"To the Manor Born"

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As fiction is concerned, rewriting history to (re)enslave Americans is about as bold as it gets. So, technically speaking, Matthew Speiser’s *To The Manor Born* is bold, but bold by the attempt alone. Speiser’s history where the American Civil War never ends is a work of fiction whose high-water mark is its own synopsis. Of course, same as anything in the world of imagination, Speiser’s America could have conceivably existed. The problem, however, is that nothing in Speiser’s’ history is worth imagining.

In this hypothetical history, April 9th, 1865, is just another day. The bloodshed will continue for another six years until borders are redrawn and the two sides agree to an ‘unofficially’ ceasefire. The narrator is unclear what went wrong, what did or did not happen, where things went a different way, or when recorded history ended and the fantasy began. However, to speak on what is clear will require that I first untangle both the form and history from this complicated assemblage, for it is simply the sum of its own parts. Each page is crowded with analysis, facts, backstories, clarifications, and contextualization. This leaves no room for life or emergence of any kind. In fact, the only sign of life in the novel are the hands of the author himself, whose juvenile treatment of the form calls the reader's attention, making himself visible throughout. This is, ironically, the work's only redeeming feature, as far as it brings forth a spirit of innocence.

Taken seriously as literature or a work of art, *To The Manor Born* is a tone deaf romanization of white saviorism that borders on contemptuous. While it is certainly true that
Speiser means no harm, and rather genuinely wishes to offer his thesis on what might have happened, he is nevertheless employing a language he does not quite yet know how to speak.

The story begins with the assumed main character, ‘Atticus Brooke,’ a man born a slave to Rosewood plantation. He is picking cotton with thousands of his fellow ‘indents’ who share the fields with ‘modules,’ which seem to be a sort of large industrial machine. Surrounded by overseers equipped with whips and tasers, Atticus labors alongside his girlfriend, ‘Clara Brooke.’ The “sun bore down like a God,” writes Speiser as he proceeds to poetically describe the experience of enslavement in the modern Confederate States. Unfortunately, no dates are given as to when the story is set, with the only gauge of time being technology: cellphones, computers, surveillance cameras, AR-15’s, BMW 7 series, internet, ect. But to be clear, outside of modern tools and gadgets, there is no discernible quality that removes this story from the 1860’s. The goofiness of the situations and characters makes them feel as if they are permanent Civil War reenactors. While there is no shortage of characters, only four truly matter. Speiser tries to remain centered on Atticus and Clara, yet the story cannot resist orbiting their owners: General Franklin Brooke and his daughter Liza. The General, who is permanently dressed in traditional uniform, conveniently emerges as the most important man in the Confederacy. Liza, a young woman who has been locked in the plantation big house all her life, is the only character that undergoes major transformation. Speiser is far more interested in Liza than either of the two lovers, and subsequently the General becomes his very own Lee.

Formally, the novel is composed of 46 Chapters while only 320 pages long. Such a formulation makes the book both congested and disjointed. The major issue working against the story is that it is mostly written from a third person, omniscient perspective. Every narrative comes from a narrator, and from this point of view there presumably is no restriction on the
narrator's knowledge. All things, in all time and space, are known by this narrator, and thus this forces the reader to ask why the events and particular arrangements are chosen. Given that anything and everything could have existed, the omniscient narrator is under the most scrutiny regarding the story's composition. Further, the lack of restriction on the narrators point of view Makes it difficult for the reader to develop any sort of lens with which they can view the world.

Furthermore, one would think that an omniscient narrator would know the characters more than they know themselves. Unfortunately, however, that does not seem to be the case. The narrator of To The Manor Born does not know the characters or, at the very least, is playing a sick game of withholding them from the reader. No character has any texture or dimension, and most are merely extended cliches. There is an unearned quality to each of the faceless names, who are less characters than they are visual cues, harnessed to the hypothetical hypotheses.

The reason is coincidence. The story turns on coincidences and as a result the characters are exonerated by coincidence. For example, Liza begins to sneak away to Richmond, liberating herself and seeing for the first time the world outside the plantation. She meets a young Confederate soldier who takes her to an underground bar which turns out to be a tavern for the ‘Resistance,’ a rising movement of young Confederates who sing ‘Dixieland’ and plan to take back their nation. This, of course, has a profound effect on her, and she soon returns to Richmond (?) against her family’s wishes. Although, upon her return, there is a sting operation and the Confederate Guard raid the tavern. For the first time in the story a character’s life has been turned upside down. It is here that the reader finally gets to see what Liza is all about, if she will stand by her decision to join the resistance or run back under daddies wing. But coincidentally, the young man that brought her there originally turned out to be a double agent. So, as fate would have it, she did not have to worry about possible prosecution.
The double agent antidote is actually applied twice. The second instance follows Clara’s failed slave rebellion. After securing guns from a conveniently networked spy from a local seed shop, Clara leads the indents on an attempted overthrow of the Rosewood Manor during a Confederate party hosted by the Brookes family. The raid lasts about ten minutes, and they are quickly surrender by the Confederate Guard; but it just so happens that men who arrested Clara were – as you might guess – double agents. Likewise, Atticus has his own army of white saviors that make it possible for him to escape across the border. He is never truly left to his own devices; the reader never gets to see him decide between the lesser of two evils or even overcome an obstacle by his agency alone. The only way to know a character is by observing what they do, particularly the way they act when their souls are at hazard. Atticus and Clara are not afforded this moment until the last page, where they vow to return to the South to fight after both having made it to the U.S. and freedom. To plunge their hands back into the filth, risk their freedom and lives to fight for their loved ones takes supreme character, but of course this is where it ends. The narrator appears to withhold this courageous act, but the narrator is not capable of telling such a story or crafting such dilemmas, because for Speiser the game is not to tell a compelling story. His characters are bookends for his argument, so allow me to humor him.

In Speiser’s’ 150-year-old Confederate States of America (C.S.A.), plantations are still said to be the ‘soul’ of the nation, and rule by the aristocracy has proven to be a far better theory of political governance. The Mason Dixon line has extended all the way to California, and the men still wear the uniforms of their ancestors. Religion and tradition continue to their working order, with gender roles still cemented. The Confederacy welcomed in the twentieth century by “re-writing the constitution, recognizing that the rights of citizenship worked best on a graduated scale, that only those properly prepared warranted the reins of power. Voting had ceased for
yeomen, office-holding too. Plantations had been expanded. Slavery preserved. The Confederate
guard had been founded for enforcing it all.” (29) During World War II they were the world's
largest exporter of foodstuffs, grain, and cotton. It is also mentioned off hand that General
Brookes helped “silence the nuclear threats from D.C. and San Francisco, muffling those on their
own side who’d rather throw those same threats back in return” (31). The Confederate Guard
apparently is only for those with noble blood; that is, with the exception one member who is
conveniently grandfathered as a double agent. The Guards have ‘extra legal rights,’ allowing
them – by any means necessary – to question, imprison, or spy on anyone they see fit.

Throughout the novel, the modern C.S.A. is struggling with unsustainable agriculture.
“The Planter-subsidies had exploded in size; the taxes on yeoman had grown in turn” (33). They
seem to be unraveling, losing money and defense power as a result of their small population.
Slaves are no longer simply slaves; rather, they are ‘indents’ who do not own their own labor.
The slave or indent population has outpaced the population growth of whites, but the southern
elite keep that hushed, even though, as historians have illustrated, this had been a publicly
discussed concern in the slaveholding states prior to secession and war. Demographics aside, the
border seems to be a place of constant skirmishes, with tensions on the rise yet again. The
Underground Railroad is a major problem that southerners are still unable to get a handle on.
Insurrection is rampant and the younger generations are forming underground coalitions labeled
the ‘resistance’ as the centralized surveillance state begins to lose its grip on its uninformed
population of white serfs. General Brooke is able to rise as their bi-partisan savior in this
maelstrom, and he sets forth to negotiate a treaty with the U.S., hoping to bring an end to this
long American Civil War. Ironically, however, this only begets a Confederate Civil War.
History of the remixed U.S. is limited compared to that of the C.S.A. however they did end up moving the capital to New York City. The nation as a whole seems overly focused on the Confederacy. The border is written off as a region either producing skirmishes or Underground Railroad concerns that require the constant circulation of fresh soldiers. To achieve this constant military presence, all men unemployed for eight weeks are drafted. Speiser alludes to the fact that these forces seemingly have modern experience and weaponry, yet, for some reason he fails to explain, these men are still dressed in Civil War-era Union blue. The only characters from the U.S. that are explored in any detail are two young men, Ted and Raj, who find themselves fighting at the border. Raj is drafted because he is fired from his job. A conversation after Raj asks to copy Ted's work: “Ted cracked a smile but kept at it. ‘C’mon friend. It would not help the cause.’ ‘I forgot. With privilege, cometh principle.’ They both snorted. For Raj, a job was a job” (38). These two garner Speiser’s focus during a major border battle, and it is at this moment that they join Atticus after saving his life from a bounty hunter. The treaty was reached between the two nations shortly after the battle.

Both of Speiser’s countries are suspended in adolescence, stuck in 1860 but somehow still evolving technologically. Culture, rhetoric, laws, and even values have remained unchanged since Edmund Ruffin fired the first shot upon Fort Sumter. Such preservation is incredible considering the two nations’ rise to global and nuclear power – a development which promptly instigates a cold war between the C.S.A and U.S. Unfortunately, the specifics to Speiser’s history are worthless. His history has the look of an old infant and offers no redemption. To The Manor Born is an aesthetic disaster that is only capable of reduction. A triumph in reducing readership.