culture is a frustrating and self-defeating gesture of nostalgia. More productive is what might be termed an imaginative return to history. Looking into history, as Jerry H. Bryant states, Gaines finds “that the enduring woman and the courageous man are the critical elements in the black race’s existence and embody jointly, in their loving struggle of values, the characteristic features of life: change and growth. The political act, performed in courage, is the sign of growth, and implies both duration and satisfaction” (859).

Undertaking a temporary retreat from modernity, the Gainesian hero reviews his or her relation to rural traditions but does not plan to return to an actual agrarian life. Indeed, to a greater extent than has been realized Gaines’s fiction implies an acceptance of, even an insistence on, change. Although Gaines describes rural life with nostalgia, he is well aware of the demographic shift of black population to the cities. Population figures show that in the South as a whole, the number of black farm operators declined from over 550,000 in 1950 to just over 85,000 in 1969. These numbers are mirrored in the statistics for Louisiana, where the 40,600 operators of 1950 declined to about 5,500 in 1969 (Smythe 291). Gaines’s stories set in rural Louisiana reflect this black migration to the cities, where by 1980 eighty-one percent
lived (Franklin 420). Despite this reality Gaines is determined to preserve the
cultural ties between urban present and rural past, particularly in terms of an
ethos of family and community responsibility. In his treatment of the New
South, Gaines suggests the need to draw on the past for ethical direction and
the need to maintain a sense of one’s ancestors as contributors to an evolving
civilization. As William L. Andrews writes, Gaines explores an “understand-
ing of progress as a conserving process.” Andrews notes that Jane Pittman’s
story shows that “the folk has assumed over the years an identity based on
progressive struggle, not socio-political struggle, but the struggle to recog-
nize and conserve its spiritual resources and heroic folk traditions” (149).

Such an understanding of the past is implied in Todd Duncan’s description
of Mme. Toussaint, the conjure woman in “A Long Day in November,” who
advises Eddie to burn his car if he wishes to regain his wife. Her wisdom
derives from “a connection with intuition and to dimly remembered tradi-
tions on the Mother Continent,” yet she is “testing Eddie’s persistence and his
readiness for change” (Bloodline 87). What Mme. Toussaint advises is not the
return to an agrarian economy—the story hints that Eddie may own an
automobile again in the future—but she is suggesting a renewal of familial
and communal relationships, which do not depend on an actual return to the
rural way of life. Indeed, as Mme. Bayonne clearly sees in Catherine Carmier,
the Cajuns have destroyed the Quarters forever by their land purchases and
mechanized farming. The remaining residents are permitted to live in the
Quarters “as long as you keep your nose clean” (78), but for the young there
is no alternative to urban migration. Nor does Gaines romanticize the agrarian
way of life, for one sees everywhere in his stories examples of poverty and
hardship among those who remain on the farm. Gaines is also quite realistic
in representing the demographic shift to the cities. The portrait of emigration
from the Quarters that one reads in Catherine Carmier is confirmed by historical
evidence, for by 1940 forty percent of southern blacks were town or city
dwellers, and those who remained on farms found their position deteriorating,
even in respect to jobs traditionally open to them (Tindall 570).

Gaines’s narrative presents realistically the declining condition of farm life.
Wideman has noticed the realism in Of Love and Dust, in which “Bonbon on
his horse trailing Marcus is, among other things, a statement about the
monotony and brutality of field labor” (80). Not only did the mechanization
of farm labor drive black workers from the land by reducing the demand for
labor and by destroying the profitability of marginal land, it also reduced the
standard of living for those who chose to remain on the farms. As Mabel
Smythe writes, “The changes in methods and location of cotton cultivation,
combined with the poverty of most black farmers, worked both to push negroes out of farming and to make the attractions of city life irresistible” (288). The thesis that machines have taken jobs from rural blacks may be correct, but this does not lead Gaines to the conclusion that blacks should destroy “Western Civilization” and return to a pre-technological agrarian society, as the young radical, Billy, urges (House 162). As a matter of fact, the more attractive characters in the fiction are not always rural survivors; role models appear equally often in urban settings, and may be connected with machinery and technology. As Alvin Aubert points out, in Of Love and Dust the character of “Jim Kelly, the plantation tractor driver and maintenance man . . . serves as a constant reminder to his ward, the intractable youth Marcus, of his responsibility for his own predicament” (72).

As Rowell terms it, “the quarters in Gaines’s fiction is a ritual ground of communion and community,” a past to which Gaines must return in order to understand the present (“Quarters” 750). Catherine Carmier does not imply a continuing agrarian life for the young, but it does reach a hopeful resolution as the young reenact through ritual the lessons of their ancestors. In fact, Mme. Bayonne assumes all along that Jackson will return to California after he has told his great-aunt of his plans, but the very act of telling her of his intention, what will amount to “the worst moment of her life” (70–71), may serve as a rite of passage through which Jackson will be enabled to transfer her essential lessons of humanity to an urban setting.

Perhaps the most significant treatment of modernity in Gaines’s fiction is the novel In My Father’s House. Set in the town of St. Adrienne, a growing community within commuting distance of Baton Rouge, the novel describes a locale which is in transition from rural to urban. Accompanying this social change, the major characters in the novel are defined according to their attitudes toward regional progress. The optimism of Rev. Phillip Martin, the protagonist, is based on the belief that black southerners will achieve full economic participation in the New South’s prosperity. During the post-war era, St. Etienne has undergone a degree of racial progress, but after the death of Martin Luther King the civil rights movement faces challenges from outside, in the form of cajuns like Mr. Chenal, and from inside, as the black organization in St. Etienne has become stagnant and less solidified.

Even before the traumatic experience with his son, Rev. Martin projects a sense of inertia and complacency. As his supporters notice a growing timidity and acceptance of gradualism, younger workers are impatient and seem merely to tolerate their leader on the basis of past accomplishment. The sense that Martin has lost enthusiasm for his public role is related to the fact that
his belief in progress is a limited and materialistic answer to more complicated problems of modernization. Gaines suggests that Martin’s complacency toward his role in social justice is reflected as well in a willingness to accept the “boosterism” of the town’s white leaders, and that his weak grasp of both problems has its source in a failure of nerve. The inability to connect with others, an insistence on proud isolation, may be seen as Martin’s psychological defense against society’s ongoing attempt to degrade him. As Gaines makes clear in an interview with Charles H. Rowell, the performance of the black father is conditioned by his position in society outside the home. As Gaines states, “I don’t know that the father will ever be in a position—a political position or any position of authority—from which he can reach out and bring his son back to him again” (40). Martin also interprets his failure as a parent in the light of black history, excusing the abandonment of his first family as the result of a “paralysis” residue of slavery. Part of the complexity of Gaines’s treatment of character is illustrated in the way that Martin becomes a fully “rounded” character: his actions are understandable in human terms as the struggle for self-preservation of a proud, strong man, but from another point of view, they are rationalizations based on historical grounds.

As his son, Robert X implies, Martin’s justification has become weak rationalization for a hidden defensiveness. By the end of the novel, faced with consequences of his disregard of others—his son’s suicide and the alienation of his second wife and children—Martin gives up, at least for the moment, his role as a community leader and questions his vision of the New South as a progressive coalition of blacks and whites. Gaines suggests no alternative to the spread of “progress” that has left Martin disaffected from those closest to him. However, Gaines insists on a critical examination, a tallying up, of the actual benefits and costs of development. At the heart of this examination is the fact that Martin’s rise in fortunes operates as a defensive avoidance of the more strenuous task of maintaining a coherent identity in relation to family, community, and state. Martin’s social position and wealth offer an illusory confirmation of self that leads him to lose sight of his own and others’ human needs; his success masks his deep alienation from every form of intimacy.

In many ways Martin has endorsed the program of regional development promoted by white leaders in the South, and he has accepted a filter-down theory of economic reform. Though Martin “fights” the remaining businesses that discriminate, he only fights when he has the support of paternalistic white moderates, thereby collaborating with the town’s white leadership by not pushing too hard. Surrounded by a group of whites and aging blacks as advisers, he speaks of waiting for the proper time for action and finding the
proper means of protest. Having won privilege for himself, Martin epitomizes the historical problem of a separation of leadership from constituency within the civil rights movement (Tindall 568). Ironically, Martin may be more respected by whites, who envy his material prosperity and political power, than by blacks, who are able to see through the rhetoric of change to his underlying self-interestedness. Gaines’s description of his residence as “the most expensive and elegant owned by a black family in St. Adrienne” (28) suggests Martin’s relationship to the black community, for the expense and elegance of his home project his separation and defensiveness. His display of wealth is intended to cover an underlying insecurity which extends to every human relationship, most importantly that with his family. Epitomizing the New South ethos of success, Martin occupies a position of comfortable prominence, living in a large modern house and driving a luxury automobile. His expensive clothes are intended to impress others with his status, and he has come to believe that comfort and status are the ends of existence.

Certainly Martin wants these benefits for others, but by the same token he holds an exclusive position as long as they have not been extended to all. Howard Mills’s accusation that his friend went behind the backs of his family and community in making a decision about calling off the boycott is the crux of Gaines’s critique of the New South ethos. The modern South is morally corrupt, because its pursuit of success has displaced the shared human values of communal life, including the practices of family and community involvement in decision-making. Even his closest supporter recognizes that Martin has failed to respect the rights of others, and especially the political right to choice. Countering Martin’s statement that he acted for the benefit of his son in calling off the boycott, Mills says, “We want this world better fit for everybody’s children . . . Not just for one man” (127). That Martin has the potential for becoming an autocratic leader is suggested by hints of past violence toward his own people, for we learn that in his youth the minister was twice picked up as a suspect in killings and for fighting (85).

There is also the carnal side to the Faust-like Martin, who tends to accept pleasure as his due and in return for political complacency: he has had many mistresses, enjoys rich food and drink, and his body has become soft and heavy. His striving after comfort and status characterize Martin as a representative of a certain New South boosterism, which Gaines undoubtedly intends to bring into question. Another point that connects Martin with the modern South is the facile way in which he claims to have “found God” (100). The reappearance of Etienne, the alienated son from his first marriage, and Martin’s effort to save him are events that completely upset his complacency.
Martin is forced to admit the self-interest which underlies his faith in regional progress.

One aesthetic device appropriate to Gaines's interest in social reality is the use of setting to comment on a character's assertions. This realist technique is used in the passage which describes Martin's visit to Baton Rouge in search of Chippo Simon. Everywhere he looks in Baton Rouge, the setting refutes Martin's complacent faith in regional progress. Martin arrives on the same day that a young Vietnam veteran has been shot for stealing food, but we learn that similar acts of violence occur daily. At the heart of this underworld is East Boulevard, a street that Martin remembers as lively and prosperous, although even as he remembers it, East Boulevard was "a dangerous place" where "you could easily get yourself killed" (140). The district now shows the typical signs of urban blight: dilapidation, abandonment, darkness. While Martin does not yet see the connection between his "personal" life and the problems of the larger community, the ironic contrasts between his suburban lifestyle and the inner-city poverty of East Boulevard make the point clear. For example, the presence of Martin's automobile, which draws comment from nearly everyone he meets, is ironically contrasted with the setting in which most residents are on foot, exposed to the cold and rain. In this urban setting Martin feels even more isolated from people than in St. Etienne: he notices that he recognizes almost no one in Baton Rouge, the city where he apparently spent most of his youth, and with his narrow interest only in his own family, he has nothing in common with the individuals whom he meets.

The scene that describes Martin's first "conversation" with his son, Robert X (as he prefers to be called), reveals their differing views of existence. Ironically, Martin attempts to make conversation by pointing out that spillways have brought progress to the area, a point of regional pride which elicits only silence and scorn on the part of his son. Martin speaks only of the future, predicting economic development that will presumably include blacks, but his future-orientation obviously masks a fear of examining the past and present. Turning his back on his son even as he attempts to reconnect with him, Martin adopts the same approach to Robert X as he has shown toward his current wife, Alma, and their children. He provides them with a comfortable life, but, because of a history of guilt and insecurity, he holds himself apart. The origin of Martin's alienation, as his wife Alma analyzes it, is that he is trying to make up for the past. He has been "running" and has isolated himself (136).

When Martin offers the "excuse" that he had abandoned Robert's mother because he had been paralyzed by the pattern of slavery, he may have hit on
the truth, but he fails to see that his paralysis has not been alleviated by his participation in regional prosperity. His son rejects this argument entirely and judges his father without taking into account the impact of social conditioning on his father, yet the son is equally the product of this conditioning. His nihilism—his idea that "no matter what you do, no matter how hard you work, how much you love, they catch you off guard one day and break you" (27)—arises from a personal history of defeat. Although the two men analyze the past in different ways (Robert calls his father a "rapist" and labels his love "lust," while Martin asserts that he loved Robert's mother), both are partially correct: one can "love," in Martin's sense, and at the same time "rape," in Robert's sense. Ironically, both are partially justified, but neither can communicate his partial vision to the other.

In My Father's House represents a development of Gaines's style toward "a severe detachment, a distance between story and narrator," as Frank Shelton notes (340). As Gaines tells the story, he uses many fictional techniques to comment on his central character. Not only does Martin's perception of the setting clash with what is really there, what Martin says about the New South often conflicts with what he thinks. Through the omniscient narrator we enter a consciousness filled with self-doubt and evasion, a mind seduced by the material rewards of participation in progress but already doubting that these rewards are worth the price of personal isolation. In several ways the novel's language is used to comment ironically on Martin's belief in progress. The description of his visit to the Quarters on Reno plantation includes a complex use of irony to distinguish between Martin's judgement about the "backwardness" of conditions there and the actual state of things: the emotional support and communal solidarity that makes a rich life possible even under difficult financial strain. Commenting on the narrative distance necessary to present Philip Martin, Gaines noted that the omniscient point of view was dictated by his character's isolation: "You cannot tell that story from the minister's point of view because the minister keeps too much inside him. He does not reveal it—he won't reveal it to anybody" (Rowell, "Interview" 41).

Though the treatment of Martin is often ironic, and particularly so when Gaines deals with him as a representative of New South values, the irony is never so strong as to destroy the reader's sympathy. While we may suspect that his "paralysis" is partially the result of cowardice, we are also presented with a figure of considerable moral stature and emotional power. Ultimately, Martin rises above the level of pathos, a figure who elicits the reader's pity, to the level of tragedy, for through his character Gaines raises serious ethical issues and shows the destructive conflicts within a noble man attempting to
meet conflicting responsibilities. Under the pressure of this conflict, he becomes tyrannical and blind but finally realizes his condition. The character is successful because of Gaines's fidelity to a realistic aesthetic that places the character in a specific social setting, in this case the moment of the post-war South when the rising level of material prosperity, never extended fully to blacks to begin with, has collided against the psychological and emotional needs for a sense of the continuity of family and community. Gaines's sense of assurance in pointing to ethical resolutions contrasts with the fragmentation and ambivalence of modern writers in dealing with a similar landscape of social change. For Gaines, as for O'Connor, the machine connotes neither the ultimate destructiveness nor the seductive attraction that it suggested for Faulkner or Wright. His touchstone is always the actual quality of life within the social community. This perspective neither lauds technology as panacea nor dismisses its physical benefits, but the sober realism unflinchingly records the material and psychological transformation of the post-war South.

Indeed, both Gaines and O'Connor depict the New South as a wasteland in which both individual identity and communal ties have been distorted by materialism and mechanization, yet neither finds a "solution" in fleeing the devastation. Rather, both writers suggest a reconsideration of the essential needs of human beings, including social and psychological needs that are largely unchanged by the transition from rural to urban life. The extent to which these needs are being met is a measure of the actual quality of life, not the mere quantity of change. A similarity also exists between the use of the machine as symbol in the two writers: repeatedly the protagonist of a story must give up dependence on machinery in order to gain the wisdom to control it. As in the conclusions of O'Connor's Wise Blood and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," in which the transforming moment of recognition arrives only after the protagonists give up or are defeated by the automobiles they prize, similarly Gaines suggests repeatedly that the power of machines and possessions conflicts with communal values in that ownership separates the individual from the social group and focuses one's labor on self rather than social needs. Both writers hold out the possibility of a sort of "redemption" of the mechanical realm, and by implication of the New South itself, but only after a re-affirmation of the priority of human needs over mechanical technique. As Amy declares at the conclusion of "A Long Day in November," the family can anticipate owning an automobile again "when you learn how to act with one" (Bloodline 77).

The increasing urbanization of the South threatens the black community, but as an external "environmental" force the threat can be dealt with by means
of education that often takes the form of knowledge passed down from elders. Gaines urges his reader to consider the relationship of present to past, and to ponder the continuing existence of ethical choices of individual and political bodies whereby the impact of mechanization will be humanized. One should add that in the case of O'Connor, the modern devastation is more fundamentally a reflection of human nature itself, which in her view has always tended toward the mechanical and inhumane. Her fiction thus implies a less attractive notion of what human beings might be like to begin with in communal and traditional settings such as Gaines's "Quarters."

One might also compare Gaines's treatment of modernization with that of another contemporary, William Styron. While Styron describes the transformation of war-time Norfolk, his home region and the home of many of his protagonists, nowhere does he provide the graphic evidence of change that one might expect, particularly when one considers that during the war Norfolk "achieved an unequaled reputation for squalor" (Tindall 702–703). Styron's reaction to the urbanization of the South is "aesthetic," based on the assumption of the writer's power to transform physical reality with an art that will replace the "monstrousness" of modern life with a serenity analogous to the effect of classical music. In comparison with Styron's deliberately less realistic treatment of change and its social consequences, Gaines writes a more direct, realistic account of black neighborhoods in Baton Rouge in the sixties and seventies, as black businesses close, housing conditions deteriorate, and lives unravel.

In the fiction of Ernest Gaines, as in that of O'Connor and Styron, the New South after the Second World War is a subject which informs the aesthetic practice of the novelist in significant ways. To some extent Gaines's style, his use of point of view, his handling of comic and tragic genres, and his shaping of metaphor and symbolism is determined by an intention to record and change contemporary experience. With the eye of a powerful realist, Gaines carefully records his vision of the post-war South. With the development of his work from Bloodline through In My Father's House, Gaines has shown an ability to adapt his realist aesthetic to the demands of the imaginative subject in ways that we are only beginning to appreciate.

Works Cited


