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Fire Eater! Editor

Lilac Darkness: *Thomas Wolfe & Southern Culture*

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So often we in the Southern movement spend our time defending our culture. Attack on our beloved battleflag? Off go a dozen emails to the usual yankee Pecksniffs. Assault on our history? Ramp up the boycott. And so it goes.So it shall always go until we stop defending our cultural Maginot Line (or more accurately, our Maginot mentality) and go on the offensive. And why not? Think about it. The South not only invented America, but also produced its finest culture. Who is Cotton Mather compared to Flannery O'Connor? Or Jonathan Edwards compared to William Faulkner?

Scribblers and hacks, that's who. Not even close. No seegar. (Notice I'm assuming there is such a thing as yankee culture. As Brother Dave said, "See, beloved, I dont believe there is a North. There's just south of Canada.")

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Thomas Wolfe embodies the South in a way no other creative genius ever has. Perhaps not even William Faulkner (whose grandpa, by the way, signed up my great-grandpa to the 7th Mississippi Partisan Rangers, CSA). Faulkner was, in every respect, a master of the English language, and a writer so powerful in the concision of his narrative and descriptive elements that one would hardly dare to think anyone else worthy of the same greatness.

But then there is Thomas Wolfe.

In 1947, even William Faulkner ranked Thomas Wolfe "ahead of himself as the most important American writer of the 1920s and 1930s." (*www.learner.org*)

Born in Asheville, North Carolina, 3 October 1900, his was a brief life, a meteor streaking across the Southern sky for a moment only, dying of tuberculosis on 15 September 1938. But from that flash of 38 years came a body of literature of such import that even today the South is defined by this one man's writing. And of that body there stands one work, a novel, that well deserves the much disputed title "The Great American Novel". That novel is *Look Homeward, Angel*. Published in 1929, on the brink of the Great Collapse, the enormity of its scope is still under discussion, with hundreds of papers, essays, and theses continuing to pour out yearly, and renewed interest on the Internet.

In the first three paragraphs of the novel, the South is tied to the concept of destiny:

"...as the art of Thomas Wolfe shows, that we who know the South as God's Country should look never again to apologise for either our kith or kin, for we are the sons and the daughters of the best that ever was."

"Each of us is all the sums he has not counted: subtract us into nakedness and night again, and you shall see begin in Crete four thousand years ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas. The seed of our destruction will blossom in the desert, the alexin of our cure grows by a mountain rock, and our lives are haunted by a Georgia slattern, because a London cutpurse went unhung."

The main character, Eugene Gant, grows up in a house called "Dixieland". In real life, Thomas Wolfe grew up in "The Old Kentucky Home", a boarding house and real-estate investment run by his momma, Julia Wolfe, in Asheville. Wolfe describes Eugene Gant's South thus:

> "His feeling for the South was not so much historic as it was of the core and desire of dark romanticism—that unlimited and inexplicable drunkenness, the magnetism of some men's blood that takes them into the heart of the heat, and beyond that, into the polar and emerald cold of the south as swiftly as it took the heart of that incomparable romanticist who wrote The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, beyond which there is nothing."

It was a South "where all women were pure, gentle, and beautiful, all men chivalrous and brave, and the Rebel horde a company of swaggering, death-mocking cavaliers."

Yet Wolfe's alcoholic daddy and neurotic momma, who together made his childhood a bitter one, came also to represent the South, and he reproached his own Southernness when he spoke of it as a "barren spiritual wilderness", and left for the yankee Harvard after graduating from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Still, as one writer put it, "His career can actually be characterized by his longing for home..." He also wrote an entire story about his great-uncle's stories of Chickamauga. John B. Westall, a Confederate veteran, personally related the stories to Wolfe when Wolfe visited him on the South Toe River in North Carolina.

Perhaps Wolfe's depiction of the South was skewed by his boyhood, but at the same time the South created for him the landscape upon which all reality lay:

> "...strewn lightly like a fragrant gauzy scarf upon the earth; the night was a cool bowl of lilac darkness, filled with fresh orchard scents."

The South was also populated with angels. Wolfe's daddy, W. O., was a stonecutter, some of whose marble angels still stand in the Oakdale Cemetery in Hendersonville, North Carolina. I find it revealing that Wolfe conflated the South—which he both loved and reviled—with those stone-white winged messengers of God (and Wolfe knew the ancient Greek derivation of angelic icons, the winged Nike, from his Classical studies). "Look homeward, angel, now, and melt with ruth", reads the line from Milton's Lycidas. The "home" in "homeward" was the South of Wolfe's younger years, a South still not far removed from the War. A South to which later, after his yankee sojourn and European travels, Wolfe would return.

> The "hill-bound, the sky-girt, of whom the mountains were his masters, the fabulous South. The picture of flashing field, of wood, and hill, stayed in his heart forever..."

Southern words.

Though the yankees produced notable writers (Emerson, Thoreau), still, after all these years, the South has no peers in the North to

compare with the likes of Edgar Allan Poe, William Faulkner, or Thomas Clayton Wolfe. Think, for example, of the poem, Annabel Lee, by Poe. There simply is no yankee equivalent. Annabel Lee is an example of a perfect poem, made what it is by the same depth of feeling and passion (and intellect) we find in Thomas Wolfe. (It is interesting to speculate on the Celtic origins of the South that produced Thomas Wolfe. Like Beowulf and the poetry of Dylan Thomas of Wales, the Southern writings of both Poe and Wolfe use the old Celtic alliterative rhyme schemes.)

There is a passage from *Look Homeward, Angel*, whose last line is engraved on Thomas Wolfe's gravestone in Riverside Cemetery in Asheville, and which mirrors Poe's poem in its sheer sonic perfection:

> "He stood naked and alone in darkness, far from the lost world of the streets and faces; he stood upon the ramparts of his soul, before the lost land of himself; heard inland murmurs of lost seas, the far interior music of the horns. The last voyage, the longest, the best."

There is also the famous passage that prefaces the entire novel:

> "...a stone, a leaf, an unfound door; of a stone, a leaf, a door. And of all the forgotten faces. Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb we did not know our mother's face; from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of this earth. Which of us has known his brother? Which of us has looked into his father's heart? Which of us has not remained forever prison-pent? Which of us in not forever a stranger and alone? O waste of loss, in the hot mazes, lost, among bright stars on this most weary unbright cinder, lost! Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When? O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again."

As I read this passage yet again since I first read it in high school, I am reminded of my great-grandpa, William Henry Aston, the first Pentecostal preacher in Pittsburg County, Oklahoma. Though I never knew him, I knew his son, my grandpa, and I'll bet William Henry had that same passion that Wolfe had. "Which of us has looked into his father's heart?"

How ironic that the South, butt of scorn and ridicule by the sorry factory of mediocrity known as Hollywood, lives forever in words and in song that are so much higher cultural artifacts than anything the blustering North could ever think of producing. If cultures are judged by their artistic lights, the light of Southern culture far outshines its yankee counterpart. It is for this reason, as the art of Thomas Wolfe shows, that we who know the South as God's Country should look never again to apologise for either our kith or kin, for we are the sons and the daughters of the best that ever was.

NOTE: For more on Thomas Wolfe, try The Thomas Wolfe Web Site at http://library.uncwil.edu/wolfe/wolfe.html. Also, for those who have not read Wolfe, the two novels that comprise Of Time and the River are actually the continuance of *Look Homeward, Ange*l. Finally, if you do get round to *Look Homeward, Angel*, pay attention to the scene in which Wolfe's (real-life) brother, Ben, dies. It may be the finest death scene ever written.