

Thomas Wolfe and the Civil War

The New South of the twentieth century remained a land haunted by the ghosts of the Confederacy. The ghosts had helped make it a conservative, deferential society; they had contributed to an unquestioning patriotism and respect for the military. Sometimes they had supported the cause of reaction. They were not ancestral spirits who exercised constant or crucial influence, however. Rather they were phantoms called forth from time to time by various people for differing purposes. The ghosts of the Confederacy had shaped the New South, but in the twentieth century they had become too elusive and ephemeral to define its identity.

—Gaines M. Foster

Thomas Wolfe was born in 1900 at the close of the last hurrah for the Confederacy, a cry that lasted some twenty years with the erection of monuments in cities and villages across the South. Fewer and fewer authentic voices of experience spoke of the great national crisis of the nineteenth century and those that did were less and less analytical and more and more wistful. The march of mythology had started as younger generations far removed from the events began to hear accounts of battles and heroes at the knees of their elders. Wolfe as an adult went to visit a half brother of his grandfather in Western North Carolina and heard an account of Chickamauga from this ninety-five year old veteran of that battle (Nowell 380), material that emerges in Wolfe's own story named for the battle. But Wolfe had heard other stories much earlier, for his father, fifteen at war's end, had worked in a Union mule camp and endured the loss of family members who fought for the Union at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg (Nowell 22). And his mother's father had served the Confederacy as a major in the

North Carolina militia; surely she, who had grown up in the poverty of the Reconstruction, had her own stories. In school, Wolfe read and heard about the Civil War from the perspective of “how we almost ‘whipped’ [the yankees]” (Donald 16).

As a voice carrying out the demands of the mythology of lost order, and grandeur, Wolfe emerges as a problematic sound. Having a mother and father tied to both sides of the conflict offers an immediate dichotomy of vision. Hugh Holman notes that Wolfe was “a product of a region steeped in defeat, suffering, and the acceptance of an unthinkable inevitability” despite the liberal area of the South “in which he grew up” (40-41). David Herbert Donald in his biography observes that “Asheville, a city with few links to the antebellum slavery era, was not especially Southern” (79). Mountain areas as far South as Mentone, Alabama, on Lookout Mountain seem apart from the antebellum temper of the midlands that feature the more recognizable elements of the historical South. For one thing, they were generally cut off from easy transportation and as a result the populations were less coherent in an economic and social sense. With a few notable exceptions, the war had marched below and by these places. To add one more item to the mix, Wolfe felt the complementary influence of literary Modernism, especially through the work of Joyce, with its uncertainty of place and divided self. For Wolfe, his play *Mannerhouse* notwithstanding, the Civil War did not form the focal point of his imagination; rather, it appeared as an occasional feature influencing perspective.

Foster comments that “In the 1920s and 1930s many southerners still remembered and talked about the war, although probably intellectuals and artists did so more than businessmen and workers” (196). The biographies and studies published then, including those by the group that would come to be known as the Agrarians certainly provide enough evidence for this generalization. Wolfe, keenly aware of his “southernness” at least that attributed to him by his Harvard colleagues, wrote his ritual work of initiation into the fraternity of southern writers, the previously cited play *Mannerhouse*, with its emphases on loss, decadence, and dissolution. Wolfe’s interest quickly shifted to the

contemporary, often with a romantic's understanding, if not vision of the impact of the past on the present.

Most readers know Wolfe for his voluminous novels, none of which have the Civil War as their subject. And yet the war enters them as well as parts of those that have appeared as short fiction. In defining Wolfe's point of view on the war as a subject, one in which he displays an empathy for its role in the lives of people north and south and one in which he is clearly the "other," we can examine a section of *You Can't go Home Again*. George Webber observes his aged and alone neighbor Mr. Wakefield:

He was a veteran of the Union Army in the Civil War, and his room was filled with books, records, papers, and old clippings bearing on the war and on the part his regiment played in it. Although he was alert and eager toward the life around him, and much too brave and hopeful a spirit to live mournfully in the past, the Civil War had been the great and central event in old man Wakefield's life. Like many of the men of his generation, both North and South, it had never occurred to him that the war was not the central event in everyone's life. Because it was so with him, he believed that people everywhere still lived and thought and talked about the war all the time. (406)

Wolfe separates himself from the world of this old soldier who could just as well have been an old Southern soldier as he identifies closely with Webber's awareness of the present, his analytical style, and youthful sense of play. As Wolfe relates Wakefield's and Webber's conversation, one experiences humor in Wakefield's being out of step, a tolerance for his situation, and a growing yet controlled tendency toward caricature. Using the North as a setting, Wolfe lifts the Civil War from its traditional southern setting and ownership to provide readers with a fresh view of a reality that was fast becoming obscured by cliché.

In *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe demonstrates in a sustained way his ability to draw material from the Union background of his father and the Confederate background of his mother and handle each with empathy for the intensely autobiographical characters

he creates. He describes with an understanding humor the singular and lackluster engagement of Major Thomas Pentland's repulsing Sherman's stragglers. And yet he carefully presents through Eugene's father's story Confederate General Fitzhugh Lee's praising a northern boy by saying, "It is impossible to defeat an enemy which breeds boys like that" (224).

With quiet irony Wolfe treats Colonel James Buchanan Pettigrew, who led his cadets into battle and who years later wears his Confederate gray cape in his carriage, and describes him in the Chaucerian line: "He was a very parfit gentil knight" (288). In the scene where the Colonel passes Wood's pharmacy, at which some of his students are recreating, Wolfe suggests a passing of the old guard, but a passing with a dignity that allows some humor. Wolfe at this moment seems almost to be drawn into the situation created, but stands back for art to overwhelm sentiment.

Only thirty years before *The Web and the Rock*, much controversy centered on the construction of a memorial for, as one monument design noted, "The Women of the Confederacy." Arguments persisted about the image being too "defiant," lacking "womanly grace or modesty," and not reflecting "the patient, self-sacrificing, unwearied helper and comforter of the boys in gray" (Foster 176-77). Wolfe frequently uses the term "wilderness" (*Web* 69) to describe the land in much of the antebellum South. He sees a hardness to the experience of the land and its inhabitants. So in his creation of Aunt Maw one can easily see a character whose image contradicts those prevailing attitudes embracing the idealized portraits of women suffering and one that embraces the strength, will, and humor to survive under duress: "She was not sorrowful herself. She fed on all the loneliness and death of the huge, dark past with a kind of ruminant and invincible relish, which said that all men must die save only these triumphant censors of man's destiny, these neverdying, all consuming Joyner witnesses of sorrow, who lived, and lived forever" (*Web* 69).

Of course, much of Wolfe's mother is in this character who somehow seemed more nearly true for the generation she represents than all that marble could hear. Aunt Maw's critical view of the soldiers and the so-called reasons for their coming

home from the war at odd times did not escape her judgment: "It didn't take long for [Sam] to get well when he saw the war was comin' to an end and he wouldn't have to go back and join the rest of them"(70). Revisionist might be too definite a term to attribute to Wolfe in his approach to the depiction of women and the Civil War, but he was in the company of writers like Margaret Mitchell, Gwen Bristow, and William Faulkner, who had created female figures contradicting the stereotypes.

Of fifty-eight stories in *The Complete Short Stories*, only four narratives actually focus on the Civil War: the previously cited "Chickamauga," "The Four Lost Men," "The Bell Remembered," and "The Plumed Knight." Four others possess images of the conflict that contribute both to its reality and its myth. "Boom Town" has a reference to the economic vulnerability of "Civil War veterans and their decrepit pensioned widows" (*Stories* 126). In "Angel on the Porch," realism and romance touch as Wolfe tries to define the reality of a moment through a comparison to the frozen life of a photograph—a veteran who finds himself upon his elbow near Ulysses Grant (*Stories* 9). In both "The Train and the City" and "The Names of the Nation," fiction remarkably close to prose poems, Wolfe reaches toward a Whitman-like vision of the United States using catalogues of dead soldiers and famous battles among an epic range of images.

The most frequently cited Civil War story, "Chickamauga," reflects Wolfe's giving up his own voice to that of the narrator who closely embodies the half brother of his grandfather (Nowell 380). The point of view is distinctively other than Wolfe, who seems to have been seduced by the charm and power of the old veteran's story. The lyrical quality grows intense with the refrain that actually opens and closes with slight variation the specific story of the battle:

But I have been in some big battles, I can tell you: I've seen strange things and been in bloody fights. But the biggest fight that I was ever in—the bloodiest battle anyone ever fought—was Chickamauga in that cedar thicket—at Chickamauga Creek in that great War. (*Stories* 396)

Wolfe does allow himself the freedom to shape the story so that there are marked contrasts between a real portrayal and an impressionistic one in which the nightmare of the experience overwhelms the reader to a degree similar to that in Ambrose Bierce's tale of this battle.

Wolfe maintains the authority of the narrative with a voice close to his own in "The Bell Remembered," a story built on the memory of the narrator's father in conflict with the experience of the present. Wolfe uses the fiction in part as a means of criticizing the pattern of veterans who served as soldiers and in the aftermath of the war gave themselves the ranks of officers. Here the representative culprit is "Major" Slagle (*Stories*, 284), a twice-wounded veteran also known by the name Looky Thar. In addition to the loss of a leg, Looky Thar also has a large hole in the roof of his mouth, an apt condition for one given to exaggerating his military reputation. The youngster's father stands in quiet and solemn contrast to this ridiculous figure, for as the boy discovers he, indeed, had lost a leg in hand-to-hand combat at Spotsylvania and except for his limp had not revealed his crippled condition to his son. If Wolfe searched for a father in his fiction, even though it seemed that he was more often searching for a mother, here is an example of the former. Although the story is tightly bound to the Civil War and the South, it goes beyond particular place and circumstance, beyond the function of regional apologia.

"The Plumed Knight" also attacks the post war Southern myth of "everyman a hero and a colonel" with the humorous account of Theodore Joyner's rise to rank by creating a Southern military academy, marching his cadets to war, and contributing to the growing myth of the post war South. The events play off a similar story about Colonel James Buchanan Pettigrew from *Look Homeward, Angel*, but Joyner's experiences form part of a sustained broadside against what Foster terms the late Confederate celebration (194). This story with its tract-like elements presents by far the most vigorous treatment of this subject by Wolfe, the most singular position that he has developed on issues related to the Civil War.

Wolfe's story "The Four Lost Men" moves toward a fiction of ideas. Within a frequently used framed narrative structure, the

father tells stories to the son at the boarding house with an audience of guests and the son later recalls and uses the story for his purposes. The son remembers the father's tales of Gettysburg, merges them with the father's told-memories of American presidents, and imagines their serving in the conflict with the epiphanies that it would give them on the realities of war:

Then Garfield, Arthur, Harrison, and Hayes had gone to war, and each became a brigadier or major general. All were bearded men: they saw a spattering of bright blood upon the leaves, and they heard the soldiers talking in the dark of food and women. They held the bridge head And they heard the surgeons cursing after battle and the little rasp of saws. They had seen boys standing awkwardly holding their entrails in their hands When the cannister came through, it made a ragged hole. . . . Sometimes when it struck a man, it tore away the roof of his brain, the wall of his skull And when Garfield, Arthur, Harrison, and Hayes saw these things, they saw that it was not like the picture they had as children; it was not like the works of Walter Scott and William Gilmore Simms. (*Stories* 111)

Wolfe's fairy tale tone mixed with the prose poetry of vision contributes to this story's philosophical consideration of war; beyond cause, issues, and alliance, for questions dominate the last two paragraphs:

Shall we ever ride out of the gates of the East again, as we did once at morning, and seek again, as we did then, new lands, the promise of the war, and glory, joy, and triumph, and a shining city? . . . O youth, still wounded, living, feeling with a woe unutterable, still grieving with a grief intolerable, still thirsting with a thirst unquenchable—where are we to seek? (119)

The ghosts of the Confederacy that Foster cites had, indeed, begun to be more elusive by the 1920s and 1930s, but enough remained inspired by the marble monuments in public places and old battlefields in the South. Wolfe, taking this vista in from his

mountain view, worked to establish the distance that an artist required. In *Mannerhouse* he acknowledged the calamity. His novels reveal the changing locus of the event in the experience of his generation, but the short fiction provides the venue for a few sustained considerations of the Civil War and its meaning. Touched directly by stories from family and community, he tried to find the ghosts, describe their vestiges, and exorcise what he thought false and perilous. □

Works Cited

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