

## THE GIFT OF SOUTHERN LITERATURE

*William McF. Wilson*  
University of Virginia

In an essay of 1956, C. Van Woodward, a widely published and highly respected historian of the South, invited his colleagues to abandon their “standoffishness” and make “a bow to Southern men of letters.” “It simply goes without saying,” he continued, “that the literary men have earned the greater acclaim and distinction.” The essay then proceeds to analyze briefly a few works of William Faulkner, Allen Tate, Andrew Lytle, Robert Penn Warren, Katherine Anne Porter, Ellen Glasgow, and other prominent Southern novelists and poets, in praise of the “historical consciousness” their works display; which indicates that Van Woodward considered his colleagues in Southern history lacking this, which, to say the least, is a key ingredient in their work, and that this lack is the reason they are standoffish.<sup>1</sup>

By 1956 Faulkner had written his best books, as had most of the literary artists listed above, and Andrew Lytle was one year away from completing his last novel, his masterpiece, *The Velvet Horn*. If Van Woodward’s era had shied away from such greatness, we can say today that those historians who came after them have most certainly not read and studied the next line of Southern literary greats, Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, George Garrett, Peter Taylor, Shelby Foote, and many others. For Van Woodward’s era was

merely standoffish; their legacy – our current reigning Southern historians – have circled the wagons.

Our reigning Southern historians, especially the historians of the War Between the States, rule by fiat what counts as evidence, unabashedly leave out vital facts, impose the plot (they don't discover one) and simply disregard the criticisms of their work that come from the host of small presses or those books and articles which are self-published. For instance, perhaps the most influential of these historians, James McPherson, entitles the first chapter of his highly influential *Battle Cry of Freedom*, "The United States at Midcentury," and fails to say in it that New England brought enslaved Africans to the New World, not the South, and that New York ran slave ships up to eighteen months into the war. Allen Guelzo, in his book *Fateful Lighting*, simply refers to this Yankee industry as "the slave ships." There is not a word where they were from, how long the wicked and inhumane practice lasted, nor does he admit that the tremendous wealth attained helped fuel in large measure the industrial revolution. All the reader needs to know it seems is that they were "slave ships," generic "bad guys" with no past, which simply vanished at some unknown time.

What is more, not one of them admits that the revered Emancipation Proclamation did not, and was not meant to, free anybody. They can simply ignore their small press and self-published critics when they point out these and a host of other omissions; but the novelist can get their goat for it. The great Southern novelist, Walker Percy, for instance, held that such flagrant omissions occur *as if* they came from a large, extended Southern family, which at some time in the

distant past, and for no apparent reason, has quietly decided never to talk about its “Uncle Louie.” (Note the “as if.” Literary artists think up excellent similes, so watch out.) The grownups in the family have forgotten the reason, and the children will simply never know. *You just don’t do it. As we say today, you just don’t go there.* “The understanding is that is the way things are,” Percy’s humor explains, “and there is simply nothing that can be done about it.”<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, if a critic runs out of steam asking questions about the omission of huge and vital facts, and moves on to other strange and puzzling habits of our reigning historians—say, the way they insist on calling the biggest and bloodiest war of the 19th Century a “rebellion,” or that the purpose of the invasion of the South by an army 75,000 was (as it is *always* said), “to *put down* a rebellion,” you will once again get “Uncle Louied.” It is a marvelous scholarly tool. Andrew Lytle, novelist, historian, editor, and teacher took care of this “rebellion” chatter quickly. In his family saga, *A Wake for the Living*, he wrote that when “the lower South seceded, and Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to put down the rebellion,” he added parenthetically, “a matter as he (Lincoln) thought beyond the marshals and the sheriffs.” The local “marshals and sheriffs” could not handle the rebellion, so Lincoln sent in 75,000 soldiers, just to be on the safe side. Words matter to great literary artists.<sup>3</sup>

Calling the war a rebellion is one way to whittle it down to something manageable, as does calling it an expedition to free slaves. Note that both are instances of imposing a plot on the material, which leads one by necessity to select and discard facts, a prime example of what RG Collingwood, an acclaimed Oxford

philosopher of the 1930's, called "scissors and paste" historiography.<sup>4</sup> First you cut out the facts that fit while ignoring those that don't, and then paste them into your story. When C. Van Woodward in 1956 implied that his colleagues lacked "historical consciousness," he probably had this radical scissors and paste approach in mind. If the plot *dictates*, that is, because it is predetermined, then the reader will not be involved in the story. There will be no growth in the tale for him or her to grow into. There will be no development of the characters as they take on all the relevant facts. No, Lincoln will be the Great Emancipator from the very moment we meet him; and Jefferson Davis from the outset will be the evil mastermind of a slavocracy. We do not, that is, bear witness, we do not participate, in the time under investigation. We have no heart in the matter and no dog in the fight. One can grow accustomed to shoddy scholarship and never realize the absolutely dire consequences to a civilization, especially when it is only the South that is getting cudged. But shift to occupied Warsaw under the Nazis and then the Stalinists and hear the consequences stated by a Polish freedom fighter and Nobel prize winning poet. Czeslaw Milosz said in 1951, "when literature is...dealing with prefabricated friends and foes, it studies (also) the process of metamorphosis by which men arrive at total salvation or absolute damnation *in Party terms* (emphasis mine). This way of treating literature," he concludes, "leads to absolute conformism," which eventually will force the true artist to "stand alone." All the rest will spin party yarns, impose plots, carefully discard facts, work with stock characters, *et cetera*.<sup>5</sup>

One two-line stanza from his poem *Child of Europe* (1946) says it all:

He who has power has it by historical logic.  
Respectfully bow to that logic.<sup>6</sup>

Raw power always has a logician dealing out history. With the expedition designated from the outset to be for the purpose of freeing slaves, then the cause of the war is established as well. The North fought to rid the nation of slavery, while the South would dismember the Union to keep it. This designation of cause is sacrosanct. If anyone should step into Uncle Louie territory, then he or she is said to be dabbling in "myth," maybe even the "occult," perhaps dealing in nostalgia, and most certainly unaware of just how evil slavery was. But listen to the South greatest literary artist on this alleged cause of the War. In building a plot whose subject is emancipation, this claim that the purpose of this American holocaust was for the North to lead slaves to a "New Canaan," to a land called freedom, to a new Eden, has the odor of a "rank stink" and a matter "of baseless and imbecile delusion," and nothing but "that boundless rapacity and folly of the carpetbagger followers of victorious armies."<sup>7</sup>

Most people think that great art enchants the mind. No, it does the opposite; it disenchants the mind. W.H. Auden, one of the 20th Century's greatest poets, said this. Milosz said as much above. In other words, according to these great literary artists, the blasphemy, the thing that must be ruled out, in the consideration of slavery and the war, is *not* the denial that the war was fought to free slaves, rather it is the opposite, it is the insistence that it was fought for that reason. Reigning historians have told us that we are deluded

in some way if we doubt that the war was fought to end slavery. But they are the one's deluded. Read great Southern literature. It rids of that fantasy.

These are a few simple examples of how great literature subverts the academic tyranny that oppresses us, and, unfortunately, has won over the American mind. But, of course, solid history and literature are complimentary. C. Van Woodward insists on this in his essay by asking standoffish historians to please step forward. On 22 March 1775, Edmund Burke, writing as a statesman, reveals for us the very fallacy which now reappears 274 years later, ripe for Lytle's humor. In his speech "On the Conciliation with the Colonies," Burke said,

It would be my way of conceiving such matters, that there is a very wide difference in reasoning and policy, between the mode of proceeding on the irregular conduct of scattered individuals, or even of bands of men, who disturb order within the state, and the civil dissensions which may, from time to time, on great questions, agitate the several communities which compose a great Empire. It looks to me to be narrow and pedantic, to apply the ordinary ideas of criminal justice to this great contest. *I do not know the method of drawing up an indictment against a whole people* (italics mine). I cannot insult and ridicule the feelings of millions of my fellow creatures...at the bar. I hope I am not ripe to pass sentence on the gravest public bodies, entrusted with magistrates of great authority and dignity and charged with the safety of their public citizens.

In other words, it is not possible to recognize a coherent, historic people, whose unity we witness in large measure by the claim of wholeness and independence, and at the same time pass *legal* sentence against it. What law has it broken? The charge, as Lytle shows, is laughable. Also, if the magistrate takes claims of independence to be a threat and acts against this people, he is not putting down a rebellion, rather he is playing tyrant and forcing the state into "slavery." "Will it not teach the state that the claim of liberty is high treason?"<sup>8</sup>

The appearance of tyranny can be brilliantly handled by historians (and statesmen) down the years and can be equally handled by great literary artists. We see it in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or *Othello*, Dante's *Inferno*, Solzhenitsyn's *Lenin in Zurich*, and hundreds of other such works. Shelby Foote does it exquisitely in his *The Civil War: A Narrative*, which is at once literature and history.

But the artist renders "historical consciousness" (to recall Van Woodward's words for their genius) in a very different way from the historian; and I believe he meant that this different way is something all historians should treasure, and with their best means should try to emulate. Andrew Lytle stated the difference succinctly: "Poetic language can translate the eternal mysteries into simple understanding."<sup>9</sup>

For an example of what solid history can learn from art, here are some opening lines of John Elliott's study of 17th Century Spain, *The Revolt of the Catalans*. "A 17th Century Spaniard could well quote with pride from the Psalms: 'Their line has gone out from the earth, and their words from the end of the world.'" Spaniards, Elliott continues, "had won a unique place

in the annals of mankind for the prowess of their arms, the skill of their diplomats, the brilliance of their civilization, and the incomparable wealth of their king.”

Little more than one hundred years before Spain could scarcely be said to have existed...it was a factitious unity to a complex of crowns and kingdoms-Castile, Leon, Navarre, Aragon, Portugal, and the Moorish Kingdom of Granada. Each had its own history, its own institutions, and its own ways.

Now, “the history of this fragmented peninsula was decisively changed in 1492 by the marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon to Isabella of Castile.” Granada fell in the same year, 1492. Navarre was incorporated into Castile, and Portugal united with Castile and Aragon.” In other words, this hodge podge of scattered kinglets united into one concentration of political power. Elliott writes that this chain “of miraculous events” mentioned above “would carry the name and reputation of Spain to the farthest ends of the earth. *Without it the triumphs of the 16th Century would have been unthinkable*” (italics mine).<sup>10</sup>

I apologize for such a lengthy quotation. It is necessary if we are to see what an equally astute purveyor of the past is able to do with the exact same facts, dates, and people. In his novel, *At the Moon's Inn* (1941), Andrew Lytle concretizes my abstract phrase above, “concentration of political power,” by placing the reader in a banquet organized to entice the Spanish “new money” into supporting an expedition to the New World, the draw being gold and the salvation of “heathen” souls.



One of the guests, a man who has already signed on to the adventure, stands and, facing the gathering, says, "I give you our host, Don Hernando de Soto, and the pacification of La Florida."

After the toast is drunk, and as the guests are sitting down, "the old Marshall of Seville kept to his feet, his arm thrust high, and down the heavy gold cup, the wine spilled, staining his hand." All watched him standing in his black satin robe, while he offered a new toast: "I was at the fall of Granada," (the people raise their cups and invoke the patron saint of Spain, shouting SANTIAGO, SANTIAGO, SANTIAGO). The marshal's voice then grew lower as he delivered a warning. "Granada fell in 1492. Later that year your Columbus made such a hole in Christendom I fear it can never be plugged...Too much gold now pours into this frugal land. Remember this young captain, on that blessed day when queen Isabella rode in triumph she held in her hand the scepter of Castilla. It was a slight thing of silver gilt. Yet it brought low the infidels." He then thrust the cup forward, and with all eyes upon him he thundered, "Senores, I give you the poverty, the poverty of the cross which is Spain." Lytle continues, "With one great swallow the marshal drank down the toast. The guests, half rising, half sitting, looked foolishly at their empty mugs. The marshal took his seat with an air of triumph. He did not know he had drunk alone."<sup>11</sup>

So, what is the larger "eternal truth" we learn when a literary genius takes on the facts, situation, and

changes bringing about the new 16th Century Spain? The gathering drank not to Spain, not to the centuries old Hispania stained by the blood of Christ as the wine stained the old man's upheld and shaking arm. Not at all, they drank to the inebriation brought on by the lust for raw power, power unrestrained by ancient faith and story, love, culture, and patriotism, and made possible by the unification of regions. It will poke a far bigger hole in the tapestry of Christendom than Columbus did. Chanting the name of the patron saint was the raw cheer of a sporting event.

As all great literary men and women know down the years, this power betrays. It betrays the nation, it betrays the new world, and finally will turn viciously on the betrayers themselves. de Soto dies on the expedition, and for a grave is sunk in the Mississippi (so the natives will not find his body). The few survivors return wearing the hides of New World beasts.

Whenever you hear it said that the Republican Party officials and bosses unified the states into an amalgamated power source to put down a rebellion and take slaves to freedom, remind them of this story—and say, yes, and de Soto, Pizarro, and company went to the Americas to baptize the souls of the natives. It should not need to be said that the horrible fate of the Freedmen is one big hole poked in American triumphalism—one big Uncle Louie. Shelby Foote said, throughout the twenty years he spent writing his trilogy on the war, the two worst crimes of the United States are slavery and emancipation. The freedmen died by the tens of thousands on the road, by tens of thousands in hastily constructed concentration camps, and by tens of thousands by disease, especially

smallpox. Finally, they were betrayed when Reconstruction backed out of its promises.<sup>12</sup>

In a 60-page story which was published as a novella and entitled *Alchemy*, Lytle told the story of Juan Pizarro's conquest of Peru in 1529. Fewer than 200 Spanish soldiers conquered the riches of an entire civilization in a battle against some 30,000 Incas. In his forward to the story Lytle admitted that this conquest "strained credulity" and "seemed magical." Magic "forces nature beyond its laws," he said, and is "connected with Alchemy," a spirituality which "seeks to free God from nature;" and, we can add, God's judgment from the world. The novella ends with the Spanish captains prepared to receive their unimaginable treasure and prize. But, Lytle writes, "beside them was a companion clad in a different guise. As they reached out their hands to clasp their desire, that other, the dark thing, stepped forward to receive *them*" (*italics mine*). The "dark companion" is, of course, Satan, who now owns the prize because, in their sin, the Spaniards now belong to him. The power of their victory betrays them. Lytle regretted that he never made *Alchemy* the prologue to *At the Moon's Inn*.<sup>13</sup>

Our sheer and phony joy in the triumphalism of the power of empire (or "globalism" as we now enshrine it) is witnessed in using phrases like "spreading democracy" for wars seeking cheap oil or for transforming a defense alliance-such as NATO-into an offensive one and pretending it is still the same arrangement by keeping the original name. Raw power breeds arrogance, and arrogance is itself a coverup or a dupe. Senator J. William Fulbright in his book of 1965 held that America now thinks that "force

is the ultimate proof of superiority," and that a stronger army is a sign of a better people."<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the most egregious example of this arrogance is seen in the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, which should be called, helped by a little poetic disenchantment, "America's Hymn to Power." As we all know, the hymn celebrates the North's "trampling out the vintage" of the sinful and traitorous South. The rejoicing is a demonstration of the destructive effect arrogance, by way of sheer power, has over the human mind, especially when it comes to appreciating great art. For the Vineyard is clearly, even to a careless reader, the image of Israel, God's chosen and beloved people. This is known throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The imagery of the vineyard is particularly found in the beautiful verses of Psalm 80, the prophecy of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and in many other places. When Christ says in the Gospel of John that he is the vine, his followers the branches, he is recalling the image, now centuries after the Psalms and the Prophets.

God is indeed punishing his beloved nation in the vineyard verses, and it is quite harsh; but he is doing so to purge it of its sin; he is doing so because he will not let his beloved go. The "rod" of his purging, his "ugly stick" so to speak, are the mighty ancient empires, Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, and others. They mean nothing to God. Regarding Assyria, Isaiah says it is but "the rod of my anger, the staff of my fury (*Isa 10:5*). Assyria may boast of its might, but God knows that such a boast is a coverup, and God roars...

I will put my hook in your nose, and my bridle  
in your mouth, And I will turn you back on the  
way by which you came. The Assyrian shall

fall by a sword, not of man, and a sword not of man shall devour him. (Isa 31:8)

What can be better evidence for the confused mind's zeal for deadly and deadening power? Well, perhaps this: If the author of the hymn, Julia Ward Howe, should argue that she is using the vision of the vineyard found in the New Testament book of Revelation, which reads, "put your sickle in and harvest the bunches from the vine of the earth, all grapes are ripe (Rev. 14:15)," she could seem momentarily to have a point. But the "seeming" is a result of the overwhelming confusion brought on by unimaginable arrogance. The vision in Revelations is of the end of time, not the purging of God's chosen people *in* time. Ms. Howe, then, is not celebrating the North's assistance to God by fighting the war, rather she is claiming to *be* God's power, God's will and God's judgment. Her name is joined to that of Juan Pizarro and his Spanish army in Andrew Lytle's, *Alchemy*. The "Dark Person" has stepped forward to receive her, as well.

The philosopher and scholar of ancient Hebrew thought, Abraham Heschel, once remarked that the height of blasphemy is confusion; and there is some mighty terrifying confusion going on here.<sup>15</sup> An excellent student of literature, M.E. Bradford, can disenchant and heal it. If I might paraphrase him...is one supposed to believe that the Angel Gabriel is Ambrose Burnside marching on Fredericksburg, Virginia in 1862?<sup>16</sup>

Confusion is a result of blasphemy because power in and of itself has no aim, direction, or goal. The stupidity of the arrogance it breeds assumes that the force is at its command. Shelby Foote is a master of

depicting the specter of force and its devotees in our world. Here is a scene from his novel, *Love in a Dry Season*, written in 1951 but applies directly to us today. It is all too familiar. A wrecking company surrounds an old mid-19th Century mansion once owned by a family that hoped to extend the pre-war way of life into the post-war future. The second-generation owner claims to want money from the sale, and the buyer, a “one stop service garage mechanic” wants the business an automobile and money culture will bring. Foote, simply by description, knows and reveals the real reasons as the reader’s vision gives rise to knowledge:

“Early next morning the wreckers came with machines, like a tableau of some mechanistic future, in which these, the only survivors after the Bomb, turn on the world with destruction.” The novel is set between the World Wars, but not even life in those decades prepares us to know *this* about ourselves. The description certainly helps us apprehend the character and culture of those who attack marble and stone in the moonlight. Czeslaw Milosz reminds us that mobs are formed to relieve the gathering from having to think. After all, why think? Force and arrogance go hand in hand; but force can’t ever satisfy. Power itself goes where power will go. Arrogance is but the mask we put on to keep this secret away. So, as Foote says, not even the Bomb will satisfy. Those who survive will destroy anything- stone, marble, or old mansions. Decades of this confusion fetter, vex, and amaze us to no conceivable end. Power alone has no end.

Foote continues: “When the sound of the air hammers stopped and the dust had cleared, there was only the vacant lot strewn with rubble. The house had disappeared like the fulfillment of some prophecy of

Isaiah." The Prophets knew that power by itself is worthless. Like the new vacant lot, it is a privation, a lacuna, a gap. It can aim at nothing and so it produces nothing.<sup>17</sup>

This witness to the devil of power in our midst and to human confusion grows to a climax in Foote's great novel. Here is a scene from the dance hall: "Inside (the club) the five man negro band pumped jazz...while the planters and the bankers, the doctors and the lawyers, the cotton men and the merchants, made a show of accompanying each other wives through the intricacies of the Charleston, the Black Bottom, the Barney Google or else backed off and watched one of the women take a solo break, improvising, bobbing and weaving, wetting her thumbs and rolling her eyes, ritualistic, clinging desperately to the tail end of the jazz age...as if they had foreseen the depression and Roosevelt and another war, and were dancing thus, Cassandra-like, in a frenzy of despair."<sup>18</sup> Flannery O'Connor said in 1964 that we have "domesticated despair and are learning to live with it."<sup>19</sup> Foote said the same in this passage of 1951.

We turn now to a scene in another of Foote's novels where he again delivers meaning by way of a description of power, but this time in a very subtle way. In *Jordan County*, composed of thematically arranged short stories (much like Faulkner's *Go Down Moses*) Foote writes of the same small town we saw in *Love in a Dry Season*. Again, the setting is between the World Wars. Foote writes: There "was a brooding force, a fuliginous backdrop against which the town, mindful of Haiti and John Brown and Reconstruction, played out its life. But there was another, as dark and as brooding, and even more inscrutable. Bristol was a

river town. Tawny, mile-wide, humped by boils and dimpled by eddies, the river came out of the north, gliding between Mississippi and Arkansas with a faint, insistent whisper against the bank. All afternoon the shadow of the levee, ragged along the rim because of the grass, edged eastward down the two main streets, moving from door to door. Bristol merchants told time by its progress until the sun was gone, then barred and locked their doors and hurried home through the gathering twilight. In mid-spring people in the streets looked up and saw the cupolas of steamboats sliding against the sky above the levee with the smooth unreal progress of floats at carnival, each with a pilot who stood with his hands on the big wheel like the master of the lottery."<sup>20</sup>

To understand this passage we need to ask why the "brooding force" of the river is greater than the force wrought by the memory of John Brown, the bloody slave revolts in Haiti, and even the ignominy and unrelenting lawlessness of Reconstruction. Walker Percy knew the answer. We can see it in a passage from his novel *The Last Gentleman*. "Like many young men in the South, he had trouble ruling out the possible. They are not like the immigrant's son from Passaic who desires to become a dentist and that is that. Southerners have trouble ruling out the possible."<sup>21</sup> In the South something happened nobody expected *could* happen, leave aside planned for; and it is now no longer possible to gauge what is possible. Those big facts the current historians leave out *really* did happen. Life is, thus, like a "lottery" (the last word of the passage); anything can happen, and there is a lot more at stake, the people of Bristol surely know, than money. The river insistently seems to whisper what the future



will be but the words of the whisper cannot be comprehended. The result is dread and terror because this “possible” may very well happen *now*. Everybody races home at sundown. What is more, the time before the “possible” strikes is fast approaching, for the steady flow of a river looks as if it is making progress.

This brooding force then too breeds despair, and as we read a later story, “Pillar of Fire,” we learn what occurred in the war, what impossible thing happened *nonetheless*, that influenced this despair. What occurred was the fall of Vicksburg on 4 July, 1863, the months long siege and shelling of which Foote described in an interview as “terrorists tactics.” “They killed daily and indiscriminately “men, women, children and dogs,” he said, and “it was a shameful performance.” The shame is revealed in “Pillar of Fire” when Foote quotes an actual statement of Lincoln’s, that with Vicksburg out of the picture “the Mississippi now flows unvexed to the sea.” Like so many Lincolnesque utterances, we take this to be a prophet’s recognition of the hand of the divine leading the righteous cause further on to victory; whereas it is simply a declarative sentence announcing that nature moves at the command of the Republican Party. It is exactly on par with Ms. Howe’s announcement that Ambrose Burnside, marching on Fredericksburg, is the Angel Gabriel. We simply see once again the arrogance of raw power. In this brief quotation Shelby Foote is ridding us of this fantastic melodrama, and that the propounding of it down the years is a but a cover for shameful “terrorist tactics.” The townsfolk, years after the fall of Vicksburg, hurry home in the evening unnerved and frightened, have the tactics and the judgment from on high in their

collective memory. They cannot hear exactly what the river is whispering now.

The genesis of such arrogance, shame, and lust for power is enacted by a main character in "Pillar of Fire," Union Colonel Nathan Frisbie, wounded at Shiloh. Frisbie hides away through most of battle but not before being seen by the multitude of cowards who had no intention of returning to the fight. The Colonel puts on arrogance to cover his shame and therefore takes his wounding as a personal insult. He could not believe that "the bullets fly both ways," and so will "make the South pay." In this sketch of the man's story and resultant psyche we see the reason the strife turned to "Total War" and "Unconditional Surrender." The arrogance of power can have no opposition. Frisbie is harried, like those who attack stone and marble, with *dunamis* and *hybris*: power and arrogance. Foote knew his Homer.

Colonel Frisbie is taken with house burning and one day shows up at a stately plantation built down the years by a man who had been taken with pioneering, pushing ever westward as Federal Washington does the same to Native Americans, uprooting and resettling them. Then one day while contemplating the remains of an Indian settlement and sensing a similar end to his own dwelling should the "possible" materialize, the man wonders if life makes any sense at all. He is no philosopher, as he says himself, but still is struck by possibility's threat. He is also naive and innocent as the steady greed of Manifest Destiny had kept the thought at bay. Frisbie too is naive and innocent. Bullets in war do fly both ways. Nor can he conceivably imagine that Total War will betray him. But of course, it will. He burns the house

of the former pioneering man with a steady eye for perfection.

As the house burns and Frisbie's deadly deed is accomplished, the owner sees the roof cave in and sparks shoot up in the shape of a gigantic pillar. A power far, far higher than that of human shame, and naivety, inspires him to behold "a pillar of fire," a replica of God's sign that led the Israelites to the Promised Land. Though the plantation owner dies during the vision, the reader, the beneficiary of great stories like this one, knows the Southern epic has begun. The story is so excellently told that he or she loses all naivety and innocence, and gladly leaves both of them behind.<sup>22</sup>

Flannery O'Connor said, after citing Walker Percy's argument, that losing the Civil War was a great gift because it "showed us Moses' face" — Moses, who led the Israelites behind God's burning pillar—"pulverized all of our idols;" just as it will rid the South, of America's deadly fantasies and enchantments. Foote himself said in an interview that the loss of the war "gave us an enormous gift lacking in the rest of the country." It is a profound sense of the tragedy of life" which triumphalism, to paraphrase the rest of his comment, will never know to its great peril.

William Faulkner stated this lesson best. In his novel, *The Unvanquished*, a man looking back on his youthful experiences in the war, recalls...<sup>23</sup>

On the day back in spring when Father serving  
in the war rode up the drive on a return home,  
and that odor in his clothes and beard and  
flesh too which I believed was the smell of  
powder and glory of the elected victorious...  
But which I know better now: know now to

have been the will to endure, and a sardonic and even humorous declining of *self-delusion* which is not even kin to that optimism which believes that that which is about to happen to us can possibly be the worst that we can endure (*italics mine*).<sup>24</sup>

Notice that when he says, "that which is about to happen," he means what Percy meant by "possibility." Indeed, to this way of thinking the past is not behind us. Faulkner said in his play *Requiem for a Nun*, "(t)he past is never over, it's not even past."<sup>25</sup> By the "past" we mean what we have made out of the present that influences the way we must act, so to speak, "presently" on into the future. We see this understanding of the passage of time clearly in Footé's story of the illusive terror of the river. The riverboat captain looks like the master of a lottery. We understand that this haunting is the result of the North's conquest of the river town of Vicksburg; but even without this "drama," to help us see this sense of the passage of time, the past remains the shape we have given to the present in which we find our footing for the future. Reaching the future means shaping the past we must *now* act in.

The goal, perhaps the purpose, of history, then, is to act and then *learn* again to act, but now in a new and different tension between what has happened and what is possible; that is with justice, pity, grace, and honor, and in forgiveness, sacrifice, thanksgiving, and extreme courage. There is no final victory in human time, no final triumph over time. That is the fantasy of those who put their bets on raw power and the fantasy and enchanted assurance that it can force time to go its way.

Faulkner's grand character, Molly Beauchamp, former slave and later wife of a sharecropper, said it best: "The Lord say that what goes down into my earth is mine unto I resurrect it."<sup>26</sup>

Here is a long quotation from Marcel Proust which offers for us a European agreement on this, as well as an agreement with O'Connor's sense of the blessing of having one's idols blasted away, and with Foote's new Southern sense of tragedy unavailable to the rest of America, and with Faulkner's sardonic grin at the thought that the future will not bring us more than we can bear. The passage comes from the last pages of his *Remembrance of Things Past*:

Literature in taking up again the abandoned labors of amorous delusions, confers a sort of renewal of life on sentiments that had already ceased to exist...Happiness is beneficial for the body but it is grief that develops the powers of the mind... [and] is indispensable to bringing us back to the truth, forcing us to take things in a serious vein, by uprooting each time a tangled growth of habits, skepticism, flippancy (and) indifference...(L)et us accept the physical injury it inflicts because of the spiritual wisdom that it brings...Ideas (will eventually) take the place of sorrows; when the latter are transformed into ideas, they at once lose part of their noxious effect on the heart and from the very first moment the transformation itself radiates joy.<sup>27</sup>

All of Europe, after all, had concentrated power by joining into one nation once separate and independent social authorities, as had Medieval Spain and the United States. In all cases the new power "poked a

hole” in their tapestries of heritage and promise, and cataclysm leaked out. Proust died four years after the first World War, right on time to know that (Faulkner again) the next worst thing that could happen might be greater than we could imagine.

In conclusion, we should remember that the power that “trampled the vintage” in the Old Testament’s true rendition of our war hymn was composed of a huge assortment of conquered countries.

The word came to Jeremiah from Yahweh when Nebuchadnezzar was king of Babylon and his whole army, with the kingdoms of the earth under his dominion, and all their peoples, were waging war on Jerusalem...  
*Isaiah 34:16*

<sup>1</sup> *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. XXXIV (1956). Reprinted in a collection of C. Van Woodward’s essays, *The Burden of Southern History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 27-39.

<sup>2</sup> See his essay “Science, Language, and Literature” in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, Patrick Samway, Ed. (New York: Farrer, Straus, Giroux, 2000).

- <sup>3</sup> (Nashville: J. S. Sanders and Co., 1992), 156.
- <sup>4</sup> See his *The Idea of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946).
- <sup>5</sup> Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind* (New York: Vintage International, 1981), 217.
- <sup>6</sup> See his *New and Collected Poems 1931-2001* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 84.
- <sup>7</sup> *Go Down Moses* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 266.
- <sup>8</sup> "Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies," *Selected Works of Edmund Burke* (Carmel, Indiana: Liberty Fund Press, 1999), 252-252.
- <sup>9</sup> Andrew Lytle, "The Long View," *From Eden to Babylon: The Political and Social Essays of Andrew Nelson Lytle* (Washington D.C: Regnery Gateway, 1990), 188.
- <sup>10</sup> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963).
- <sup>11</sup> *At the Moon's Inn* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1941), 46-47.
- <sup>12</sup> James Downs, *Sick With Freedom: African American Sickness and Suffering During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (London: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- <sup>13</sup> (Winston Salem, North Carolina: Palemon Press, 1979), Private Circulation.
- <sup>14</sup> *The Arrogance of Power*, (New York: Vintage, 1966), 5.
- <sup>15</sup> Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, Vol. I (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 78.

<sup>16</sup> M.E. Bradford, *A Better Guide Than Reason* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 197.

<sup>17</sup> *Love in a Dry Season*, (New York: Vintage International, 1992), 245.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 173.

<sup>19</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "The Novelist and the Believer," *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1969), 159. Shelby Foote, *Love in a Dry Season*, 51.

<sup>20</sup> Shelby Foote, "Child By Fever," *Jordan County* (New York: Vintage International, 1992), 107-108.

<sup>21</sup> Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman* (New York Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1966), 266.

<sup>22</sup> "Pillar of Fire," in *Jordan County*. The Interview is online. Mississippi Public Broadcasting.

<sup>23</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "The Regional Writer," *Mystery and Manners*, 59. *Conversations with Shelby Foote*, Ed. William C. Canter (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1989), 261.

<sup>24</sup> William Faulkner, *The Unvanquished* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 10.

<sup>25</sup> (New York: Random House, 1951), 91.

<sup>26</sup> *Go Down Moses*, 99.

<sup>27</sup> Marcel Proust, "Remembrance of Things Past, Translated by C.K. Scott Montcrieff (New York Random House, 1932), 1020.