

## Epilogue

HISTORY IS A LIBERAL ART AND ONE PROFITS BY STUDYING THE whole of it, including the lost causes. All of us are under a mortal temptation to grant the accomplished fact more than we should. That the fall of Rome, the dissolution of medieval Catholicism, the overthrow of Napoleon, the destruction of the Old South were purposeful and just are conclusions that only the tough-minded will question. But such events, hampered out by soldiers and politicians, by adventurers and traders, are hardly a guide to the moral world. They are text for the lesson, not the lesson itself, which should go beyond the waywardness of events. Behind all there must be a conception which can show the facts in something more than their temporal accident. In this research, therefore, I have attempted to find those things in the struggle of the South which speak for something more than a particular people in a special situation. The result, it may be allowed, is not pure history, but a picture of values and sentiments coping with the forces of a revolutionary age, and though failing, hardly expiring.

The South possesses an inheritance which it has imperfectly understood and little used. It is in the curious position of having been right without realizing the grounds of its rightness. I am conscious that this reverses the common judgment; but it may yet appear that the North, by its ready embrace of science and rationalism, impoverished itself, and that the South by clinging more or less unashamedly to the primitive way of life prepared itself for the longer run.

It is an old Southern custom, however, to take too sanguine a view of the section's record, and before going further with

this prophecy, one should make a candid examination of failures. The South committed two great errors in its struggle against the modern world, errors characteristic for it, but of disastrous consequence. The first was a failure to study its position until it arrived at metaphysical foundations. No Southern spokesman was ever able to show why the South was right *finally*. In other words, the South never perfected its world view, which determines in the end what we want and what we are. Legal arguments like those of the apologia are but a superstructure resting upon more fundamental assumptions; journalistic defenses, however brilliant in phrase, are likely to be even less; and fiction may serve only as a means of propagation. The South spoke well on a certain level, but it did not make the indispensable conquest of the imagination. From the Bible and Aristotle it might have produced its *Summa Theologia*, but none measured up to the task, and there is no evidence that the performance would have been rewarded. It needed a Burke or a Hegel; it produced lawyers and journalists. Perhaps the sin for which the South has most fully though unknowingly atoned is its failure to encourage the mind. Some fringes of excess it has thereby avoided, but it has had to compete against the great world with second-rate talent, and to accept the defensive where an offensive was indicated. One may understand the feeling which could boast of the South's freedom from *isms*, but this implies the existence of a satisfactory theology and metaphysics, which were not on hand. The lack continues, and today we behold Southern writers of amazing resource and virtuosity—I should instance here Thomas Wolfe—thrashing about in the world and almost terrifying us with their potentiality, but leaving in the end nothing but the record of an enormous sensibility. The average Southerner, pushed beyond the rather naive assumptions with which he sanctions his world, becomes helpless and explodes in anger.

Another great failure, and one for which people cannot be readily forgiven, is the surrender of initiative. So little has this section shown since 1865 that one is prompted to question whether the South ever really believed in itself. It is not that the South is uncreative; on the contrary it is pregnant and full of dreams; it is always sending abroad some novelty to be adapted and perfected; the list would be long and astonishing. But it seems to have no faith in its own *imprimatur*. It has been unwilling to buy books and magazines unless they came with the prestige of a Northern publisher; indeed this preference has extended over a vast range of things. Does it bespeak some deep-lying sense of incompetence, of inadequacy? The supposition clashes with the widely noticed presumption and conceit of the Southerner, with his faith in the rightness of his way of life, which have irritated numberless people from the outside.

I believe there is at bottom a consciousness of failure. Probably the decision of 1865 has been interpreted too literally. It has been regarded as casting a cloud over all Southern endeavor, so that the Southerner, despite efforts at compensation, has been unable to convince himself.

And more than likely this is to be traced to the first failure, the lack of a fundamental position from which he could judge his achievements with some assurance that the judgment would be vindicated.

In summary, I would say that the South needs now, as much as ever before, a metaphysic of its position, and that it must recover initiative at least to the point of following a right course without waiting for the North or for Washington to express approbation. Only this can diminish its hypersensitivity to criticism, which makes the task even of its friends difficult.

One might hesitate to say that the South, with such weaknesses, has anything to offer our age. But there is something

in its heritage, half lost, derided, betrayed by its own sons, which continues to fascinate the world. This is a momentous fact, for the world is seeking as perhaps never before for the thing that will lift up our hearts and restore our faith in human communities. The search is not new; it began before the brashness of nineteenth-century confidence had worn away, and Henry Adams, wearied with the plausibilities of his day, looked for some higher reality in the thirteenth-century synthesis of art and faith. In a parallel way victims of the confusions and frustrations of our own time turn with live interest to that fulfillment represented by the Old South. And it is this that they find: *the last non-materialist civilization in the Western World*. It is this refuge of sentiments and values, of spiritual congeniality, of belief in the word, of reverence for symbolism, whose existence haunts the nation. It is damned for its virtues and praised for its faults, and there are those who wish its annihilation. But most revealing of all is the fear that it gestates the revolutionary impulse of our future.

Looking at the whole of the South's promise and achievement, I would be unwilling to say that it offers a foundation, or, because of some accidents of history, even an example. The most that it offers is a challenge. And the challenge is to save the human spirit by re-creating a non-materialist society. Only this can rescue us from a future of nihilism, urged on by the demoniacal force of technology and by our own moral defeatism.

The first step will be to give the common man a world view completely different from that which he has constructed out of his random knowledge of science. Without this the various schemes of salvation are but palliatives. What man thinks about the world when he is driven back to his deepest reflections and most secret promptings will finally determine all that he does. We might well ask for a second coming to

accomplish this change. Multitudes would wait with eagerness to learn

... What rough beast, its hour come round at last  
 Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

But we must put aside the temptation of literalism and consider from what source we are likely to get the needful revelation. Barring the advent of an illumination by some fateful personality, the task falls upon poets, artists, intellectuals, upon workers in the timeless. We must again harken to these unacknowledged legislators of mankind. They alone can impress us with some splendid image of man in a morally designed world, ennobled by a conception of the transcendent. They will have to abandon, and I am sure they will be ready to abandon, the tortured imaginings of our vexed decades. The rift between them and the people has not been a rift of their own making, but the symptom of a deep lesion, and its cure will have to be a part of the "healing of the nations." The common man is now ready to discard his hazy notions of science and materialism, intellectual hobbies of a hundred years ago. Nor do I speak cynically here of a pendulum movement in fads; non-materialist views of the world have flourished for most of our history, have inspired our best art and held together our healthiest communities. This is, indeed, the "natural" view, whereas the other is symbolic of spiritual decadence. The South had this view and fought for it long, behind the barricades of revealed Christianity, of humanism, of sentiment; it battled somewhat ineptly for lack of adequate weapons, but with inner conviction. Now it can return as to the house of its fathers.

The creation of a religious moral world will bring an end to the downward conversion which today threatens institutions and culture. Equalitarians have always understood that

men must be equated through a lowest common denominator, which is appetite. All men are equal in that they get hungry and deserve to be fed; this is admissible on every side and should not be made a debating point in discussions of the future start. But as soon as we begin to refine the tests and to look for positive qualifications, we are at the threshold of those divisions which make society. We can then hope to distinguish between good and bad, between the wise and the foolish; we can have centers of power and influence; we can undertake the great task of demassing the masses. There will result a pluralistic world, in which one will not have to choose between being first at Rome and having no authority at all.

For the present tendency of the world's great states is in the direction of dictator or emperor worship. It is not a chosen course; the emperor will be elevated to his throne by science; he will be the source of control of power too dangerous for distributive ownership. Today we are running from our inventions, hiding from them, trying to reason away their awfuller potentialities. We shall soon have to perceive that science is democratic only in a treacherous sense. True, it brings the same thing to everyone, war to the babe in the cradle; it compels virtually all men to listen to radio edicts. But what of the source of the edicts? We are being narrowed down to one nation, to one world, in which nobody can move an elbow without jostling those in the farthest corner; and the danger of friction is so great that liberty of opposition must be decreased, channeled, and there must stand ready a supreme authority ready to strike down any menace to peace, to its peace, to the status quo. The emperor or dictator, of completely pervasive authority, backed by an oligarchy of scientists—that is the situation into which forces are hurrying us. The state becomes a monolith, rigid with fear that it has lost control of its destiny. We all stand today at Appomattox,

and we are surrendering to a world which this hypostatized science has made in our despite.

By restoring the moral and aesthetic medium, we shall have a leverage on this. We can will our world, and retrieve our defeat by an upward conversion. This will revive those differences which mean as much to living as rules mean to a game, which are indeed the living that is not sustained by bread alone. Then man can again see his life as a drama and know the transfiguring interest that comes through conflict. The conflict will not be a meaningless strife of forces, into which scientists and utilitarians sought to usher him, but a conflict in the old sense of religious drama, between him, with what he can apprehend of the good, and the powers of evil.

Distinctions of many kinds will have to be restored, and I would mention especially one whose loss has added immeasurably to the malaise of our civilization—the fruitful distinction between the sexes, with the recognition of respective spheres of influence. The re-establishment of woman as the cohesive force of the family, the end of the era of “long-haired men and short-haired women,” should bring a renewal of well-being to the whole of society. On this point Southerners of the old school were adamant, and even today, with our power of discrimination at its lowest point in history, there arises a feeling that the roles of the sexes must again be made explicit. George Fitzhugh’s brutal remark that if women put on trousers, men would use them for plowing has been borne out, and I think that women would have more influence actually if they did not vote, but, according to the advice of Augusta Evans Wilson, made their firesides seats of Delphic wisdom.

One word of advice must be given to workers for this new order. Considerations of strategy and tactics forbid the use of symbols of lost causes. There cannot be a return to the Mid-

dle Ages or the Old South under slogans identified with them. The principles must be studied and used, but in such presentation that mankind will feel the march is forward. And so it will be, to all effects. It is a serious thing to take from the average man, and perhaps from anyone, his belief in progress. The average man’s metaphysic is summed up by this word; “progressive” is his token of approval. Therefore the future will always be the future, and we need not lecture tediously on the imperishability of principles. It is enough if we let them inform the new order, while adorning them with the attractions of the hour. “The river of knowledge often turns back on itself,” and there are progressive revolutions to an earlier condition. As long as we keep our course clear by acknowledging the primacy of knowledge and virtue and avoid a surrender to suppositious “objective necessity,” we can still reconstruct our life on a humane basis.

There is a certain harrowing alternative to be pointed out as a possibility of our inaction or our failure. It is undeniable that there are numerous resemblances between the Southern agrarian mind and the mind of modern fascism, and I would affirm that fascism too in its ultimate character is a protest against materialist theories of history and society. This is certain despite the fact that fascism immersed itself in materialist techniques for its conquests, and thereby failed. This other society too believes in holiness and heroism; but it is humane, enlightened, and it insists on regard for personality more than do modern forms of statism under liberal and social-democratic banners. Above all, in meeting the problem of motivation it does what social democracy has never been able to do. Now that truth can once more be told, let us admit that fascism had secret sympathizers in every corner of the world and from every social level. It attracted by its call to achievement, by its poetry, by its offer of a dramatic life. It attracted even by its call to men to be hard on them-

selves. Social democracy will never be able to compete with this by promising to each a vine-covered cottage by the road and cradle-to-grave social security. People who are yet vital want a challenge in life; they want opportunity to win distinction, and even those societies which permit distinction solely through the accumulation of wealth and its ostentatious display, such as ours has been, are better than those that permit none. From the bleakness of a socialist bureaucracy men will sooner or later turn to something stirring; they will decide again to live strenuously, or romantically.

The Old South may indeed be a hall hung with splendid tapestries in which no one would care to live; but from them we can learn something of how to live.

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