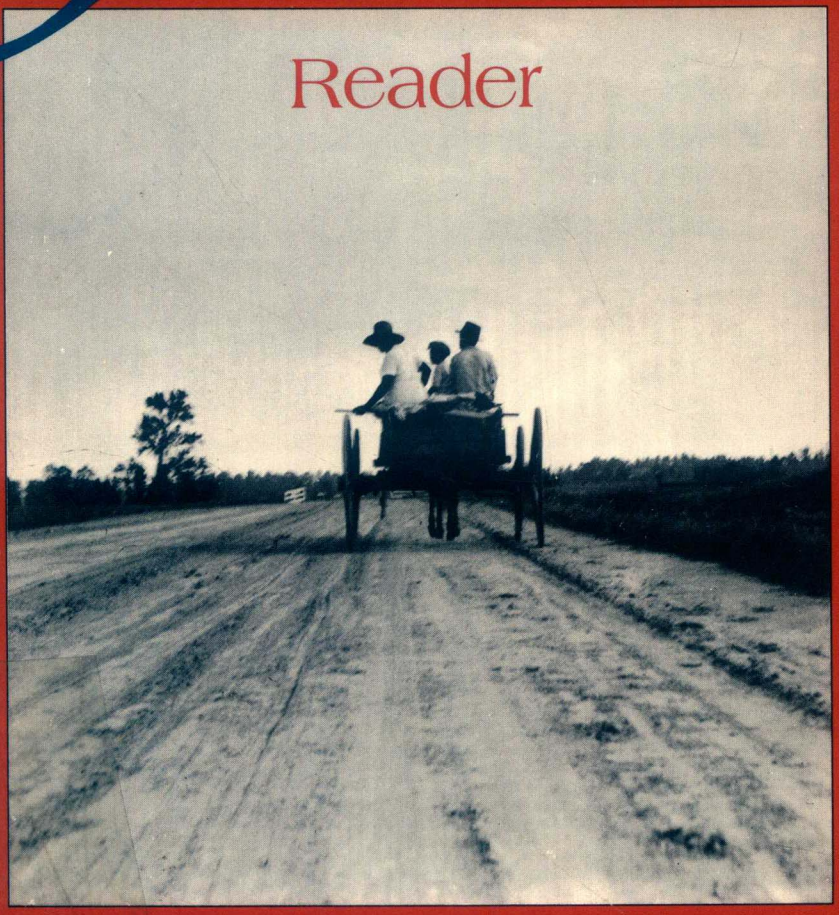
# A Modern SOUTHERN Reader



Major Stories, Drama, Poetry, Essays
Interviews and Reminiscences
from the Twentieth Century South

Edited by Ben Forkner and Patrick Samway, S. J.

# A Modern SOUTHERN Reader

Major Stories, Drama, Poetry, Essays
Interviews and Reminiscences
from the Twentieth Century South

Edited by Ben Forkner and Patrick Samway, S. J.

PEACHTREE PUBLISHERS, LTD.
*Atlanta*

Published by
PEACHTREE PUBLISHERS, LTD.
494 Armour Circle, N.E.
Atlanta, Georgia 30324



Manufactured in the United States of America

5th printing

Cover design by Candace J. Magee
Design by Paulette L. Lambert

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A Modern southern reader.

1. American literature--Southern States. 2. American literature--20th century. 3. Southern States--Literary collections. 4. Authors, American--Southern States--Biography. 5. Authors, American--Southern States--Interviews. 6. Southern States in literature.
I. Forkner, Ben. II. Samway, Patrick H.
PS551.M64 1986 810'.8'0975 86-21218
ISBN 0-934601-01-1
ISBN 0-934601-08-9 (pbk.)

Cover photograph: Eudora Welty Collection—The Mississippi Department of Archives and History

# • CONTENTS •

# • INTRODUCTION •

AS THE LAST DECADE of the century progresses, and as we look back at what should remain alive in the next, there seems a good chance that Southern literature of the twentieth century will be remembered and read as one of the permanent gifts of modern times. A list of the best of Southern writers — William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Peter Taylor, Ernest Gaines, Reynolds Price, Robert Penn Warren, Walker Percy, and all the rest — would be recognized anywhere in the world where modern writing counts, just as the best of Southern music — blues, jazz, bluegrass, and the modern country song — has given us the most original, vital, and far-reaching regional music of the century.

Looking back, it is difficult to realize that as late as 1917 H.L. Mencken condemned the South as a cultural desert, the Sahara of the Bozart. To be fair to Mencken, the great age of Southern letters — the age represented in this collection — was to begin several years after his thundering dismissal. But to be fair to the South, Mencken was in many ways blind and deaf to the deep springs of vigorous traditional arts — homemade music and compulsive storytelling — that had been there all the time when the modern spirit of the South began to awaken.

This anthology is intended as one way of setting forward the best of modern Southern writing in a single volume, a representative choice from a remarkably fertile time and place. Of course the century is not finished, and there are still good Southern writers at work, many of them included here, but the natural chronological brackets of a nearly complete century is only one of the good reasons for making the collection now. For one thing, the South, even in its most traditional and stubborn enclaves, has become more and more indistinguishable from the rest of the United States, especially in the last twenty years. Differences do remain, and sometimes seem to hold on crazily despite all odds. You can stand in the center of Columbus, Mississippi, or Hillsboro, North Carolina, or in the larger towns of Natchez or Savannah, and still feel part of a permanent Southern community, at least as far as the vegetation and the architecture are concerned. But in the middle of each house and on the outskirts of each town the South has given way to the common national norm. Television and the suburban shopping mall have pushed it further into the backcountry, and the small town rural world of the early decades of the century is now most fully alive in the fiction it helped create.

Good writing will continue to come out of the South, but it will have to be a good deal different from the stories of Faulkner and Welty and Gaines to reflect the Sun Belt South of tomorrow. Even the contemporary Southern writers most alert to the absurdities and contrasts of today's transformed South — Walker Percy and Barry Hannah come immediately to mind — rely on a well-defined Southern community to make their satires of doubt and alienation work. The community might be based on memory rather than immediate experience, but the notion of a complete community underlies almost all modern Southern writing. Flannery O'Connor once answered an attack that Southern writing — of the 1940's and 1950's — often dealt with grotesques by observing that the Southern writer writes about grotesques because he is still able to recognize one. O'Connor's fanatic eccentrics and Percy's rudderless castaways are perhaps in no other way comparable, but they both are clearly defined against a community that exerts powerful forces even when doomed.

To a large degree, it has been precisely the Southern writer's keen awareness of a community *different* from the rest of the United States that has stamped his stories and poems and reminiscences. Many of these differences come readily to mind: the history of a rural, agrarian society dominated by the plantation and slave labor; the powerful impact of nineteenth-century sectionalism that led to the Southern secession and the War; the haunting and helpless memory of reckless courage and resounding defeat that lasted through the Reconstruction and on into the twentieth century; the myth of an antebellum golden age which, like all myths, tended to draw the curtains in front of the grim realities it could never fully face, and the most pervasive difference of all, the often cruel, always humiliating oppression of blacks by whites — a forced segregation between two races who nevertheless lived so close to each other that individual reconciliations were more common than not. Historians, social theorists, and economists — all could add to this list. The modern South has had its share of compelling dissections. And the modern Southern writer, growing up at the beginning of the century, has had his share of ripe obsessions and dramatic oppositions to deliver into literature.

There is another important difference, an obvious one to a reader opening a book of stories and poems: the distinctive character of Southern speech. Perhaps the fact that it is so obvious helps account for the relatively little attention it has been given in discussions of what sets the South apart. Yet the language of the South has always been bound up with its special identity. When Mark Twain revisited the Mississippi River in 1882 to write his impressions of the changes that had occurred since the War, there was at least one element of Southern life that had not changed at all, the characteristic sound of its speech: "I found the half-forgotten Southern intonations and elisions as pleasing to my ear as they had formerly been. A Southerner talks music. At least it is music to me, but then I was born in the South. The educated Southerner has no use for an r, except at the

beginning of a word. He says 'honah,' and 'dinnah,' and 'Gove'nuh,' and 'befo' the waw,' and so on. The words may lack charm to the eye, in print, but they have it to the ear."

That these same examples could be taken from Southern speech today without too much hunting around argues in several directions. It proves that language is a powerful force of community identity, time-resistant, and, as Mark Twain himself suggests, space-resistant as well. He was born in Florida, Missouri, north of St. Louis. But he speaks of himself as being born in the South. What he means is that the small frontier town of Florida, and later, of Hannibal, were at the very least outposts of the South, where the majority of the inhabitants spoke and acted and ate the way they had in Tennessee, Kentucky, or Virginia before they moved West. If anything, the displacement made them more attached to what they had brought from home. Mark Twain was born "in the South," but he was also born a Southern exile, an origin that may help explain the sense of loss and of looking back all through his work. At the end of his life, in Connecticut, he is capable of complaining that corn bread, hot biscuits, and fried chicken have "never been properly cooked in the North."

Twain's examples of Southern speech suggest something else for the reader of modern Southern literature, that the South affirms its identity as much in the ways of expression as in what is expressed. The objection could be made that in the examples given, Twain limits himself to mere sounds, a characteristic accent or pronunciation. But just two years after he published *Life on the Mississippi* and his observations on Southern "intonations," he finished what Allen Tate has called the first modern Southern novel, *Huckleberry Finn*, a book that exploits the resources of vocabulary, idiomatic invention, and poetic power of an uneducated Southern boy in a revolutionary way. *Huckleberry Finn* had no immediate successors, but as the one great example of a wholly Southern narrative capable of giving astonishing voice to a wide range of Southern realities, it prepared the way for the literary revival of the twentieth-century South. So many modern Southern writers — Faulkner, Warren, Welty, Percy — have mentioned it as an important literary influence in their careers that it will be worthwhile coming back to it later on as one of the best introductions to their writing.

Eighty years after Twain's observations, Flannery O'Connor also turned to language in a definition of Southern qualities. Like Twain, she did not write under any regional spells, and she was not given to sentimental praise of Southern myths; but for her, too, one of the great fortunes of a Southern writer was his native English: "There are two qualities that make fiction. One is the sense of mystery and the other is the sense of manners. You get the manners from the texture of existence that surrounds you. The great advantage of being a Southern writer is that we don't have to go anywhere to look for manners; bad or good, we've got them in abundance. We in the South live in a society that is rich in contradictions, rich in irony, rich in contrast, and particularly rich in its speech."

Perhaps one reason Flannery O'Connor felt called on to praise the wealth of behavior and speech she saw and heard every day around her in the present, was that at the time she was writing, in the 1950's, the most common distinction of the South was its struggle with the predominantly negative legacies of its past: the burden of its special history.

This last phrase is of course the title of the well-known book by Southern historian C. Vann Woodward. *The Burden of Southern History* was published in 1960, but the essays it contains were written during the 1950's, and they represent the most forceful statement of what had become the dominant version of Southern difference. Woodward was greatly influenced by the new Southern writing of the first half of the century; he readily acknowledged — even insisted on the fact — that his reading of Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, Thomas Wolfe, Robert Penn Warren — to whom *The Burden* is dedicated — helped sharpen his vision of Southern history. The Southern writer who influenced him most powerfully was Allen Tate: poet, novelist, critic, and Southern theorist. Even though he is best known as a poet, Tate's Southern essays exceed everything else he wrote as rich fuel for all sorts of recent speculations about the South.

In an essay published in 1935, "The Profession of Letters in the South," Tate had pointed out the "peculiarly historical consciousness" of the Southern writer. And in a later essay, "The New Provincialism," he made the claim that the historical compulsion of the modern Southern writer was the driving force behind the brilliant burst of literary achievement after World War I: "With the war of 1914-1918, the South reentered the world — but gave a backward glance as it slipped over the border: that backward glance gave us the Southern renascence, a literature conscious of the past in the present." As Tate suggested, and as Woodward developed the idea in his essays, Southern history was considerably different from the common experience of the rest of the United States. Instead of the usual American story of success, industrial progress, social mobility, accessible wealth, equal rights, and confidence in the future, the Southern historical legacy was one of defeat, dispossession, poverty, racial oppression, rural inertia, and, for many, a corrosive guilt. For Tate, and for Woodward, the first half of the century was marked in the South by a necessary struggle with this legacy, a continual wrestling with the past in order to better confront the tormenting realities of the present.

The struggle took many forms and expressed as many attitudes as there were writers. What all the writers did share, however, were a spirit of critical inquiry and a willingness to apply the lessons of modern literary realism. Faulkner, Porter, Caroline Gordon, Andrew Lytle, Warren, all make use of the Southern problem of the past, but always dramatically. They were well-read in the Southern literature of the nineteenth century, and realized that its weaknesses were largely attributable to the way political simplifications often shoved aside social realities and obscured the contradictions of individual character.

The single intellectual movement in modern Southern letters, the Fugitive-Agrarian group at Vanderbilt University in the 1920's, did tend to look back to certain community values of the Southern past as preferable to the urban uniformity and mass culture of modern times, but their attachment was never blind; they were in fact first to admit that earlier Southern literature was "hag-ridden" by politics and political rhetoric. The poets of this group are best considered individually, since Ransom, Tate, and especially Warren, were to have long careers as independent moderns. But their collection of essays published as an Agrarian "manifesto" in 1930, *I'll Take My Stand*, did mark an important step in their lives and in the intellectual history of the South, even though, as most polemical tracts, it seems today more valuable as an historical document than as a seedbed for Southern theory. Certainly the idea behind most of the essays, that society is most fully human when based on the simple fact of "the family on the land," has remained a powerful countercurrent to the enormous changes the traditional rural South has undergone.

As a collection of twelve essays, *I'll Take My Stand* served as a document that mirrored the thinking about Southern society, culture, religion, industry, and the arts up to 1930, much as in a more sustained way Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, and others of their generation did in Victorian England; it also served as a lamp to light up the way for the rest of the twentieth century and give direction, as the essayists fervently hoped, to future decision makers in the South. American society has changed in ways that these writers could never have imagined in 1930; one has only to think of the differences made by jet planes, lasers, the civil rights, gay and feminist movements, the growth of universities, computers, industrial robots, moon landings, World War II and the war in Vietnam, television, Moog synthesizers, Dacron, and wonder drugs. Today, in hindsight, some of the views of these agrarians, as stated in the introduction to the book, seem not to have weathered well the test of time: "Art depends, in general, like religion, on a right attitude to nature; and in particular on a free and disinterested observation of nature that occurs only in leisure. Neither the creation nor the understanding of works of art is possible in an industrial age except by some local and unlikely suspension of the industrial drive." And yet, contrary to the expectations of these agrarians, American (and Southern) art and belles lettres prosper and have continued to thrive during the last fifty years.

In spite of their reluctance to a changing American society, these twelve Southern thinkers are not arguing for a nostalgic return to the Old South; rather, they are concerned with articulating a workable philosophy rooted in a love of land and the concommitant values that emerge from such stewardship, among which are a strong family unit, a commitment to the incarnational theology of the Bible, the development of a legal system that respects the differences that exist in various parts of the United States, and an expressive use of language that reveals the foundation of a rich literary tradition. None of these essayists gives a more

sympathetic overview of Southern society than does Andrew Lytle in "The Hind Tit." Lytle believed that one must understand, in particular, the rapid alterations that the Cotton Kingdom underwent after the Civil War in order to appreciate the transformation that took place in the South and the subsequent demands his agrarian-minded confreres were making. The rise of the poor white sharecropper who supplanted the black slave, the use of fertilizers that insured a faster growing cotton and thus a greater reliance on a cash economy, and the expansion of the railroads that brought an end to regional isolationism — all created a fabric, he believed, that could be torn apart by an unchallenged proclamation of thoughtless notions about manifest destiny. In his portrayal of the South, Lytle never loses a sense of the demands, rewards, and specificity of daily life; yet his lyric raptures lead to an untenable conclusion: Until the small Southern farmers and the conservative communities across the United States unite politically, Southerners must not buy any products that the industrialists offer for sale. Unfortunately, his position prevents genuine growth or advancement.

In his essay "Reconstructed But Unregenerate," John Crowe Ransom, provides a glimmer of hope in suggesting a solution to industrialism's grip on the Southern economy; in his view, the South has the potential to provide moral leadership for the rest of the country: "I wish that the whole force of my own generation in the South would get behind his principles and make them an idea which the nation at large would have to reckon with." In general, Ransom saw the South as the place where European principles of culture can continue to flourish and exert an influence over the rest of the country. Unlike life in England, however, where people have successfully adapted to the environment, he wrote, the American way of life is progressive, urbanized, and in a constant state of flux. Although Ransom and his colleagues could well be accused of setting up a too neat dichotomy between the progress of industrialism (and its counterpart, service) and undisturbed nature, they apodictically believed, and with good common sense to support them, that progress "never defines its ultimate objective, but thrusts its victims at once into an infinite series." Not too subtly, they imply that progress will have deleterious effects on society and that, more importantly, intelligent men and women cannot provide the answers needed to solve the ongoing congeries of complex problems that steadily confront them.

What eventually happened in the years since *I'll Take My Stand* was published is that Southerners have, rightly or wrongly, been conscious of the principles that Ransom alluded to. Ransom wisely had no concrete plan for development in the South; he knew that a philosophical approach would win the day since it would set guidelines that would have to be accommodated at each stage of industrial development. One way to adapt would be for "the South to reenter the American political field with a determination and an address quite beyond anything she has exhibited during her half-hearted national life of the last half a century." By joining the mainstream of American life and not remaining apart from it, South-

erners, ever conscious of the sources of their talents and genius, have constantly nourished American society without depleting their own creative wellsprings. The problem, of course, was and will always remain how to prevent a partial or even complete dissolution of the Southern way of life in spite of the tremendous ebb and flow in American society. At least two of the contributors, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, continued to revise and develop their interpretations on religion and race relations respectively in later essays. But given the far greater worth of the poetry of these two writers, it is probably best to remember *I'll Take My Stand* as an exceptional — and limited — expression of the modern writer's conviction that in the South, as Faulkner's Gavin Stevens argues, "the past is not dead. It is not even past."

There can be no question that the pressures and problems of Southern history — as Allen Tate and C. Vann Woodward have claimed — dominated the beginnings of modern Southern fiction. Even the characteristic form of many of the novels and stories was, appropriately enough, the retrospective monologue. Remembering and, to use an old Southernism, disremembering, became the most vital acts of central characters in a Faulkner novel or a Katherine Anne Porter story. But the burden of Southern history is only a partial explanation of the force and vividness found in these writers. Southern language and Southern attitudes toward language are equally important. We need a term such as a renewed "verbal consciousness" to match the new "historical consciousness" Allen Tate singled out. This brings us back to Flannery O'Connor's reference to the rich vein of Southern speech which seemed to her in the 1950's one of the abiding gifts of Southern life.

There is a way, of course, in which the Southern writer's special use of his native English coincides with his historical preoccupations. Stories out of the past are always on the threshold of legend and myth, and the reverential or automatic repetition of these stories are closely bound up with the conscious or unconscious attitude towards the language that embodies them. The power of language to trap, betray, and distort is as great as its power to reveal or give meaning, and for a Faulkner character, for example, the sacred myths and the sacred words are never far from the mechanical rite that has been emptied of all value. The modern Southerner, because of his history, is perhaps more keenly aware than others of the universal fact that an individual can only express his nature in a language he has inherited. He should constantly be sounding his words out, thumping them for what is rotten or ripe. Eudora Welty begins one of her essays by remarking that "we start from scratch, and words don't; which is the thing that matters — matters over and over again."

Another dimension of this new "verbal consciousness" — more closely related to Flannery O'Connor's praise of the Southern idiom — was the fresh appreciation of Mark Twain's discovery that poetry, wit, expressive power, and range reside as much in the vernacular as they do in the literary tradition. Mark Twain, of course, was not the only Southern writer to exploit the resources of the spoken word, but

he was the first to free it from conventional stereotypes. When the modern Southern writer looked back at the Southern literature of the nineteenth century, he could not help but be struck by the ease with which most books could be classified in terms of literary schools.

There was the plantation novel, launched by John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* in 1832 and culminating in Thomas Nelson Page's *In Ole Virginia* in 1887. Most of the plantation novels and stories follow the same pattern of nostalgia and regret, looking back to a better age of social and racial harmonies. With their genteel descriptions of the fine-mannered master and the faithful slave, both full of good humor and mutual sympathy, they helped fix the myth of the antebellum plantation in the Southern and, for that matter, the Northern imagination. There were the historical romances of the colonial South by William Gilmore Simms and dozens more now forgotten names. There were also the Southwestern humorists — the Southwest referring to what is now known principally as the Deep South: Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana in the decades just before the Civil War — who brought to the civilized East the exotic stories of the wild and unlettered frontier. Finally, there were the local color writers of the post-Civil War South: Irwin Russell, Joel Chandler Harris, George Washington Cable, and others, who turned to profit an accurate description of regional Southern dialects and folkways, attractive and archaic to Northern readers whose own language was becoming standardized, and whose cities promoted the modern and the brand-new at all costs.

The main problem with much of this writing — and the reason it is so easy to classify — stems from its reliance on social and racial types, and on a rigid division of language into two kinds: educated and not. This same division plays an important role in fictional narration. Dialect, both black and white, even when accurately rendered, was reserved almost exclusively for comic effect, and the eccentricities of native Southern speech were made even more so by surrounding them by the overblown, excessively "literary" style of the author. Many of these writers were professional lawyers, and all too often the thesaurus oratory and the Latin tags are as suffocating as a summer courtroom. Given the conventions of the genteel literary tradition that most nineteenth-century Southern writers adhered to, we are often left with the impression of two extremely opposed versions of experience, each in its own way limited and isolated.

Characterization was almost wholly determined by social position demanding well-defined, and too often one-dimensional roles. The capacity of a human being to slip in and out of several roles, sometimes at cross-purposes with each other, and despite this, remain himself, is rarely acknowledged in early Southern fiction.

The attitude that made it so rare was not confined to the Southern writer. In *The Cotton Kingdom* by Frederick Law Olmsted, one of the most perceptive and informative accounts we have of the South just before the Civil War, the North-

erner Olmsted is gratified whenever he meets the expected Southern "type" in the flesh. He can thus give his reader faithful snapshots of a pipe-smoking female "cracker," a rich absentee planter, or a gesticulating black preacher. He does so with a great deal of sympathy, but there is always the question of what is hidden by the artificial light of the photographic flash. To Olmsted's credit, he is not always satisfied with his categories, and can confess his confusion when he discovers someone inhabited by more than a single form of social behavior. For Olmsted, it is interesting to note, this strange self-contradiction was more Southern than Northern: "I found that, more than any people I had ever seen, they were unrateable by dress, taste, forms, and expenditures. I was perplexed by finding, apparently united in the same individual, the self-possession, confidence, and the use of expressions of deference, of the well-equipped gentleman, and the coarseness and low tastes of the uncivilized boor — frankness and reserve, recklessness and self-restraint, extravagance and penuriousness." The problem with much of early Southern fiction is that it too finds it difficult to do justice to the complex ironies and unpredictable shifts of an actual human being, and this is exactly one of the strengths of the modern Southern writer, from William Faulkner to Walker Percy.

As has been implied up to now, twentieth-century Southern literature has been marked especially by the works of one writer: William Faulkner. For those who were his contemporaries and followed after him, they had, in the marvelous image of Flannery O'Connor, to get off the tracks quickly when the Dixie Limited came roaring down. Born in 1897 in northern Mississippi, Faulkner came from a family that was known both in that area and beyond. His great-grandfather, for example, Col. William Clark Falkner (without the "u"), wrote the best seller *The White Rose of Memphis* (1881) and other works; he was also noted as someone who had killed two men before being murdered himself by one of his business partners. Young William grew up in the post-Civil War years and though he incorporated situations from this war into a number of works, including *The Unvanquished* (1938), his genius was rooted more in his desire to explore his native region, his own "little postage stamp of native soil," and to expand continually the frontiers of fiction.

His first important novel, *Sartoris* (1929), relying to some degree on his own family genealogy, portrayed the clash of values that the South experienced in the late 1920's, particularly in the emotional shock a young Southerner feels when returning to Mississippi at the end of World War I. Though Faulkner had never seen battle in Europe (he had joined the Royal Air Force and trained in Toronto, Canada), he was acutely conscious of the changes taking place in the South during his lifetime. In this novel and in subsequent ones, he dealt both with the South's ability or inability to find strength to overcome the obstacles time inevitably brings. In *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), for example, a title taken from the last act of *Macbeth*, Faulkner tells the story of the decline and fall of the Compson