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Jerzy Sobieraj

# Southern *Antebellum* Plantation: *Home,* *Prison, Enterprise?*

*this picture, steeped in the intense quivering summer moonlight,  
filled the soul with unspeakable emotions of beauty, tenderness,  
peace, home.*

Dr. George W. Bagby

This article addresses various functions of the *antebellum* Southern plantation.<sup>1</sup> The author covers both major “actors” who experienced the plantation system, planters (and the members of their families) and slaves. The former group is represented by such participants of the plantation life as Thomas Nelson Page or Bennet Barrow. In the latter group the voice belongs to Harriet Jacobs or Solomon Northup.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Southern writers started making the plantation theme significant in their various texts, novels, stories, and essays. In this way Southern plantation crossed the borders of the South. Plantation fiction emerged before the Civil War and the writers often came out with the idealized picture of the microcosm they described. In John Pendleton Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn, or A Sojourn in the Old Dominion* (1832), the plantation’s center was “an aristocratical old edifice, ... a time-honored mansion” (19). The plantation was an expression of the aristocratic world of the agrarian South. The plantation literature, fiction and non-fiction, was continued in the post-Civil War decades, and though the idealization of the plantation still marked the genre, the message it carried changed. In the *post-bellum* period Southern authors expressed their longing for the world that was gone; idealizing it they offered consolation to the white Southerners, often broken financially and, after all, morally and mentally by the defeat.

The writer who focused in his fiction and non-fiction on the plantation, making it both home and homeland of its owner, and sometimes showing it as his own home, was Thomas Nelson Page. Page, whom Woodward calls “the undisputed champion among the glorifiers of the Old South and the plantation legend” (429), introduced an idealized and sometimes sentimental picture of the plantation which was additionally reinforced by his quite personal attachment to the plantation world; he himself, being the son of a Virginian aristocrat, spent his childhood on a plantation, before the Civil War shattered the world of the white Southerners. Thus not only social and political reasons stood behind the ideal plantation world he pictured, but also his own experience of the life on the plantation as a child. His childhood memories naturally made the world he described ideal, spotless and, thus, secure. Speaking about Page’s idle childhood spent on his family plantation, Oakland, Virginia, Lucinda H. Mackethan concludes that the fact that Page “would idealize the past was an inevitable consequence of the experiences which made up the most impressionable years of his life” (1978, not paginated). As in the case of many other Southern writers who created the plantation world, memorizing the past events and objects was characteristic of Page’s writings. One of the epitomes of a romanticized plantation picture is his collection of essays entitled *The Old South: Essays Social and Political* (1892), and especially his personal account of his plantation childhood, “Social Life in Old Virginia Before the War.” Here Page employs his memory as a tool determining the shape, details, and atmosphere of his plantation image. He opens his account with a short introductory paragraph: “Let me see if I can describe an

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1 A simple and explicit definition of the term “plantation” is given by Martin Ruef: “[T]he term *plantation* refers to any large agricultural unit (500 acres or more) that is owner-operated (rather than rented or tenant farmed) and heavily reliant on hired or enslaved labor” (1366). It must be noted that the plantation system developed in the South in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the character of plantations depended much on the crops the planters grew and harvested. Slaves on tobacco and cotton plantations were put to labor under a “gang” system, whereas those working on rice plantations followed the “task” system. Apart from tobacco, cotton and rice plantations, there were also sugar plantations, located mainly in Louisiana; these ones demanded extremely hard slave labor to be profitable.

old Virginia home recalled from my memory stamped with it when it was a virgin page. It may, perhaps, be idealized by the haze of time; but it will be as I now remember it" (143). Page gives us his image of the plantation he remembers from childhood but somehow entitles this account of his innocent years rather seriously, "Social Life in Old Virginia before the War," perhaps unconsciously emphasizing that we remember in socio-cultural contexts and that even if we refer to our childhood that we remember as idealistic, our account of that childhood will be filtered through our present knowledge, needs, obligations and expectations. In this sense, memory is somehow lived, personal, concrete, and still alive in the context of the aspects of the "now."<sup>2</sup> In this respect, it differs from sheer history, that is sometimes conceived as "abstract, totalizing, and 'dead'" (Erl1, 6). We cannot exist without constant employment of our memory, and not only because of pure physiological reasons; we need it, since "[t]o strengthen our sense of self the past needs to be rescued and made accessible" (Tuan, 187).

Lucinda Mackethan emphasizes the three aspects of Page's Arcadian world: "the plantation locale itself with the great house at the center; the image of Southern gentleman; and ... the 'old time' Negro, the slave or 'servant' as Page calls him..." (1978, not paginated). These three aspects of Page's homeland can be traced in most of his accounts of the plantation. The same occurs in his "Social Life in Old Virginia Before the War." The plantation house is at the center of the microcosm described; it is a container of life but also the hub around which all important events take place. Here absolute concentration is on the house and its inhabitants; the economic aspects of the plantation, work in the fields, are almost absent. Memories of childhood refer to the close, secure and intimate place, rather than to the difficult-to-grasp space. Childhood needs a home as shelter that guarantees security, not to mention that, naturally, "[h]ome is at the center of an astronomically determined spatial center" (Tuan, 149).

Page's account of his plantation home contains the aspects that give it some uniqueness, emphasizing its individuality and history. The house is "set on a hill in a grove of primeval oaks and hickories" (143), this way its superiority is expressed by being above and attached to old times, thus underlining its residents' organically belonging to the place and creating some aura of mystery that can cover the unwanted. "Long ago" is associated with some utopian perfectness. As Tuan states, "Antiquity is idealized.... The Golden Age is shrouded in mystery..." (122). Much of Page's attention is focused on the garden surrounding the place, that shapes its atmosphere, that of joy, warmth and idleness; it contained "lilacs and syringas and roses, and locusts of every age and size, which in springtime filled the air with honeyed perfume, and lulled with the 'murmur of innumerable bees'... [E]verywhere were tall lilies, white as angels' wings..." (144, 146). Page slowly transforms the house on a hill and its surroundings into a mythic territory, where things are associated with some glorious, idealized past: Some beautiful flowers were "sweet as if they had come from Paradise to be worn upon young maidens' bosoms" (146), some others "on their stout stems, glorious enough to have been the worthy badge of victorious Lancastrian kings" (147). One of the plantation houses was so greatly appreciated by the boys "as was by the youth of Rome the wearing of the *toga virilis*" (144). A fine home at

2 Alun Munslow expresses this conviction in the following way: "[H]uman beings reflect upon not just what happened in the past but we do so within the context of our own personal experience of living on the receding edge of time" (157).

the center with its serene and beautiful surroundings, anchored in the past and loaded with some mythical associations, well expresses the Aristocratic dimension of the South as well as the dream of Arcady itself. Mackethan emphasizes that Page's "locales are charged with special significance.... And it is through these descriptions that Page is establishing the credentials of his heroes – if they come from a fine plantation, they are almost invariably of high moral quality and deserve universal admiration" (1978, not paginated). As Mackethan expressed it elsewhere, "the plantation ... [is] the breeding ground for heroes" (1980, 48).

In Page's version of the plantation community, some intellectual activity of the owner is emphasized. The master not only talked about "philosophy, politics, and religion," with his guests, but he increased his considerable knowledge in his own library "and read only the best. His book-cases held the masters.... Horace, Virgil, Ovid, Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Goldsmith, "Mr. Pope," were the poets; Bacon, Burke, and Dr. Johnson were his philosophers" (159, 160). The depth and richness of intellectual life of Page's master works well as an element of the dream expressing the gentleman's wisdom. However, it was not typical of a Virginian gentleman to always express such learning and intellectual qualities. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown clearly states, "learning, especially the venerable kind, marked the possessor as a gentleman. Yet, in the South at least, too much of it allegedly spoiled the result. There was a strongly anti-intellectual streak in Southern society..." (46). Anyway, book reading or books on one's shelves often find a significant place in Southern plantation writing, as for instance in Ellen Glasgow's *The Deliverance*. This significance is perhaps well expressed by Aristides who tried to declare convincingly that "[a] book in one's own library is in a sense a brick in the building of one's being, carrying with it memories, a small block of one's personal intellectual history, associations unsortable in their profusion" (qtd. in Tuan, 187).

Speaking of this learned gentleman/Aristocrat/master Page introduces him as an unshakable and indestructible "stronghold" of the family and plantation itself. His spotless picture, that could serve as an idealized description of a Virginia aristocrat, shows a man of pride whose character is

based on self-respect and consciousness of power....  
[T]here was absolute self-confidence.... There was not a doubtful line in the face nor a doubtful tone in the voice; his opinions were convictions; he was a partisan to the backbone.... He was proud, but never haughty except to dishonor. He believed in God, he believed in his wife, he believed in his blood. He was chivalrous, he was generous, he was usually incapable of fear or meanness. To be a Virginia gentleman was the first duty; it embraced being a Christian and all the virtues.... He had inherited gravity from his father and grandfather before him.... The greatness of the past, the time when Virginia had been the mighty power of the New World, loomed ever above him. (157, 158, 159)

Page, looking at his childhood time on the plantation, but from a perspective of a grown-up man's experience, politicizes his gentleman/aristocrat/master. He undoubtedly asserts the solidity of the Southern social hierarchy. There is a powerful master living in his mansion on the hill, but he deserves the

power due to his features of character, patriarchal heritage, wisdom, and high morality; he is thus qualified to be at the top. Introducing the idealized master class, Page glorifies the *antebellum* order, but doing so he cannot, irrespective of what some scholars say, avoid showing “his portrait of the South as an oversimplified depiction serving as local color propaganda...” (Hagood, 423–424), regardless of what it is designed to aid or to serve.

The gentleman’s best companion was undoubtedly the lady of the house. The mistress “was the most important personage about the home...” (152). In the conservative mind of Page, she was her husband’s “guide, philosopher, and friend,” to put it nicely, but in fact her freedom was limited due to her devotion to others and, first of all, to the master of the house: “Her life was one long act of devotion – devotion to God, devotion to her husband, devotion to her children, devotion to her servants, to her friends, to the poor, too all humanity” (155). And her daughter, like her mother when she was younger, “had not to learn to be, because she was born a lady. Generations had given her that by heredity” (162) For Page, the mistress exquisitely expresses the paternal world of the South, in which a white lady, irrespective of her features of character and privileges, is often only the enchanted symbol, the one locked in the castle on the top of a glass mountain, “[r]emoved from the fullest exercise of power by her womanhood” (126), to borrow a phrase from Drew Gilpin Faust.

Those who expect that Page’s plantation picture will be destroyed by showing the exploitation of hard working slaves are certainly wrong. First, one notices that Page refers to the plantation slaves as “servants” which diminishes and neutralizes our obvious associations with the evils of slavery and thus enables Page to construct his Agrarian world. Second, the way the “servants” are pictured makes them closer to the some kind of friends or members of the master’s family than to the cruelly exploited hard working hands:

[T]he boys mixed up with the little darkies as freely as any other young animals, and forming the associations which tempered slavery and made the relation one of friendship.... From the back yard and quarters the laughter of women and the shrill, joyous voices of children came. Far of, in the fields, the white-shirted “ploughers” followed singly their slow teams in fresh furrows ..., loud shouts and peals of laughter, mellowed by the distance, floating up from time to time, telling that the heart was light and the toil not too heavy. (150)

Though Page idealizes the lives of his African American characters, he, undoubtedly, becomes a spokesman for the superiority of the Caucasian civilization. It was the white man who “christianized the Negro race ... [and] impressed upon it regard for order, and gave it the only civilization it has ever possessed since the dawn of history. It has maintained the supremacy of the Caucasian race, upon which all civilization seems now to depend” (184, 185). Such protective tone and paternal attitude towards black slaves while at the same time emphasizing the superiority of the white man, is characteristic of some more 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century plantation and/or Reconstruction literature written by white Southern writers. Thomas Dixon very well echoes Page’s conviction. African Americans should be given the protection and care of a white man, as long as they know their place in the world governed by the supreme Caucasian race.

As mentioned above, Page looks at the *antebellum* spotless and idealized world of his childhood home and nostalgically explores it, consciously or not, for the purpose of somehow preserving that lost world and offering some comfort to the white Southerners who lived in the post-Civil War decades of sharp civilizational changes that occurred in their region<sup>3</sup>. When “a people perceive that changes are occurring too rapidly . . . , nostalgia for an idyllic past waxes strong” (Tuan, 195). Page’s point of view is filtered through his up-bringing and his sense of once belonging to the class of white rulers. To break out of this world is often impossible, even keeping in mind the memories of innocent childhood.

The word “home” and the message it carries, is rarely mentioned, if ever, by the remaining inhabitants of the plantation, slaves. In their narratives they may refer to the plantation, their quarters or cabins, the master’s house but very rarely to their home. Mary Ella Grandberry describes the slave cabins on a plantation in the following way: “There was a lot of cabins for the slaves, but they wasn’t fitten for nobody to live in. We just had to put up with them” (not paginated). A “home,” a center of our universe is often silenced in slave and ex-slave narratives. Certainly, whatever this is, it is devoid of the features that fill home with content, at least as free people feel and understand that content.

However, Harriet Jacobs exploring her memory about her childhood, sees it, similarly to Page, as a happy one: “I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away” (5). Being a child, probably protected by her mother against getting the truth about who she was, she was unaware about the evils of slavery. Her family, mainly due to her father’s skills and the income he secured for his mistress, could live in a house more comfortable than those of other slaves. While growing up, her awareness of her position and the life around her was structured enough to notice the difference between black and white people whom she met daily.

Imprisonment is the notion that perhaps best refers to the position of slaves. Being encapsulated, limited in freedom of movement, experiencing all sorts of punishments inflicted on them, best express their situation. Bennet Barrow, owner of about 200 slaves, states clearly in his plantation rules, that he composed in 1836, the obvious, that “[n]o negro shall ever leave the place at any time without my permission. . .” (not paginated). However, in his plantation rules he tries, smartly, to explain this imprisonment: “The negro who is accustomed to remain constantly at Home, is just as satisfied with the society on the plantation as that which he would find elsewhere, and the very restrictions laid upon him being equally imposed on others, he does not feel them, for society is kept at home for them. . .” (not paginated).<sup>4</sup> Bennet Barrow’s attitude toward a slave is a fine example of, what Stanley Elkins calls, “a perverted patriarchy” (104).

Elkins in his controversial, though instructive and inspiring, classic, goes far in searching for common aspects of an American slave plantation and a Nazi concentration camp. As the common aspects of both kinds of imprisonment, Elkins mentions perverted patriarchy, lack of privacy, uselessness of making any plans for the future, outside life as sort of abstraction, being under a significant amount of stress, the impossibility of any individual

3 W. J. Cash, writing about the destruction of the Old South, speaks about the changes that occurred in the post-Civil War decades and a Southern society which at that time „has been rapidly and increasingly industrialized and modernized both in body and mind” (x).

4 Some masters erected jails for slaves on their plantations. Harriet Jacobs refers to one of them: “There was a jail and a whipping post on his grounds; and whatever cruelties were perpetrated there, they passed without comment” (46).

heroics, childlike quality. (104–111) Speaking about a concentration camp he emphasizes that prisoners there were “reduced to complete and childish dependence upon their masters...” (113). Reading Barrow’s plantation rules one can come to a similar conclusion. The protective, paternalistic tone emerges when he, playing the role of a severe father, instructs: “You must, therefore make him [a slave] as comfortable at Home as possible, affording him, What is essentially necessary for his happiness – you must provide for him Your self and by that means creat (sic) in him a habit of perfect dependence on you” (not paginated). Elkins, however, does not pay much attention to one more significant aspect of both institutions, i. e. labor. Though labor is their significant element, its purpose certainly differs. With certain simplification it can be stated that in case of a concentration camp, labor is used to produce, but first of all, it is applied as some sort of perverted economy whose goal is the extermination of prisoners. In the plantation system, work is first of all to produce in order to secure income for the master and his family, irrespective of the fact how inhuman and degrading it is for the slaves (see also Sobieraj, 35).

Plantation world, a home for Page and all other members of slave-owning families, is often pictured by those who experienced slavery, as horrible, terrifying, and offering no hope. Jacobs’ words well express what slavery is for a slave: “Alas, what mockery it is for a slave mother to try to pray back her dying child to life! Death is better than slavery” (62). Solomon Northup speaks about his being a slave in utmost sadness, and, like Jacobs, refers to death: “I must toil day after day, endure abuse and taunts and scoffs, sleep on the hard ground, live on the coarsest fare ... , live the slave of a blood-seeking wretch, of whom I must stand henceforth in continued fear and dread. Why had not I died in my young years...” (81). Death, like in an old negro spiritual, can be some freeing solution. As such, death can ease the horror of being imprisoned, everyday hard work, sense of helplessness and hopelessness, “fear and dread.”

Without the system of slavery, without that imprisonment, an *antebellum* plantation could not exist as an enterprise, which is what it, from an economic point of view, was. As Bennet Barrow wrote about Southern plantation system, “[a]plantation might be considered as a piece of machinery, to operate successfully, all of its parts should be uniform and exact, and the impelling force regular and steady...” (not paginated). What Southern plantations produced was crucial not only for American economy but equally important for European industry and markets. Sugar, tobacco and, especially, cotton were extremely significant for individual European states. American cotton created highly specialized cotton market in Great Britain. Many European newspapers commented on the situation of this market threatened by the ongoing war. For example, *Gazeta Polska*, in its report published in August 1861, gave as one of the reasons for the war, the defense of the cotton market by Southerners:

What then do Southern states want, if not the defense of cotton.... England needs 2,5 million bales of cotton ... to keep their factories in motion ... to give employment to 4 illion workers, one fourth of England’s population, and one eight of the whole of Great Britain.... Four fifths of the cotton indispensable to keep up this machinery running, to feed these workers, to bring this colossal capital to England, is delivered by the United States of America. (1) /translation mine/



That delivery was certainly possible due to the slave labor; without it any agricultural economy would be impossible. Though the “economic root of slavery was only one of several roots...it grew strong enough to produce an ugly organism” (Genovese, 247). Many business historians agree, that slavery flourished so quickly “in response to economic stimuli” (252). As Eugene Genovese<sup>5</sup> makes it clear, a peaceful transition from slave labor to free labor in the South was simply impossible. (269).

Bennet Barrow described the slave plantation in terms of “a piece of machinery,” whereas Solomon Norhtup focused on some aspects of that machinery from a perspective of a hard working slave:

When a new hand, one unaccustomed to the business, is sent for the first time into the field, he is whipped up smartly, and made for that day to pick as fast as he can possibly. At night it is weighed, so that his capability in cotton picking is known. He must bring in the same weight each night following. If it falls short, it is considered evidence that he has been laggard, and a greater or less number of lashes is the penalty. An ordinary day’s work is two hundred pounds. A slave who is accustomed to picking, is punished, if he or she brings in a less quantity than that. (108)

The *antebellum* plantation, though sometimes commented upon as a certain sort of capitalist enterprise, resembles in some respects the pre-Industrial Revolution organization of work, when work and home were close, sometimes inseparable spheres of human activity. The plantation can be defined as a certain microcosm experienced by its inhabitants depending on “who’s talking.” For Page, a member of the Southern ruling class, it is home, warm and uninterrupted by the image of his father’s slaves working hard in the fields; for the slaves, it is an encircled space, a curious bleak labyrinth with no exit, and for the slave owner it is also an enterprise organized to bring income, an enterprise in which the slave is only a tiny, though necessary, part of the plantation machinery. Thus, on its social level the plantation was a home for planters and their families and a peculiar prison for its slaves with all limitations characteristic of a prisoner. On the economic level the plantation was an enterprise securing profit for the slave-owned families.

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5 Eugene Genovese is an advocate of the so-called “pre-bourgeois civilization” interpretative model of the plantation. The other popular interpretative model is the “planter capitalism” one. These two models are discussed in more detail by Charles Post.

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