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"Knowing Movement, Wanting Order": Michael O'Brien on the US South

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It is easy to forget that interest in the intellectual history of the US South only fully emerged in the post-1960s years. Though there have been no outstanding southern philosophers or philosophers of the South to focus on, there have been plenty of talented literary and cultural critics and political and social thinkers, as well as historians, political scientists, and sociologists, whose work has significantly shaped the idea of the South and who thus deserve the interest of the intellectual historian. Works as varied as Clement Eaton's *The Freedom-of-Thought Struggle in the Old South* (1940) Rollin Osterweis's *Romanticism and Nationalism in the Old South* (1949), and William R. Taylor's *Cavalier and Yankee* (1961) were early examples of the effort to identify the intellectual and cultural issues central to the history of the region. By exploring the literary history of the South in the interwar years, what came to be called the Southern Renaissance, post-1945 literary historians such as Louis D. Rubin and Lewis Simpson undoubtedly also influenced those who tried to make sense of the life of the mind below the Mason–Dixon line.

Still, it was probably W. J. Cash's *The Mind of the South* (1941) that was most influential in defining the patterns and style of thought indigenous to the (white) South. Of course, the "mind" in Cash's title referred not to rational intellect as such but to the characteristic mentality, spirit, way of thinking, or identity of the region.[1] A journalist rather than an academic, Cash was also following in the footsteps of Vernon L. Parrington in the first volume of

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[1] W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (London: Penguin, 1971). The all-encompassing German term here is *Geist* and it is sometimes translated as "mind," even though "spirit" is more common.

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Main Currents in American Thought (1927), where he referred to the "American Mind" quite frequently and named a section in Volume II "The Mind of the South." Cash's basic thesis was that the historic South lacked any great commitment to the life of the mind, to say the least. The Enlightenment tradition in the South, as illustrated in the writings of Jefferson and Madison, faded considerably as the sectional crisis began heating up in the 1810s and 1820s. Indeed, Cash cited Henry Adams to clinch the case. Of Robert E. Lee's son Roony Lee, Adams had written that he "did not (typically speaking) think; he felt."[2] It was a line that came early in *The Mind of the South* and few readers of the volume ever forgot Adams's damning indictment.

This is not to say that Cash's thesis went unchallenged or that southern intellectuals were totally neglected. Richard Hofstadter's profile of John C. Calhoun in *The American Political Tradition* (1948) referred to the South Carolinian as "The Marx of the Master Class." Louis Hartz included a chapter entitled "Reactionary Enlightenment" in his influential *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955). There he identified a genuinely conservative intellectual tradition in the Old South and focussed particularly on John C. Calhoun and George Fitzhugh. The leading postwar southern historian, C. Vann Woodward, further explored the complexities of Fitzhugh's work in the essay "A Southern War against Capitalism" (1960) collected in Woodward's *American Counterpoint* (1971). Finally, Marxist historian of slavery Eugene D. Genovese devoted a considerable number of pages to Fitzhugh in *The World the Slaveholders Made* (1969) as a southern thinker who had dared challenge the beneficence of the free market and free labor generally, while Drew Faust in *A Sacred Circle: The Dilemma of the Intellectual in the Old South, 1840–1860* (1977) extended the range of inquiry beyond individual thinkers to the networks that connected southern intellectuals with one another. Still, the single work that put paid to Cash's thesis and expanded the purview of southern thinkers and writers appeared much later as Michael O'Brien's *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810–1860*, a prizewinning two-volume intellectual history of the ante-bellum South.[3]

[2] Cash, *The Mind of the South*, 117–18. O'Brien published an early piece on Cash, "W. J. Cash, Hegel and the South, *Journal of Southern History*, 44 (Aug. 1978), 379–98), but, as he says, he modified it considerably when it was published as "A Private Passion: W. J. Cash," in Michael O'Brien, *Rethinking the South: Essays in Intellectual History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 179–89.

[3] Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810–1860*, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

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RETHINKING THE SOUTH'S INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

In large part I raise these issues because of the sudden death from cancer of Michael O'Brien on 6 May 2015. Michael's death was a shock to the community of American and southern historians, among others, on both sides of the Atlantic. It is only fitting that the *Journal of American Studies* should recognize Michael's signal achievement as an historian of the intellectual history of the US South and of the United States. I should also say a word about Michael's importance as a mentor of young historians both in the United States, where he held full-time positions in the history departments of the University of Arkansas and Miami (Ohio), and then, from 2002 on, as a full-time member of the History Faculty at Cambridge University. It is easy to forget that academics influence students not only through what they write but also as advisers to undergraduate students, supervisors of advanced-degree work, and mentors to young PhDs. This was certainly the case with Michael O'Brien. One consistent and insistent note in the public commemorations of O'Brien since his death has been the great influence he had on his students and how, despite a certain shyness and at times an intimidating manner, he cared deeply about them intellectually and personally – and they, him. In what follows, I want to offer what I think Michael would have respected – an dispassionate assessment of his work but with a particular focus on the shift that took place in his conception of the South in the 1980s and how it led to his masterwork, *Conjectures of Order*. It remains only to say that it is still difficult a year later to separate the feelings of personal and intellectual loss at his death from the sort of engagement with his work that he would have respected.

But how did a native of Plymouth in England come to be the leading intellectual historian of the South of his generation? It was in the late 1960s, 1968 to be exact, that we can begin to see the formative experiences that determined his career. In that summer, he worked on a carpentry crew in Alabama, an experience that several people identify as the beginning of his interest in the region. He received his BA from Cambridge the next summer, and married Tricia Bacon (also of Plymouth), whereupon the couple headed immediately for Nashville, Tennessee, where Michael earned an MA in history at Vanderbilt. Returning to Cambridge (UK), O'Brien was awarded a PhD under the supervision of John Thompson in 1976. He spent three years at the University of Michigan's Society of Fellows and one year at the University of South Carolina. In the fall of 1980, he assumed his first full-time position at the University of Arkansas and in 1987 moved to the History Department at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Between 1994 and 2001 Michael spent part of the year teaching at Miami's center in Luxemburg and part of the year teaching in Cambridge. Then in January

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2002, he assumed a full-time post in Cambridge following the death of Mark Kaplanoff. O'Brien's interests nicely complemented those of Tony Badger, who, as Mellon Professor, helped make the US South and civil rights history specialties in US history at Cambridge. Writing in 2013, Michael suggested that the South's "moment" as central to the writing of US history had come and gone. When he had been hired, three of four American historians had southern interests, but, he noted, only he remained. Sadly, now he is gone too.[4]

Looking back, it is surprising how quickly O'Brien made his mark as a southern historian. His first published piece was "Thomas Wolfe and the Problem of Southern Identity: An English Perspective" (1971) in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*. It was followed in 1973 by "C. Vann Woodward and the Burden of Southern Liberalism" in the *American Historical Review*, the first full-length treatment of Woodward's work which was certainly one of the main influences on O'Brien's view of the South.[5] O'Brien's former dissertation supervisor, John Thompson, notes that O'Brien saw parallels between young southerners such as Wolfe, who left the South in search of fame as a writer ("North toward Home," to use the title of Willie Morris's wonderful autobiography of 1967), and "'working-class boys' who went to university in Britain (of which he, of course, was very self-consciously one)."[6] Thus O'Brien clearly saw parallels between the "hidden injuries of class" (Richard Sennett's phrase) and the nagging white southern sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the racially enlightened, liberal, and cosmopolitan North. Put another way, O'Brien harboured a certain distaste for liberal political culture in America, particularly northern social and cultural elites, who looked down their noses at white southerners. (Why he neglected the crucially important

[4] Thanks to David Moltke Hansen, John Thompson, and, especially, Patricia O'Brien for the biographical information about Michael 's education and early professional career. For his comments on the state of southern history see "A Retrospective on the Southern Intellectual History Circle, 1988–2013," S-USIH blog, at http://s-usih.org/2014/01/a-retrospective-on-the-southern-intellectual-circle-1988-2013.html. The three historians he was referring to are Tony Badger (twentieth-century southern political history), Betty Wood (history of slavery) and himself.

[5] O'Brien later paid handsome tribute to Woodward with an edition of *The Letters of C. Vann Woodward* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), introduced with a 45-page overview of Woodward's career.

[6] John Thompson, email to Richard H. King, in reference to "Reading and Remembering Michael O'Brien," memorial service, 19 Nov. 2015. Willie Morris's autobiography, *North toward Home* (1967), charts Morris's move from Mississippi and Texas to New York and then editorship of *Harper's* magazine in the early 1960s. Numerous southern writers and intellectuals, including Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote, Harper Lee, and Carson McCullers all followed this same trajectory in their lives, though Welty, O'Connor, and Lee eventually returned to the South to live and write.

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working-class, racial, and ethnic dimensions of American liberalism is a puzzle.) But O'Brien's experience in 1970s America, as filtered through Wolfe's fiction and Woodward's Populist-inflected political reformism, helps explain his later lack of enthusiasm for mainstream southern liberalism in the ante- or postbellum South.

O'Brien never took on the protective coloration of southern conservatism or the "good ole boy" jocularity that outsiders to the region sometimes try to imitate. As he emphasized, he was not interested in identifying with or defending the South, much less criticizing it. Rather, as he wrote in "The Endeavor of Southern Intellectual History," "a culture is there, for good or ill, for better or worse, and there is an obligation to understand it." And as he noted later in a brilliant account of the origins of the Southern Intellectual History Circle which he founded in 1986, "The South was an object of interest or fascination but not an identity." His position, he recognized, was something like an anthropologist of the South, combining participant observation with political and, to a degree, moral detachment from the natives. He recognized that his "resident alien perspective has meant a crookedness of vision," yet it also offered a counterweight to the "Whiggery run amok" of the American Dream.[7] Nor was O'Brien's outsider status without its uses. It could be used to sidestep the conventional wisdoms of political and cultural advocacy that were found all along the spectrum of intellectual and political opinion. He was a keen, even ardent, aficionado of jazz, but he had little interest in the blues tradition. More surprisingly, O'Brien never worked up much interest in the region's main claim to literary eminence, William Faulkner.

All this amounts, I think, to a pretty austere vision/version of the region. While Cash's picture of the South stressed its extremities and exuberances with irrationality as the norm, O'Brien was far less taken with the region's spirit of "enthusiasm" in religious, intellectual or political matters despite his lifelong interest in the Romantic tradition in Europe. Ironically, Cash gave full historical weight to the pervasive impact of religion on southern life, even though he personally had no more use for evangelicalism and fundamentalism than did O'Brien. As a result the antebellum southern intellectuals that O'Brien explored (and sometimes all but discovered) were a pretty buttoned-up and sober bunch. I also suspect that his sense of a certain detachment from the South was due to his hostility to religion in general. This is not to say that Michael and his wife, Tricia, felt isolated or alienated in the South. They lived in or close to it for two decades at least and often felt at home there.

[7] Michael O'Brien, "The Endeavor of Southern Intellectual History" (1988), in O'Brien, *Rethinking the South*, 1–15, 2, 5. See also O'Brien, "A Retrospective on the Southern Intellectual History Circle," for the comment about "fascination" not "identity."

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WRITING ABOUT THE SOUTH

O'Brien spent the 1970s transforming his PhD dissertation at Cambridge into *The Idea of the American South, 1920–1941* (1979), one of several academic studies at the time to explore the explosion of creative talent and critical thinking in the region between the two world wars.[8] Specifically, his study focussed on the idea of "southern identity," as it emerged in the work of the conservative Vanderbilt Agrarians and the more reform-minded Chapel Hill Regionalists. Of course, this obsession with regional identity had been a major preoccupation in the writing of the 1930s as the South stood facing "both ways," toward the past and toward the future.[9] It linked such disparate works as the Vanderbilt Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), Cash's *The Mind of the South* and then later C. Vann Woodward's "The Search for Southern Identity" (1958), and his *The Burden of Southern History* (1960). All were clearly dedicated to a kind of regional exceptionalism, but were divided as to its salutary impact.

It is also important to remember that southern identity was assumed to be a problem primarily for white, not black, southerners. Why should black southerners feel ambivalent about the collapse of a regional order that had been formed under slavery and devoted to the preservation of white supremacy since then? As it turned out, those of us who wrote about southern identity were dead wrong to have assumed that black southerners lacked any interest in the idea of a regionally inflected identity. The books of Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, and Richard Wright, then later Alice Walker, contained plenty to indicate that black southerners thought about *their* regional identity too: "down home" referred to more than the horrors of chattel slavery and being sold down the river. That is, there was a black version of southern identity vis-à-vis the white South, but also in reference to northern black culture. All this was particularly accentuated by the "Great Migration," which saw millions of southerners leave the region for the North.

[8] Besides O'Brien's *The Idea of the American South, 1920–1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), see Francis Garvin Davenport, *The Myth of Southern History: Historical Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Southern Literature* (1970); Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue* (1977); Richard H. King, *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Re-awakening of the American South* (1980); Daniel J. Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919–1945* (1982); Fred Hobson, *Tell about the South: The Southern Rage to Explain* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1983). See also Michael Kreyling's *Inventing Southern Literature* (1998) for an analysis of the origins of canonical "southern literature" and the so-called Southern Renaissance.

[9] As the Canadian Shreve McCannon famously asks Quentin Compson at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), "Why do you hate the South?" To which Quentin replies, "I don't hate it."

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What I want to emphasize here is a certain shift in the focus of Michael O'Brien's work as the 1980s unfolded. He stopped trying to solve the puzzle of southern identity in mid-twentieth-century America and instead turned his attention to the intellectual culture of the antebellum South. The end result was *Conjectures of Order* (2004), a testimony to scholarly persistence, dedication, and considerable talent as an historian. Why he made this shift, I'm not sure. Perhaps he felt crowded by the emerging scholarship on the intellectual history of the modern South and that there was more new territory to be explored between 1830 and 1860 than between 1930 and 1960. His pivot away from the second half of the twentieth century was accompanied by a gradual abandonment of the trope of identity, a term not all that different, as I have suggested, from Cash's "mind."[10] Originally, O'Brien shared the assumption that ideas, identities, and images had a historical reality and were not merely secondary reflections of material reality.[11] He also made much of the influence of the Romantic tradition on the antebellum South, with its emphasis upon communities, not individuals. This point was linked to the Romantic tendency to think that every culture had a distinctive core, or nature, or essence. O'Brien also characterized the Romantic vision of society as a "combination of a sociology of community" and "a psychology of alienation." Historically, like Scotland and Germany, the antebellum South was "a provincial culture anxious to invent and legitimate itself."[12] "Knowing movement, wanting order," as an antebellum southerner Stephen Elliott once observed, was the region's guiding precept.[13]

In the early 1980s, O'Brien still retained his emphasis on the Romantic desire for coherence and order and still referred to the "mind of the Old South" in announcing his views on the stature of antebellum southern thought.[14] At the same time, he began moving toward a view that stressed the way that ideas, identities, and images could not be sealed off from social forces; methodologically, he felt "novel pressure of the new social history."

[10] Like others who embraced the "mind" metaphor, O'Brien treated the regional culture as a kind of collective psyche. This tradition derived both from the Romantic–Herderian emphasis on cultures as coherent wholes and from the psychoanalytic–anthropological tradition of national character studies produced by "culture and personality" studies.

[11] The irony here is that O'Brien spent a lot of time identifying the abstractions by which southerners thought of themselves, even as many southern conservatives denied the importance of abstractions. Michael O'Brien, "Intellectual History and the Search for Southern Identity," in O'Brien, *Rethinking the South*, 207–18, 207–8.

[12] Michael O'Brien, "The Lineaments of Antebellum Southern Romanticism" (1986), in O'Brien, *Rethinking the South*, 38–56, 50.

[13] O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order*, Volume I, 221.

[14] Michael O'Brien, "On the Mind of the Old South and Its Accessibility" (1982), in O'Brien, *Rethinking the South*, 19–37, 19.

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But what most clearly reflected a change in his thinking was his paraphrase of E. P. Thompson in 1984: "The South is a relationship, not a thing."[15] Clearly, it no longer made sense to talk of the South in terms of a single idea, identity, or coherent image. Finally, the South had even originally been a "polygot culture": "Distinctions of ethnicity, later swept away, were powerfully relevant in the earlier South."[16] Overall, then, the South was best conceived of as a continually changing set of relationships, a complex network of institutions and ideas, a cluster of traditions that interacted over time.

O'Brien also used the term "intellectual history" to describe an approach that took greater account of social forces and historical change in relation to the production and reception of ideas. Intellectual history, he contended, encompassed at least "the history of the social function of the intelligentsia, or the history of particular intellectuals, or the scrutiny of texts, or all three."[17] As his research on the intellectual life of the antebellum South progressed, he increasingly emphasized contexts as much as texts, intellectuals as much as their ideas in pure form. Intellectual history was necessarily also the history of intellectuals. At least in *Conjectures of Order*, it was the historian and the essayist that seemed to elicit his most interest, not philosophers or theorists. Proud of his literary style and a scourge of the unclear and pretentious, O'Brien became increasingly impatient with large abstraction or theory in the grand manner as the 1980s gave way to the 1990s. If it was worth saying, it was worth saying clearly. He also retained, and perhaps even strengthened, his historicist tendencies. We should, he insisted, understand the slaveholding South in its own terms, not in the terms of advocates of civil rights in the mid-twentieth century. Thus value judgements – whether moral or aesthetic – brought to bear on a past tradition or culture were largely *verboten*. He was a kind of relativist of circumstances without being a cynic.

Certainly, O'Brien was after big game from the early 1980s on, at least. In a particularly revealing passage, he signalled his intention to write with at least one eye on the supreme intellectual historian of New England, Perry Miller. As he wrote in his introduction to a collection of antebellum southern writings, *All Clever Men Who Make Their Way*, "we stand in our understanding of antebellum Southern thought where the study of colonial New England stood when Perry Miller came to revise the orthodoxy of Brooks Adams."[18] This was, he recognized, "a big claim" and O'Brien's *Conjectures of Order* proceeded to make his case in terms of three basic concerns or issues.

[15] O'Brien, "Intellectual History and the Search for Southern Identity," 210, 218.
[16] O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order*, Volume I, 285–86.
[17] O'Brien, "Intellectual History and the Search for Southern Identity," 207.
[18] O'Brien, "On the Mind of the Old South and Its Accessibility," 20.

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- First, O'Brien sought to torpedo the idea spread by W. J. Cash that antebellum southern culture was a poor, provincial thing, obsessed only with slavery and salvation, and operating according to what Cash called "the Savage Ideal." In this, O'Brien was largely successful, as I have already tried to underscore.
- Second, O'Brien believed that the Old South, despite the centrality of the institution and ideology of slavery, was not only *in* but *of* the modern world. Thus he was sceptical of Eugene Genovese's claim that Old South was a premodern, seigneurial social and cultural order.[19] The Old South was "not premodern but deeply implicated in modernity."[20]
- Third, O'Brien argued convincingly that the intellectuals of the antebellum South were open to ideas of events in the outside world. They were particularly oriented to Europe, from which they drew new ideas and currents of thought either in books or through personal visits. As he wrote in the early 1980s, "I do not see Southerners as any more provincial than Englishmen."[21]

With these considerations in mind, *Conjectures of Order* was a thoroughly imposing, wonderfully written, overpowering monument of historical writing. When placed with Bertram Wyatt-Brown's *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (1983), Eugene D. Genovese's *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (1969), not to mention Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *The Mind of the Master Class* (2005), O'Brien's great work marked the triumph of the intellectual history of the antebellum South over the intellectual history of the New South. Presentism had been vanquished or at least checked for a time.

LAST COMMENTS

I want to conclude by identifying two large, problematic areas of *Conjectures of Order*.

They concern the matters of intellectual and cultural history and also value judgements as rendered by the historian. Specifically, *was* Michael O'Brien successful in doing for antebellum southern culture what Perry Miller had done for the Puritan tradition of New England – revise its historical importance

[19] O'Brien offers very little that is new on Fitzhugh and Calhoun as conservatives, except to reject the idea that they were arch-reactionaries or threats to the national union. His claims for the modernity of the South are largely convincing, if a bit undertheorized or -explored. It is not clear what modernity actually entailed for O'Brien.

[20] O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order*, Volume I, 17.

[21] O'Brien, *Rethinking the South*, 230 n. 37.

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radically upwards and reorder the canon of American thought? Yes and No. Yes, insofar as he constructed a powerful and plausible tradition of southern intellectuals, academics, and writers, who shared certain traits and concerns, and were, to a degree, in communication with one another, as well as achieving a level of intellectual life that the South could be proud of. One thing O'Brien tried to avoid in his study of the intellectual life of the antebellum South was the sense that the region's intellectual life should be read solely in terms of the way it contributed to the crisis of the Union and then the Civil War. In fact the political and moral debates that were part of that crisis certainly did not stand front and center in the two volumes. All in all, the cultural and intellectual entity that he discovered/created was a major feat of historical synthesis and imagination.

Yet, Cash was not quite so easily dismissed as O'Brien made him out to be. For instance, O'Brien was concerned with the way of life of an explicitly intellectual class in the antebellum South, a secular clerisy, as it were, while Cash was concerned with a widespread mentality that worked across various classes, statuses, and stations of the antebellum white South. They were, in other words, not talking about the same thing, though there was considerable overlap. Second, Cash captured much more vividly than O'Brien the power of religion among all the classes, the ferocious claims of sectional nationalism, and what he called "the Savage Ideal," the southern propensity toward violence and intolerance when faced with northern and/or anti-slavery attacks on the peculiar institution and the region itself. All this is considerably muted in *Conjectures of Order*.

My own judgement is that the intellectual and artistic legacy of the antebellum South that O'Brien presented with both finesse and depth was not nearly so impressive as the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century legacy of New England Puritanism. Of course the Union victory in the Civil War helped confirm the Puritan tradition as the tradition that set the tone and agenda for American culture to come, while southern conservative culture largely followed the Confederacy down to defeat. If we consider the intellectual and aesthetic harvest of Puritanism, we find Emerson and Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, and Orestes Brownson; not to mention Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Emily Dickinson. This American, i.e. "New England," Renaissance overlapped with, and then was followed hard upon by, Chauncey Wright, Charles Peirce, the James Brothers, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., W. E. B. Du Bois, and the Metaphysical Club in general. O'Brien labored heroically to find figures, ideas, and traditions that might match the New England example, but he came up with hardly anyone of comparable intellectual or artistic stature. John C. Calhoun? George Fitzhugh? Mary Boykin Chesnut? There is an argument to be made that their intellectual achievement could match those of their

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contemporaries in New England, but, after all the dust has cleared, I'm not convinced. Beyond that, the links between antebellum southern cultural and intellectual life and what came to be called the Southern Renaissance are not nonexistent but they are pretty tenuous. The region's intellectual and cultural history is marked by discontinuities.

Finally, to raise an even more ticklish issue, is there room for any sort of moral judgement on the antebellum slave South and these organic intellectuals who spoke in and, pretty unanimously, for it? (Where, for example, are anti-slavery writers such as Cassius Clay of Kentucky and Hinton Rowan Helper of North Carolina in *Conjectures*?) I see at least three ways to react here. One is to judge the Old South in terms of right and wrong and leave it at that. Ulysses S. Grant's damning judgement said it all when he noted that he had witnessed "the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause – though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse." It is a dignified and restrained judgement on the South but utterly devastating. Second, Eugene Genovese's attitude was that the intellectual historian should strive mightily to understand antebellum southern culture in all its weaknesses and strengths, but particularly the latter. The South had had a coherent high culture, which kept faith with its essential values. Once that was done, however, the southern ruling class deserved to be condemned and then executed as criminals, while presumably the southern intellectuals should hold their tongues or risk the same fate. Thus spake the morality of history and proletarian morality.[22]

Finally, Michael O'Brien's view was couched in terms not of right or wrong but of success or failure; that is, as the historicist he was, he appealed to the judgement of history. It was akin to Genovese's position but lacked the Marxist morality. As Michael brought his two-volume *Conjectures of Order* to a close, he contended that the intellectuals to whom he had devoted so much loving and detailed attention had equipped the Old South elites with a "clarity of mind." But those elites had also presided over and shaped the fortunes of "an imperial regime of ruthless ambition which had conquered an empire, enslaved millions, and had seldom hesitated to shed others' blood for the sake of its own comfort." The leadership of the region neither had been misled, nor did it act innocently; come to that, I would add, it was by no means treated particularly cruelly after the war. Let us finish with

[22] Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters* (New York: Library of America, 1990; first published 1886), 735. I heard Genovese deliver something like this judgement at the Porter Fortune Symposium at the University of Mississippi on "The American South in Comparative Perspective" in the fall of 1989.

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Michael's final words as he handed down the following verdict on that Southern regime: "For playing the game of power and losing, they do not invite pity. For replaying the game in 1875 and 1900 with equal brutality, still less do they invite sympathy. Still, they do invite understanding."[23]

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[23] O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order*, Volume II, 1202.

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