

## Tidewater and Frontier

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Randall Stewart

Southern literature from the beginning has been more diverse, more varied, than the literature of New England, or of the Middle West. There have been greater extremes in Southern literature, and the basic difference is that which separates two traditions, which one may call the Tidewater tradition and the Frontier tradition. There is no such division in New England literature, for the frontier in New England was never very pronounced or articulate; nor in the literature of the Middle West, because that region has been more homogeneously democratic. But in the South, the contrast has been marked, indeed. It would be difficult to find writers more different than William Byrd of Westover and George Washington Harris, the author of the *Sut Lovingood Yarns*; or, to take more recent examples, Ellen Glasgow of Richmond and Jesse Stuart of W-Hollow, in the Kentucky mountains. It is a remarkable fact about Southern literature that both traditions have had a great deal of vitality, and have flourished side by side.

In modern times, the Tidewater tradition is represented by (among others) the Virginians, Ellen Glasgow and James Branch Cabell; by John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate of the Nashville School; by Mississippians Stark Young and Eudora Welty. These writers stem spiritually and culturally from William Byrd's Tidewater: they are courtly, sophisticated, intellectual; they cultivate "wit" in the older sense, and a fine irony; they address an inner circle; they possess restraint, dignity, a sense of form; they are classicists.

The Frontier first found expression in the early Nineteenth Century. This was a full one hundred years after Byrd's *History of the Dividing Line*, but it is remarkable that the Frontier should have been represented

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in literature at all, let alone so early. The Frontiersman-whether in the mountains of East Tennessee or the canebrakes of Arkansas-was a pretty lively fellow, and he has his niche-and a secure one it is turning out to be-in such writings as Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes*, The Autobiography of David Crockett, Harris's *Sut Lovingood Yarns*, Hooper's *Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs*, Baldwin's *Flush Times in Alabama and Mississippi*, Thorpe's *Big Bear of Arkansas*. In modern times, the tradition is represented by such literary descendants as Erskine Caldwell and Jesse Stuart. Thomas Wolfe, who came from the same mountain region as George Washington Harris, belongs with the members of this Frontier school in some respects, though he lacked their sense of humor and their mastery of the vernacular.

The two traditions-Tidewater and Frontier-have maintained a good deal of separateness from each other down to our time, though Faulkner and Warren, as I shall suggest presently, have combined elements from both. You will find, as a general thing, little truck between writers of the two schools. I shouldn't expect Ransom to have a high opinion of Wolfe, and I shouldn't expect Jesse Stuart to think very well of James Branch Cabell. (I mean, of course, of their writings.) I doubt if Tate admires Caldwell, and I should be surprised if Caldwell reads Tate. Tidewater and Frontier are still Tidewater and Frontier.

"William Byrd, of course, is the grand prototype in literature of the Tidewater, and he is best seen in his delightful *Progress to the Mines* (1732). The journey was undertaken to investigate the state of the mining industry in Virginia, and the account shows that Byrd was a most painstaking investigator, but the more lively parts of the narrative concern the social entertainment along the way. The *Progress to the Mines* was indeed a royal progress, for Byrd was most hospitably received by the neighboring gentry. The account of his visit with the Spotswoods is revealing:

Here I arrived about three o'clock, and found only Mrs. Spotswood at home, who received her old acquaintance with many a gracious smile. I was carried into a room elegantly set off with pier glasses, the largest of which came soon after to an odd misfortune. . . . A brace of tame deer ran familiarly about the house, and one of them came to stare at me as a stranger. But unluckily spying his own figure in the glass, he made a spring over the tea table that stood under it, and shattered the glass to pieces, and falling back upon the tea table, made a terrible fracas among the china. This ex-

plait was so sudden, and accompanied with such a noise, that it surprised me. and perfectly frightened Mrs. Spotswood. But it was worth all the damage, to show the moderation and good humor with which she bore this disaster.

The moderation and good humor with which Mrs. Spotswood bore the disaster is clearly the point to underscore. She was, as Alexander Pope put it in that most elegant of all compliments to a gentlewoman, "mistress of herself though china fall."

Col. Spotswood, whom Byrd called the "Tubal Cain of Virginia," and who modestly substituted for "Virginia" in the appellation, "North America," was generous with his knowledge of the mining and smelting of iron ore; like many a Southerner after him, he was a great talker. After business, which was not scanted, came the social hour with the ladies, Mrs. Spotswood and her spinster sister, Miss Theky. The conversation with the ladies (Byrd recorded in this private narrative; the *Progress* was not published until after his death) was "like whip sillabub-very pretty, but nothing in it." Southern gallantry, it would seem, was not incompatible with a certain amount of masculine condescension toward the ladies.

At the home of the Chiswells, Byrd was shocked to discover that the twenty-four years which had passed since he last saw Mrs. Chiswell

had made great havoc with her pretty face, and plowed very deep furrows in her fair skin. It was impossible to know her again, so much the flower was faded. However, though she was grown an old woman, yet she was one of those absolute rarities, a very good old woman.

Of Col. Jones's plantations, situated nearby, Byrd recorded:

The poor negroes are a kind of Adamites, very scantily supplied with clothes and other necessaries; nevertheless (which is a little incomprehensible), they continue in perfect health, and none of them die, except it be of old age. However, they are even with their master, and make him but indifferent crops, so that he gets nothing by his injustice, but the scandal of it.

During his visit at the Flemings, the company were confined indoors all day by rainy weather, and Byrd, always the agreeable guest, "began to talk of plays," and, he goes on to say,

finding Mrs. Fleming's taste lay most towards comedy, I offered my service to read one to her, which she kindly accepted. She produced the second part of the Beggar's Opera [Polly, 1729], which had diverted the town [London Town] for forty nights successively, and gained four thousand pounds to the author. . . . After having acquainted my company with the history of the play, I read three acts of it, and left Mrs. Fleming and Mr. Randolph to finish it, who read as well as most actors do at a rehearsal. Thus we killed the time, and triumphed over the bad weather.

I resist with difficulty the temptation to quote further from this classic of the colonial South. The *Progress to the Mines* contains most of the essential elements which will recur, with modifications of course, as we attempt to trace the history of the Tidewater tradition: the good manners, the decorum, the sense of community, the sense of justice, the interest in polite literature, the gallantry, the wit. Byrd has never had justice done him as a writer. His taste and style were formed under Restoration and early Augustan auspices, and his writing as writing compares favorably with some of the best in contemporary London. Particularly noteworthy is the wit, which illustrates well enough Addison's definition in *Spectator* No. 62. Wit, Addison says, involves a turn of surprise, as in the statement, "My mistress' bosom is as white as snow, and as cold." Byrd has similar turns of surprise: "Though she was grown an old woman, yet she was one of those absolute rarities, a very good old woman"; **So** that he gets nothing by his injustice but the scandal of it:

If we divide the Nineteenth Century South into two periods—the ante-bellum and the post-bellum—we find that the best book in each period to illustrate the Tidewater tradition is still, appropriately enough, a product of Virginia: I refer to John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* (1832), and Thomas Nelson Page's *In Ole Virginia* (1884).

Kennedy was a Baltimorean, but his mother's family were Virginians, and Kennedy, like his narrator Mark Littleton, was a welcome guest in the Old Dominion. In writing *Swallow Barn*, the author, therefore, enjoyed the double advantage of detachment and sympathy. His picture is faithfully drawn. Kennedy is less witty than Byrd; his closest literary

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affinity seems to have been with Irving. But (like Irving) he is a good observer, he has a sense of humor, and he can be, and often is, amusing.

Swallow Barn," he says, "is an aristocratic old edifice which sits, like a brooding hen, on the Southern bank of the James River." "It gives," he says, "the idea of comfort." Frank Meriwether, "the master of this lordly domain," is "a very model of landed gentlemen." He is most hospitable: "a guest is one of his daily wants." He is a good citizen and attends to business, but, contrary to the expectation and desire of his friends, "he has never set up for Congress." "He is not much of a traveller. He has never been in New England, and very seldom beyond the confines of Virginia. He makes now and then a winter excursion to Richmond, which he considers the center of civilization" (matching Dr. Holmes' view of Boston as the hub of the solar system). He is a Jeffersonian Agrarian, thinking "lightly of the mercantile interest," and believing that those who live in large cities are "hollow-hearted and insincere." He opposed the re-election of John Quincy Adams to the Presidency in 1829, and voted for Andrew Jackson, without, I imagine, being an ardent Jacksonian. "He piques himself upon being a high churchman, but is not the most diligent frequenter of places of worship, and very seldom permits himself to get into a dispute upon points of faith." "He is somewhat distinguished as a breeder of blooded horses." These are some of the main points in Kennedy's "character" of the Virginia planter of the 1830s.

There is less elegance at Swallow Barn than at Westover, a hundred years earlier. The life seems homespun in comparison. A self-contained provincialism has taken the place of the cosmopolitanism of Byrd, who was as much at home in London Town as in Williamsburg. There is an even greater emphasis on neighborliness and family life: Swallow Barn fairly swarms with relatives and neighbors. There are dinner parties, and the drinking of toasts. There is still the practice of polite learning: interlocutors quote Virgil and Horace. Negro slavery has become a controversial question by 1832 (though not so much so as it was soon to become, after the Abolitionists took over), and Kennedy's book contains a statement on the subject which seems more judicious than propagandistic. "No tribe of people," says Mark Littleton, "have ever passed from barbarism to civilization whose middle stage of progress has been more secure from harm, more genial to their character, or better supplied with mild and beneficent guardianship, adapted to the actual state of their intellectual feebleness, than the Negroes of Swallow Barn." We recall that Byrd spoke of the "scandal" attached to mistreatment of Negroes in the Tidewater of his time, and it is interesting to see the same view

expressed a hundred years later in Kennedy's book: "Public opinion is stronger than law," Meriwether declares, "and no man can hold up his head in this community who is chargeable with mal-treatment of his slaves." As if to prove the point, one of the more prominent characters in *Swallow Barn* is Old Carey, the much-indulged, crochety, loyal family retainer, whose progeny in Southern fiction was to be legion.

If *Swallow Barn* was realistic and objective, though sympathetic with the life described, *In Old Virginia* was romantic and propagandistic. The War had come between, and Thomas Nelson Page wrote out of a profound nostalgia for the ante-bellum days. "Dem wuz good ole times de bes Sam uver see! Dey wuz, in fac!" Page's hero, Marse Chan is a paragon of all the virtues: "de peartes scholar ole Mr. Hall hed," and at the same time, "de head in all debilment dat went on." He is the soul of chivalry, fighting for his lady fair and for his father's good name. There is just one false touch in the portrait of this manly young knight, namely, his statement to the heroine that he has kept himself "pure" for her sake. There is nothing objectionable in the "purity," but it is the kind of statement which a young man doesn't ordinarily make to a young woman, for fear (if for no other reason) that she may think the less of his manhood. Page knew this, of course, as does every man, but he was willing to sacrifice verisimilitude to propaganda; willing to go to this extreme length in an attempt (useless though it was) to refute the stock accusation of miscegenation.

The narrator is the faithful darkey, Sam, Marse Chan's "body-servant." I am not at all disposed to deprecate Carey, Sam, and the others. The relationship which they represent would be anachronistic today, but it was a lovely one in its time and place. It was based upon personal loyalty, and the loyalty was reciprocal. Mutuality and irrevocableness (that is, permanence) are the important characteristics. Nothing of the sort exists in the modern world, such relationships having long ago been superseded by what Carlyle, long ago, called the "cash-nexus."

I am not at all disposed, either, to deprecate chivalry. I am not willing to dismiss the literature of chivalry as nonsense, merely because the age of chivalry is gone, and that of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded. And still less am I disposed to deprecate a sense of honor. Allen Tate raised the question some years ago as to whether there is any such thing in the modern world as a sense of honor. It is a serious question.

The literary work of the modern period which best embodies the Tidewater tradition is Stark Young's *So Red the Rose* (1934). It would be interesting to examine the relation of this work to the earlier works which

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I have been discussing. A few observations must suffice here. We note the presence of wit, Augustan wit, a quality conspicuous in Byrd, but not much emphasized in Kennedy, and absent from Page, where the Tidewater tradition is thoroughly sentimentalized. The remark, for example, in *So Red the Rose*, by Cynthia Eppes, a cousin from New Orleans, "I get my hats and my absolutions in Paris," recalls the wit of *The Rape of the Lock*: "Dost sometimes counsel take, and sometimes tea"; "Or stain her honour, or her new brocade." The recovery of wit was a valuable recovery. Page's sentimentality was a debasing of the tradition. The true aristocrats were not sentimentalists.

The prominence given to family ties, neighborliness, community life, recalls *Swallow Barn*. The Bedfords and the McGehees resemble in their neighborly rivalry (though "rivalry" may be too strong a word—there is no envy between them) the Meriwethers and the Traceys of *Swallow Barn*. Nearly everybody is somebody's cousin. Young Duncan Bedford has some of Marse Chan's chivalry, and William Veal, the family butler at Montrose, resembles Marse Chan's Sam. Agnes McGehee, who journeyed in a wagon to the battle-field of Shiloh, accompanied only by William Veal, to recover and bring home the body of her dead son, recalls in her heroic, quiet firmness the poised Mrs. Fleming of Byrd's narrative; the unobtrusive, efficient mistress of *Swallow Barn*, Lucy Meriwether; and the heroine, though sentimentalized, of Page's story. The Southern gentlewoman was not a clinging vine, a weak sister. On the contrary.

Hugh McGehee, who regards the changing world with a philosophic mind (he had been opposed to secession), is an ampler and wiser Frank Meriwether. "The way I've been obliged to see it is this," he says to his son: "Our ideas and instincts work upon our memory of these people who have lived before us, and so they take on some clarity of outline. It's not to our credit to think we began today, and it's not to our glory to think we end today. All through time, we keep coming in to the shore like waves—like waves. You stick to your blood, son; there's a certain fierceness in blood that can bind you up with a long community of life." "And think with passion," he added: "it's the only kind of thought that's worth anything." In Hugh McGehee," says the book's best interpreter, Donald Davidson, "Southern society has produced a fine example of the unified personality, in tune with its environment, while also commanding it." Davidson comments also on the oral quality in *So Red the Rose*. "The tones of the speaking voice," he says, "ring throughout the book as in few other novels." Young has caught, he thinks, "the characteristic tone of Southern speech, its variation in pitch, its rhythms, as

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well as the idioms, vocabulary, archaisms, and oddities of pronunciation." The naturalness, the leisureliness and desultoriness of good talk are found not only in Young's novel, but in the works (though perhaps to a less degree) which I have taken to be the principal antecedents of *So Red the Rose*. There is also, in these works, an anecdotal quality, which reflects the Southern habit of telling stories-stories which, for the most part, have come out of the community life.

We must look now at the other tradition—the tradition of the Frontier.

The Frontier referred to is, first of all, that of the Old Southwest, which comprised the states now known as the South, if we exclude Virginia and the Carolinas. The literature which flourished in this region between 1830 and the Civil War is the opposite, in most respects, of the literature which we have been considering. Instead of courtliness, sophistication, restraint, there is uninhibited nature. Instead of chivalry, gallantry, polite learning, there is rough-and-tumble. Instead of wit, there is slapstick. The region in this period specialized in the tall tale. The liveliest and most amusing of the frontier humorists is George Washington Harris, author of *Sut Lovingood Yarns*, published in 1867.

The 1867 edition is long since out of print, and now difficult to come by. A new edition has been recently published, but the editor committed the unpardonable error of revising the language and orthography. The intention was to make the tales more intelligible to the general reader. The original work is difficult for many educated Northerners, but the difficulty is not insuperable (not greater, for example, than in Chaucer), and to revise a *Sut Lovingood* tale is to destroy it.

On the occasion of the appearance of the "revised" edition, Mr. Edmund Wilson wrote a long article in the *New Yorker* on the *Sut Lovingood* yarns in which he deals so harshly with his subject that one suspects he does not rightly understand what is going on. The work is, he says, "by far the most repellent book of any real merit in American literature." He objects to the "crude and brutal humor." *Sut*, he says, "avenges his inferiority by tormenting other people; his impulse is avowedly sadistic." He quotes as an example of the sadism the following statement by *Sut* about "universal onregerit human nater":

Ef anything happens to some feller, I don't keer ef he's yure bes frien, an I don't keer how sorry you is for him, thar's a streak ove satisfachun 'bout like a sowin thread a-runnin all thru yer sorrer. may be shamed ov hit, but durn me ef hit aint thar.



Can it be that Mr. Wilson is so unaware of "universal onregenerit human nater"—possesses indeed so little of it himself—that this is a shockingly new thought to him? If so, he needs a course in Original Sin, and I suggest that he read, as a starter, Robert Penn Warren's poem entitled *Original Sin*, where he will find the accusing line: "You hear of the deaths of friends with sly pleasure."

The truth is that the Lovingood yarns are rowdy slapstick fun, the most hilarious, uninhibited compositions in American literature, and the broadest humor written in Nineteenth Century America; and if time permitted I would prove it' to you by reading one—I should like nothing better. They were not printed in the *Atlantic Monthly*, but in a subliterate journal, the *Spirit of the Times* (published in New York), whose importance has only recently been discovered by the historians. The fun is often rough, but we read these yarns, if we read them correctly, with the willing suspension of the sentimental-humanitarian attitude, which is as inappropriate here as a Puritan-moralistic attitude toward a comedy by Congreve or Noel Coward. As for sadism, and taking pleasure in spoiling other people's fun, Sut is himself as often as not the butt. Many of the funniest things, moreover, do not involve physical pain at all. "Rare Ripe Garden Seed" might easily be mistaken for a Chaucerian fabliau, and the discourse on the "points" of young widows is hardly surpassed anywhere for its appreciation of sexual pleasures.

Mr. Wilson's crowning error is the statement that Sut is a direct ancestor of Flem Snopes. Faulkner, as I shall suggest presently, does owe a good deal to Harris, but Sut and Flem are as unlike as two human temperaments can very well be. Did Flem Snopes ever go to a party, get drunk, spark the girls? Flem never had any good healthy fun in his life—he was mercenary, calculating, and impotent. Sut, on the other hand—indiscreet, fun-loving, practical joker extraordinary—wasn't exactly the kind to get himself elected president of a bank.

Bernard DeVoto pointed out twenty-five years ago, in his *Mark Twain's America*, Mark Twain's debt to the Old Southwest humorists. Sut belonged in the East Tennessee mountains, in the neighborhood where Mark Twain's parents lived before they moved to Missouri. Mark Twain was almost certainly conceived in Sut's neighborhood, and if he had been born there, and had not gone East and come under the dispiriting influence of Livy, Howells, and the Reverend Mr. Twitchell, he might have become the great Rabelaisian author whom Van Wyck Brooks, with a good deal of insight, thought him capable of being.

One must recognize the bearing of Southern topography on these

between the Shenandoah and the Tidewater, the up-country and the low-country in South Carolina, the Kentucky mountains and the Blue Grass, East Tennessee and Middle Tennessee. The Southern Appalachians-comprising Eastern Kentucky, East Tennessee, and Western North Carolina-are a homogeneous region, and a kind of modern Frontier. This region was Union in sympathies during the Civil War, and is still Republican. There were no plantations in these mountains and few slaves. The Clemenses had one Negro slave, a girl, who accompanied the family to Missouri, and today there are in this region comparatively few Negroes. The mountain people are, or have been, less restrained than their neighbors in the lowlands. They are, or have been, characterized by a special kind of wildness, and it is worth noting in this connection that Tom Wolfe's Altamont is just over the range from the Sut Lovingood country. Wolfe, of course, attended Chapel Hill, studied drama in Professor George Pierce Baker's 47 Workshop at Harvard, taught English in N.Y.U., Washington Square, lived in Brooklyn, read Shelley and Walt Whitman, and came under other "corrupting" influences, but he was a Southern mountaineer, and the mountain wildness is the most autochthonous fact about him. There is a particularly interesting passage in *Of Time and the River*, where Eugene and his cronies go for an automobile ride, drinking as they ride, careering from the hills to the plains, and landing in jail after a wildly drunken time of it. The passage, except for the somewhat Shelleyan treatment of landscape, recalls Lovingood.

It must have been, in part at least, Faulkner's admiration for the mountain wildness which led him to rank Wolfe first among the American novelists of the Twentieth Century (placing himself second). For this wildness-whether of the mountains or the plains-is an important part of Faulkner's inheritance, and it comes out in some of his best writing. Perhaps the best example is the story *Spotted Horses* (later incorporated in *The Hamlet*). Complete pandemonium can be carried no further than in Faulkner's account of what happens after the Texas ponies (the liveliest ever created by God or man) break out of the corral, and run pell-mell down the country roads, upsetting many a cart, wagon, and surrey, and trampling their occupants under foot. For a sheer all-hell-broke-loose narrative, it has no equal unless in one of Sut Lovingood's farm-yard escapades. Faulkner's yarn, like many of Sut's, is hilariously funny, despite the fact that several get hurt, and I don't quite see how Mr. Wilson can escape his old difficulty here. But the difficulty, in fact, is quite common. Non-Southerners often react to the Southern wildness in the wrong way.

If I may be permitted the pedantry of a footnote (without actually relegating the matter to the bottom of the page) on Southern folklore in general, and in particular the special kinship of Faulkner and Wolfe, I should like to quote from each author (from *Of Time and the River*, and from *Sartoris*) a description of the proper way to drink moonshine out of a jug. It is an important subject, and the correct technique is a matter of importance. Each author is obviously proud of this bit of connoisseurship. Wolfe says: "They hooked their thumbs into the handle of the jug, and brought the stuff across their shoulders with a free-hand motion, and let the wide neck pour into their tilted throats with a fat thick gurgle. . . ." Faulkner says: "Bayard was already drinking, with the jug tilted across his horizontal forearm, and the mouth held to his lips by the same hand, as it should be done." The methods are not quite identical, but basically similar. An allowance can be made for a small variation between North Carolina and Mississippi. (Young *Sartoris*, at the time, is hob-nobbing with the neighboring farm boys, and one of them is saying to another, "I knowed he was all right.") In each case, it is a ritual, not to be familiar with which marks one as lacking the proper initiation into good Frontier society.

We have been considering two traditions in the literature of the South—the Tidewater and the Frontier—and we have seen that they have flourished side by side, and somewhat separate from each other. There is just one more point which I wish to suggest: it is that the two traditions are united in the works of the writer who, all agree, is the greatest in the South today, and possibly this is one important reason why he is the greatest. For like Shakespeare, Faulkner embraces the high and the low, the aristocratic and the plebeian, the courtly and the uncouth, the educated and the illiterate, the literary and the vernacular, the traditional and the modern. I have already glanced at his affinity with the Frontier tradition. His sympathetic interest, on the other hand, in the *Sartoris*, the *Compsons*, and other aristocrats (Faulkner's treatment of these people can rise to the high-tragic mode) allies him with the Tidewater. It is this comprehensiveness, among other things, which sets Faulkner apart from his contemporaries in the South, though I should add that Robert Penn Warren has some of this same comprehensiveness.

I hope these remarks have at least suggested a genetic relationship (I believe not much appreciated) between the new literature of the South, and the old. However important various influences from outside the South may have been in the present century (and it has not been my intention to deal with these), modern Southern literature—both Tidewater and Frontier—has had a long background in Southern writing.