Adam Challoner, *Communities of Disunion: Books and*

Sectionalism in the Antebellum South

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Abstract

David Schenck, a young man from North Carolina, came of age during a particularly tumultuous period in American history. As the slavery question caused the already tenuous foundations of American nationhood to fracture further, Schenck (like many of his contemporaries) became embroiled in an emotional and intellectual conflict that challenged his understanding of self and communal belonging. To negotiate these difficulties, Schenck turned to his books.

This essay considers the fraught interactions between Benedict Anderson's notion of an 'imagined community' and Stanley Fish's 'interpretative community', as experienced by Schenck. Ideally, these two communities operated symbiotically, but in the case of the Old South and David Schenck, the two became fundamentally counterposed. Through an analysis of Schenck's reading notes, this essay will explore this process in more depth, offering some reflections upon the role of books in the affirmation and refutation of collective identities.

On 28th June 1853, David Schenck decided that he had had quite enough of living. A sombre man, often given to long periods of despondency, this was not entirely out of character. On this particular occasion, it appears that a romantic interest had spurned his advances. Much to Schenck's despair, the letter he had sent to a Miss Mattie Kirby had recently been ignored. He reported that he was 'tired of vanity' and 'disgusted with the world. All efforts to please are vain, every pursuit has its goal enveloped in the shadowy mists

of uncertainty. Nothing but strife and confusion.' More than anything, Schenck longed to escape. 'I feel like shutting out the world and with my books for company to pass a quiet, easy life.'[1]

Like many of his contemporaries, David Schenck used his books to help him navigate his daily life. Sometimes, as evidenced above, his books served as a sanctuary. Rejected and alone, Schenck wrapped himself in the folds of a world hewn from paper and ink, blissfully displaced from his own suffering. On other occasions, Schenck did not seek escapism but *understanding*. As a young North Carolinian gentleman coming of age during the particularly tumultuous decade preceding the Civil War, it is little surprise that he was such a prolific reader. Indeed, unrequited love would prove the least of his worries as his country edged ever closer to collapse, engendered in no small part by the incendiary debate over the moral legitimacy of the peculiar institution. American print culture had long been characterised by such sectional enmity. In books and magazines, pamphlets and periodicals, the slavery debate seethed unabated. In this regard, Schenck sought to use his books as a barometer by which he could measure and refine his own position on some of the most pressing issues of the day. The result, as with many of his Southern compatriots, was the development of a sectional impulse that supplanted his sense of national community.

This, incidentally, presents a source of considerable historical intrigue. If we accept Benedict Anderson's claim that national print cultures operate in a homogenising capacity, helping to calcify bonds of national kinship that transcend proximity and creed, then this critical moment in

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1 Schenck, 1853: 28th June.

American history also appears to be culturally anomalous. Anderson suggests that print capitalism generated one of the fundamental preconditions for the development of cohesive national communities. It was upon these common networks of print, he explains, that the 'imagined community' was predicated; an image of horizontal simultaneity among individuals who would otherwise share no meaningful association.[2] However, no such image ever fully emerged in the minds of antebellum readers. On the contrary, upon encountering this shared print culture, there developed an awareness not of their commonalities, but of their manifold and increasingly irreconcilable differences.

We can explain this using Stanley Fish's theory of 'interpretive communities.' Fish argues that these communities are 'made up of those who share interpretive strategies for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions.'[3] He uses the word 'writing' to refer to the act of reading a text, because for him the act of reading is itself a constitutive enterprise. Fish believes that a text is little more than a series of abstract notations, objectively meaningless until the individual reader begins to impose meaning upon them, thus 'writing' the text. The crux of his thesis lies in its intersubjectivity. The interpretive community comprises individuals who share the same interpretive techniques, and whose approach to 'writing' the text is informed by the same referential frameworks. In this way, a stable imagined community cannot exist without a nationally integrative interpretive community. With no common systems of intelligibility, readers

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2 Anderson, 1983: 6.

3 Fish, 1976: 483.

will instead apply a myriad of interpretive strategies and thus produce commensurately variegated and incompatible images of national communion.

In an ideal world, the imagined and interpretive communities work in harmony together. The imagined community provides the aesthetic substance upon which the national interpretive community is predicated, and in turn the interpretive community is composed of hermeneutical frameworks that deliberately sustain the imagined community. But what happens when this perfect, delicate symbiosis is disrupted? What becomes of the communities whose interpretive strategies become counterposed to the ideals they were designed to maintain? This essay will consider these questions in more depth, offering some reflections upon the role of books in the affirmation and refutation of communal identities, as experienced by David Schenck. First, however, we must map the cultural landscape in which these books were consumed. Readers are, after all, products of their respective cultural surroundings, and we cannot hope to understand their hearts and minds without a prefatory understanding of the circumstances that governed them.

In the concluding scene of Maria Jane McIntosh's novel *Two Pictures; or, What we Think of Ourselves, and What the World Thinks of Us*, Augusta Moray and her husband sit ensconced in the library of their idyllic Georgian plantation. The scene is perfectly peaceful until Augusta throws down her newspaper, aghast, and turns to address her husband. 'Oh Hugh,' she exclaims, 'how unjust!'4

'You are reading that review of Uncle Tom,' Hugh Moray surmises, 'with its unflattering portraiture of Southern planters.'5 In a futile attempt to

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4 McIntosh, 1863: 474.

5 Ibid*:* 474 - 475.

assuage his wife's indignation, he reminds her that there are 'two sides to every picture.'6

But Augusta was not to be placated. 'True,' she agrees, 'and I thank God there are – that we are not obliged to see ourselves or each other as the false world sees us.'7

McIntosh began her career as a writer of moral fiction for children, pseudonymously issued as 'Aunt Kitty's Tales' between 1841 and 1843. Anxious to communicate her moral directions clearly, her stories usually featured characters who

personified an idealised paradigm of American personhood, and a foil character to whom they were juxtaposed.8 Critically, this duality also operated on a broader level – at least in the context of *Two Pictures*. Bristling at how Southerners had been portrayed in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the most notable example of Northern abolitionist literature to emerge during the antebellum period, Augusta makes an important distinction. She divides her world into two, creating a moral binary that distinguishes between her own world, the South; and the pharisaic 'false world' of the North. Augusta's response was symptomatic of a cultural and political landscape pervaded by sectional hostility. It requires no exposition to say that during the antebellum period the North and South were divided, primarily over the issue of slavery. But the means through which these divisions were articulated, interrogated, and ultimately exacerbated warrants further inquiry.

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6 Ibid: 475.

7 McIntosh, 1863: 475.

8 Baym, 1993: 87.

Indeed, the architect of the Civil War was neither politician nor planter, but instead a particularly animated press. For much of the early nineteenth century, the American press was not really 'American' at all; it comprised a number of regional print networks that inevitably assumed their own distinct colouring. When this kaleidoscope of print cultures was finally subsumed under a single, national public sphere, readers encountered a cacophony of regionally inflected ideas.[9] Its defining characteristic was asymmetry. Decades of prior industrial and infrastructural progress in the North had generated a print culture that far exceeded the Southern variant by almost every significant metric.[10] Northern publishers boasted higher circulations, best-selling authors were disproportionately Northern, and vast discrepancies in education standards had produced a markedly more literate citizenry than in the South. As a result, national discourses became skewed in favour of a Northern press that routinely emphasised sectional difference. They believed that they were the true scions of the 'civic religion' of the American Revolution.[11] Their neighbours in the South, considered wilfully impermeable to the advances of modernity, were fundamentally different.

The Southern response was fervent. Faced with a Northern press with which they could not compete, writers adopted the language of 'victimhood, humiliation, and oppression.'[12] National discourses were increasingly viewed through this lens, and subsequently reimagined as coercion or outright

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9 Loughran, 2007: 3.

10 Fahs, 2002: 195.

11 Grant, 2000: 92.

12 Quigley, 2012: 90.

belligerence. In 1851, for example, a contributor to the Southern periodical *De Bow's Review* described the '*grievous wrongs*' and the '*gratuitous insults offered us, by the free States of the North.*'[13] Indignant, they insisted that '*the cup of forbearance or endurance is so full that a single drop shall make it overflow.*'[14] These insults supposedly represented an existential threat to the South. 'Let us not be lulled too easily into security,' the writer urged, 'where so much of honour, and liberty, and existence are at stake.'[15]

In effect, Southern readers began to interpret texts differently. Sectional hostility and a vertical public sphere that privileged Northern texts and ideas had inadvertently corroded the national interpretive community beyond repair. In its place, there developed a divergent Southern interpretive community defined by a beleaguered insularity, one that did not sustain a sense of national community but viewed it as an instrument of Northern oppression. Discursive asymmetries became a source of resentment, and Southern readers were increasingly compelled to renounce a union with those who actively repudiated some of their most treasured institutions and customs. As such, the frameworks of intelligibility now utilised by many Southern readers were designed to consolidate the supersession of regional community over national, and to reaffirm pre-existing prejudices against the North. And just as these intractable issues engendered a hermeneutical divide, so was the American imagined community scythed in two.

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13 De Bow's Review, 1851: 106.

14 Ibid: 106.

15 Ibid: 106.

The reading notes of David Schenck offer an invaluable insight into this process. As mentioned earlier, Schenck came of age during the decade preceding the Civil War, and it was during this time that he began ruminating upon his political allegiances. Although it would not be until 1860 that he formally declared his support for the secessionist cause, this was the culmination of a political evolution spanning several years and a great many books. What is most compelling about this period in Schenck's life is how frequently he related his reading experiences to the broader crises of culture and community in which his country was embroiled, a predilection that would in turn permanently disfigure Schenck's own understanding of communal belonging.

In the first instance, deepening sectional tensions caused him to refute his sense of national community. On 4th July 1853, whilst reading Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Schenck extracted new meaning designed to reaffirm his sense of otherness in relation to his Northern counterparts.

> Just have been reading 'Gibbon's Decline of the Roman Empire' and the thought entered my mind, that while I was scanning, in my imagination, the slow and mouldering decay of the mightiest fabric of government, ever erected, as ignorance, superstition, despotism hastened the mighty ruin as the cry of saints and the blood of martyrs cried aloud for judgment to be exercised.[16]

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[16] Schenck, 1853: 4th July.

In particular, Schenck seized upon the parallels between the problems underscoring the fall of Rome, and the issues currently facing his own country. 'Yet Oh!' Schenck exclaimed, 'my God do we still complain. Ungrateful as our forefathers. Shall this mighty bulwark of freedom be sapped by one small mine? Shall northern fanaticism apply the torch for its demolition? God forbid.'[17] Critically, Schenck's 'writing' of Gibbon's text was centred around a distinctively Southern hermeneutical framework, imposing his own ideological idiosyncrasies upon a text that would otherwise bear no relation to his present circumstances. In this case, Schenck's reading of classical history was repurposed in order to buttress his repudiation of Northern abolitionism, and to renounce any sense of community that would bind him to such 'fanaticism' and 'despotism'.

For a more direct engagement in this issue, we must consider Schenck's reading of the literary enmity that emerged between the sections. Despite the strident efforts of some librarians and booksellers to limit the circulation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the South, Schenck finally managed to procure a copy in 1853, two years after it was originally published.[18] By this time, the novel had become an invaluable asset for the abolitionist cause, helping to reify the unconscionable evil that was the peculiar institution in the minds of its readers.[19] Schenck was less impressed. He insisted that neither 'human nature' nor 'Southern justice' would permit the maltreatment of slaves to the extent Stowe depicted, and seethed that the novel was 'evil in its tendencies and should be loathed as a torch already applied to the combustible

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17 Schenck, 1853: 4th July.

18 Hochman, 2011: 95.

19 Ibid: 2.

elements of civil discord.'[20] In Schenck's mind, the novel was not merely a constituent in a broader national discourse, but instead the latest in a succession of calculated and fallacious attempts by Northern iconoclasts to beat the South into submission.

But Schenck was nothing if not a proactive reader. Fully aware that books were increasingly utilised as instruments of sectional hostility, Schenck was anxious to do his part to support the South. This brings us to the second objective in Schenck's interpretive repertoire: to bolster his sense of regional community. To this end, he turned his attention to J.T. Randolph's *The Cabin and Parlour.* A peculiar species of literature, Randolph's text was one of a number of 'anti-Tom novels' published in a direct response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. These books often exhibited a pointed inversion of the rhetorical strategies utilised by Stowe in an attempt to reproduce the well-documented emotional effects of her novel in a pro-slavery context.[21] For Schenck, Randolph's text presented the perfect opportunity to support the South against Northern literary aggression. 'These fictions, pro and con, have been creating much excitement,' Schenck observed, before insisting that 'it requires books of fiction to undermine fiction.'[22] The significance of this statement is twofold. Firstly, it shows that Schenck understood that these fictions were more than just stories, but also vehicles through which competing, regionally inflected ideas were advanced. Secondly, and more importantly, it is evidence of Schenck's insular hermeneutical mindset. The meaning he ascribed to Randolph's novel, imbricated within a broader cultural battlefield, was

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[20] Schenck, 1853: 29th June.

[21] Meer, 2005: 75-76.

[22] Schenck, 1852: 18th November.

primarily concerned with his fealty to the South, and by extension, to its beleaguered institutions and customs.

When their reserve of explicitly pro-Southern literature was depleted, readers turned their gaze across the Atlantic. Southern intellectual culture was defined in large part by postcoloniality; where Northern writers determinedly eschewed the cultural legacy of their European forebears, Southern intellectuals sought to emulate it.[23] Many educated Southerners greatly admired classical culture, and naturally found

premodern social hierarchies of great appeal. Walter Scott was especially popular. His novels featured a distinctive brand of medieval manhood, propagating a veneration of chivalry and valour in which existing codes of Southern honour found further credence.[24] Schenck was predictably enamoured – not only by Scott himself, but also by the social potential his novels provided. After reading *Waverly*, he described it as 'a piece of composition which every man who expects to mingle in polite company should read.'[25] Evidently, Schenck was himself such a man, and so his reading of Scott's novel was likely inspired by a desire to converse with like-minded people, and thus to cultivate a robust sense of fraternity among his Southern compatriots.

Clearly, it worked. Almost eight years after Mattie Kirby broke his heart, a rather more sanguine David Schenck announced North Carolina's secession from the Union. 'My feelings on this mighty event are inexpressible – my joy is unspeakable,' Schenck wrote, revelling in the fall of one

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[23] O'Brien, 2004: 211.

[24] Wyatt-Brown, 2001: 181.

[25] Schenck, 1852: 13th September

community and in the rise of another.[26] In both instances, his books were instrumental. They helped sustain an ideological intransigence utterly incompatible with the pluralistic nature of the antebellum United States and thrust Schenck into a cultural landscape that propagated the equivalence of dissent and denigration. The tenuous reciprocity between imagined and interpretive communities was thus destabilised, precipitating the fragmentation of American culture and society. But as far as Schenck was concerned, and due in large part to his books, this was a price worth paying. 'A Southern home is glory enough for me.'[27]

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[26] Schenck, 1861: 20th May.

[27] Ibid: 20th May.

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