

# ROBERT DRAKE, AS I KNEW HIM

Jeffrey Folks

In 1960, Robert Drake was one among a promising new generation of southern writers that included William Styron, Flannery O'Connor, and Ernest Gaines, all of whom were born between 1925 and 1933. Encouraged by the examples of William Faulkner and Richard Wright but determined to explore new voices of their own, this generation went on to create a body of work that reflected the region's social and economic transition. The evolving mores of the South are clearly evident in the work of all these writers.

Although usually regarded as a minor figure, Drake produced a significant body of work, which has drawn wide praise from a select readership including Austin Warren, James H. Justus, and Malcolm Jack, among others. Over a period of fifty years Drake published nine collections of short stories, a family memoir, three volumes of criticism, and a large number of occasional essays. Among his more interesting books is *The Home Place*, a memoir of the Drake family and of his home town of Ripley, Tennessee.

Drake's correspondence, which fills fourteen boxes of his papers in Vanderbilt University's Special Collections, reflects his sense of vocation as a man of letters. The collection includes significant correspondence with the leading writers and critics of his time, including Cleanth Brooks, Donald Davidson, Russell Kirk, Andrew Lytle, Flannery and Regina O'Connor, Allen Tate, Eudora Welty, and Tom Wolfe. Drake's fiction, essays, reviews, and correspondence testify to the breadth of his interests, and they reveal the deep humanity of a man who was devoted to what he viewed as a waning civilization under attack by the dehumanizing forces of modernity.

Like that of his agrarian mentor, Donald Davidson, Drake's writing focused on the small-town and rural South of an earlier era, and he questioned the value of many modern innovations. Unlike Davidson, however, Drake did not make his attachment to the past his moral compass. Despite the fact that his paternal grandfather had fought in the Civil War and was inordinately proud of

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having done so, Drake showed little interest in “the War,” in slavery, or in any aspect of history that predated his childhood. Indeed, Drake’s Woodville (the fictional town based on Ripley that is the main setting of his stories) is a milieu in which the past plays a muted role. As Miss Evelyn puts it in “On the Side Porch,” “the main thing about the past . . . was that it reminded you that the world didn’t begin and end with just you.”<sup>1</sup> This commonsensical way of thinking about the past is a far cry from Allen Tate’s elegiac depiction of a Civil War graveyard in “Ode to the Confederate Dead” or William Faulkner’s celebrated line in *Requiem for a Nun*, “the past . . . is not even past.” Drake was not writing about history per se but about a way of life, however distant it now seems, that he experienced as present and normative. As he put it in the “Foreword” to *My Sweetheart’s House*, a brief essay subtitled “My Own House of Fiction”: “I write out of the world I was born into and still inhabit (at least spiritually).”<sup>2</sup>

As such, Drake’s “house of fiction” constituted a problem both artistic and moral in nature: the problem of how to convey that “present,” the most important and in a sense the only meaningful experience of Drake’s lifetime, to an audience for whom both the manners and values of Woodville must seem alien and unimportant, if not distasteful. In this way Drake took on a difficult task as a writer, and his task was all the more difficult because he did not fit into any of the conventional molds. He did not cling to the past, but the past afforded him a model—the best model, he believed—of a cohesive social order superior to the present anarchy of competing cultures and self-constructed identities. In this respect, his view of the world was similar to that of the British philosopher Roger Scruton and to the American scientist-moralist David Gelernter, whose

elegiac book *1939: The Lost World of the Fair* resembles Drake’s effort to recover a lost era in *The Home Place*. Like that of Scruton and Gelernter, Drake’s traditionalism was not rooted in ideology but in a clear-sighted understanding of precisely what has been lost as American culture became insufferably self-conscious and alienated. Like that of Gelernter, Drake’s writing is a plea for the recovery of a more humane and responsible social order. Like Scruton, he believed that the less hurried life of the village or small town, closer to nature and unfolding on a human scale, approximated the ideal.

**I**n contrast to the more considerate manners of the fictional Woodville, life in the metropolis of Atlanta (one of Drake’s favorite examples, perhaps because he had so often attended the convention of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association there) seemed to him weirdly out of joint. I am quite certain that Drake shared Miss Evelyn Hennings’s “idea of hell”: “an enormous cocktail party in the Atlanta airport” (*Survivors*, 97). Such an event was hellish because among those thousands of strangers (nearly a quarter million who pass through Hartsfield-Jackson every day), there was no opportunity for a “real talk”—the sort of earnest conversation that, as I came to understand, was surely the greatest pleasure of Drake’s own life.

In his craving for human contact, Drake was seeking not just to preserve a way of life but, as he saw it, to preserve life itself. In the face of an increasingly alienated social condition, Drake, who remained unmarried, forged a purposeful existence centered on his writing, teaching, and personal associations (associations not just among those who were academics but among a wide-ranging acquaintance that included members of his church, friends who shared his interest in

swimming, and renowned coaches such as Johnny Majors). His sense of the richness of such a life is evident in “Mrs. Edney and the Person of Porlock,” a story in which Drake recounts the lessons, not all of them academic in nature, that he learned from his beloved high school English teacher, Mrs. Edney (Vada Hobson Edney). Along with a love of poetry and a general broadening of the mind, Mrs. Edney teaches by her example of self-sacrifice and generosity of spirit. As one who could have taught at the college level but chose to remain at Woodville High School, “she went out of her way . . . to do things she didn’t really have to” (*Amazing Grace*, 77).<sup>3</sup> She was an outstanding example, in other words, of a faithful life of service. As Drake put it in regard to his beloved “Auntee” (his mother’s cousin, Mrs. Helen Campbell), another of the nurturing elderly women who appear in his fiction, “she was always on the side of life” (*Survivors*, 107). Hers was a commitment to what Psalm 98 calls the lifting up of “a joyful noise to the Lord,” which was the highest form of praise Drake could bestow. In a related story, Drake writes a moving account of the unconditional love he received from Auntee during his childhood. When this remarkable elderly woman hugs and comforts him, declaring her complete support, it is “as if it were all a great wonder, some sort of miracle” (*Survivors*, 105).

For Drake, those moments of total acceptance were memorable because they were so very rare. Drake clung to memories of Mrs. Edney and Auntee—and to that of his parents—because his experience also included much that was painful and disturbing. Indeed, I believe that Drake wrote so movingly about the miracle of love for the very reason that he was constantly burdened by a sense of living within a fallen world in which self-interest and pride overwhelm the joyful possibilities of life. He often

complained to me about the pettiness and spitefulness of colleagues and associates, and of those who, as he put it, “simply do not know *how to do*.” That phrase implied an expectation that human beings *should* have been taught “how to behave” as a normal part of their upbringing, that they *should* behave in a more considerate manner, that they *should* control their brutish impulses, and that they *should* recognize that life has an ultimate purpose, which is to live joyfully as part of a loving community and gratefully in relationship to God. Given the universal presence of the Old Adam, the biblical figure of man as a fallen creature, what else was there to redeem life but knowing *how to do*?

In this respect Drake’s moral imagination resembles that of Eudora Welty, a writer whom he particularly admired. It is also similar in many ways to that of Jane Austen. Like Welty and Austen, Drake was fascinated by the human potential for both good and evil. It is particularly noteworthy that this great struggle for life played out against the backdrop of the otherwise quite ordinary middle-class society of Woodville, a small southern town with little to distinguish it from others. As in Austen’s fiction, however, a seemingly unexceptional moment in a quite ordinary existence can be the occasion for a moral decision of the greatest importance.

As James H. Justus puts it, “what makes [Drake’s stories] memorable is a finely traced depiction of unremarkable people going about doing what unremarkable people do.”<sup>24</sup> As with Welty and Austen, that depiction encompasses everything from the small triumphs and joys of domestic life to the bitterness of loss and even the occasional suicide. Yet, in some sense at least, what transpires in Drake’s depiction of the provincial South is anything but “unremarkable.” That is the crucial fact that young Robert recognizes in

the story “Amazing Grace” when he is corrected by his father for wanting to “eat and run” during a church social. “That would be just plain ordinary,” his father says (*Amazing Grace*, 45), and neither Robert nor any of his relations or childhood associates conceive of themselves or their way of life as that. If anything, they are “alive” and “whole” in a manner that is increasingly less common within modern America. Their intricate, mannered relations are based on deep concern for others and an underlying recognition of the necessity of a stable moral order as a bulwark against the destructive forces of pettiness and self-interest. That is another lesson of the boy’s experience of dinner on the grounds: “that we had to take some of everything so as not to hurt anybody’s feelings” (*Amazing Grace*, 44).

As the boy learns, the social rituals of his culture constitute part of a framework of understanding—what Alasdair MacIntyre would call an intact “rationality”—that ennobles life, even amid lifelong poverty, human failings, and the recognition that all of it must end in death.

Many commentators, from Frank Lawrence Owsley to Andrew Lytle, have studied this same culture and arrived at a similar conclusion. In *The Plain Folk of the Old South* (1949), Owsley documented the importance of the yeoman farmer class in antebellum times. The yeoman farmers were independent landowners, distinct from both the large planters and the dependent tenant class, and as such they constituted an educated middle class. From the perspective of the national culture today, the southern plain folk might well be viewed as impoverished, provincial, and even backward, but that judgment fails to take into account their complex social and moral culture.

In *Southerners and Europeans: Essays in a Time of Disorder* (1988), Lytle explores the

moral basis of this culture in greater depth. For Lytle, as for Drake, this middle-class society was, above all, nurturing in the manner in which established customs and beliefs were preserved and passed down. Within this society, the young were taught the virtues of self-respect, consideration for others, and faith in the goodness of life. Underlying much of the yeoman culture was a collective memory of centuries of repression under European feudalism. Having escaped this captivity, and having survived the crucible of frontier existence and civil war in America, the plain folk of the South were a proud and rugged people. It is hardly surprising that Drake began the preface of his collection *Survivors and Others* with the admission, “All my life, I realize now, I have been surrounded with survivors” (x).

Like many of his stories, Drake’s “Amazing Grace” details the author’s sudden realization that it is the people among whom he has lived, not the faraway elites of Europe whom he dreams of joining, who are the chosen ones intended for God’s grace. In the story, the hymn’s reference to the Lord’s determination to “save a wretch like me” puzzles the twelve-year-old boy, especially as he looks around the congregation in the Salem community and notices a group of poor, disfigured, and aged congregants who indeed seem to match the description of “wretches.” But with the help of his father’s loving direction, young Robert comes to realize that “there was something sweet about being a wretch” (*Amazing Grace*, 47), and that those among whom he lived, most especially his own father, were the kindest and most decent people in the world. To be found, one must be lost: that is the knowledge that his father, with tears of joy in his eyes, passes on to the boy when he offers his profession of love at the end of the story. And in their provincial and hardscrabble existence, the plain folk of

Woodville had always been lost, as far as the greater world was concerned.

What made Drake's writing distinctive was the author's refusal to surrender this hopeful vision of America in the face of changes that threatened to transform the nation into a less democratic and less humane culture. His vision of America is tied to an ideal of liberty that can be traced to debates among the nation's Founders over federalism and states' rights. As inscribed in the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution, "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, not prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people." Drake never spoke to me about such lofty matters as the Constitution, but his worldview was shaped by a civilization in which "powers . . . reserved to the States respectively, or to the people," played a central role. Much of Drake's critique of modern-day America—and he could indeed be critical—constituted a reflection on the growing power of the centralized state and of its agents within the cultural and educational spheres.

Drake was scathingly critical, for example, of "professionalized" university administration as it has come to exist. Of one university press director who was rumored to have been removed as a result of her haughty mistreatment of a prominent donor's wife, Drake told me emphatically that she had no sense of how to perform her job. No wonder Drake was a lonely man, one who characterized his beloved avocation of swimming as "the camaraderie of solitude":<sup>5</sup> he saw himself as a member of a saving remnant surrounded on all sides by barbarians inhabiting a society that was hardly recognizable to him. Perhaps for that reason, my long talks with him always seemed to devolve into therapy sessions in which he complained bitterly and

at length about the indifference of critics toward his work. "I just want to be included," he would sigh. He *should* have been included alongside Welty, O'Connor, and others whom he admired so much. He *should* have been regarded as an important if not a major southern writer. Why was he not?

Perhaps it was because, in an age that valued experimentation above all, he was guilty of the cardinal sin of appearing to be, and in his case actually being, impossibly old-fashioned. There was nothing experimental about his writing technique or transgressive about his moral perspective. What he enjoyed above all was the sense of comfortable familiarity: acceptance among what he called "home folks," social consensus, moderation, and acknowledgment of the latent understandings that are the basis of any functioning civilization. What he valued, in other words, was order, reasonableness, and effort. He was a lot closer to Samuel Johnson or Austen than to Faulkner or Joyce.

Indeed, in his final collection, *What Will You Do for an Encore? and Other Stories*, Drake revealed that he liked to think of Saturday evenings on Ripley's town square "in terms of Dr. Johnson's description of the 'high tide' of London life along the Strand."<sup>6</sup> A comparison of Ripley, with its several thousand residents, to eighteenth-century London might seem unlikely, but for Drake, as for Johnson, "noise, laughter, life" (*Encore*, 9) was the measure of things. Indeed, despite his personal setbacks, there was an intact sense of optimism and hopefulness in his outlook, and there was moral clarity as well: a conviction that human nature could be clearly understood and represented in art because it did not change. No wonder he was largely ignored.

Unlike most of his postmodern contemporaries, whose sense of good and evil was blurred by relativism, Drake was forever

writing and speaking of “the Old Adam,” the atavistic impulses that he believed determined much of human behavior. Because of the imperfection of human beings, he believed, there must be unchanging rules of conduct, and in Drake’s view, Christianity, with its ethics of self-restraint and love, was surely the best guide. That is not to say that Drake regarded religious belief as a “solution” to human fallibility: it was at best an amelioration. The Old Adam would always be with us, making life painfully unpleasant and at times impossible. The relatively high number of suicides in his fiction testifies to the force of evil operating even in the seemingly idyllic hamlets of which he wrote and to the inability of religion, rules, or mores to counter the corrosive effects of selfishness and pride. In the final analysis, Drake’s perspective was much the same as that of his ancestors and neighbors in Ripley, people whose lives were not that far removed from the implacable cruelty of the southern frontier. Like his people, Drake was of necessity a stoic, though his stoicism was softened by an abiding faith in grace. A line from “Fairy Tale,” one of the stories in *Survivors and Others*, captures the delicate ambivalence of his feelings quite well: “Maybe that’s what small towns were all about finally: you learned how to put up with people” (179).

“Putting up” with people can be construed as either a burden or an opportunity, and Drake’s fiction copiously registers both meanings. In his personal life as well, Drake underwent a great deal of suffering, of which the most painful instance was surely the institutionalization of his mother following a mental breakdown that occurred during his early teens. This was a subject so terrible that it never really entered into our conversations, though Drake did address the topic in his writing, albeit briefly, in several of his later books. In a moving section of

*The Home Place* entitled simply “My Father and Mother,” Drake notes that following his father’s death, his mother “went into a decline from which she never really recovered.”<sup>7</sup> Unlike the Drake men, who seemed always to get through life undefeated if not unscathed, his mother experienced “real agony” (62). Toward the end of the book, he returns to the topic in “A Christmas Visit,” a recounting of a visit to his mother in a nursing home. There she lives, not unpleasantly but surrounded by “a wall of impassivity” (151).

In *What Will You Do for an Encore? and Other Stories*, Drake revealed more of how his mother’s illness affected his teenage years. When she is institutionalized in Memphis during the early stage of her disease, Drake is relieved when it is decided he should not accompany his father to visit her. “I didn’t want to see her any more in the state she had been in when she left home—not her old self, not the mother I knew.” Still in his midteens, Drake learned “what illness could do to people . . . isolate them from all those they loved, wrap them entirely in themselves, cut them off from the world about them so they became immured in a kind of living death” (*Encore*, 22). It is a moving account and testimony to the fact that, even in his final years, the agonizing memory of his mother’s mental illness was still fresh in his mind. Drake spent his entire life shaping and reshaping his experience, and in his stories the autobiographical “Drake” persona evolves and matures. Even at the end, he was still exploring his experience by fashioning new versions of his Woodville days and of the young man he had been.

**H**is mother’s sudden decline was a tragedy that unsettled Drake’s youthful confidence in the beneficent nature of creation, and his entire writing career can be

viewed as an effort to defend and reconfirm the purposefulness and goodness of life as he had known it before his mother's illness. In one of his finest stores, "On the Side Porch," Drake presents what is, in effect, a "vindication" of that world as he introduces the reader to Evelyn Henning, a lifelong resident of the small town of Barfield (six miles from the fictional Woodville). Miss Henning has spent much of her life on the side and front porches of her home, observing and conversing with her fellow townspeople. For those "benighted souls" (*Survivors*, 96) who simply fail to understand the importance of this activity, she has only scorn. They are part of the growing body of humanity that no longer makes the effort "to reach out to other people or get in touch with anybody else about anything" (*Survivors*, 97). Yet it is this personal connection with others that constitutes Miss Evelyn's reason for living. Those who don't "take the trouble and make the effort" (*Survivors*, 97), though they think they have more important things to do, are merely being selfish.

This sentiment sums up a great deal of Robert Drake's attitude toward life as well as his conviction that modern existence has lost its way. As Miss Evelyn exclaims (with author Drake wryly savoring every syllable of her pronouncement), "[W]e have in our own time seen the end of the seated dinner" (*Survivors*, 98). Again, it is because most now fail to understand what is important or, worse yet, are simply unwilling to make the effort. In contrast to so many ostensibly more prominent individuals who figure in the narrator's life, self-important souls who hustle their way through without ever stopping to watch and listen, Miss Evelyn has a truer vocation: she calls herself "a bringer-together of people" and "a sort of facilitator" (*Survivors*, 97); for his part, the narrator simply refers to her as "a great joy-giver" (*Survivors*, 98). This

vocation centers on taking the time to take pleasure in people, and for Miss Evelyn this task involves turning her back on a great deal of what others believe to be important. She occupies an older home that has been lovingly restored and maintained, not a "new house" in the suburbs "fit for nothing but to watch television in" (*Survivors*, 99). There is no television playing in Miss Evelyn's home, nor any of the other electronic devices that now consume so much of our time.

Like Miss Evelyn, Drake was a person who took his time with others. Our luncheons together often ran past two hours, and even then, Drake was usually reluctant to leave. It was as if, as long as he could linger in the company of a sympathetic companion, he could fend off the morbid thoughts that shadowed his otherwise hopeful conception of existence. Like his Aunt Janie, the neglected diabetic relation who spent her brief life engrossed in selfless activity as a palliative against her sense of "emptiness and not meaning anything to all the people around her" (*Amazing Grace*, 64), Drake often communicated to me his sense of frustration with the reception accorded his writing and with a more general sense of life's inadequacy and incompleteness. Like the child in his stories who is compelled to root out the deeper meaning of events and to see that they *do* have a meaning (that they *arrive* somewhere, he would have said), Drake seemed to be struggling against a nagging fear that perhaps there exists no underlying telos after all. This abyss of meaninglessness opened up before him like the frightening ravine through which the L&N railway tracks ran, straight through the center of Woodville, and his remedy was always talk, whether the talk he overheard as a child, the therapeutic talk he conducted with friends like myself, or the talk he carried on over the course of a half century in his writing.

All that talk was a buttress against the unimaginable horror of life's not amounting to anything: against the deaths of his aging relations, his mother's mental illness, and the shabbiness and insignificance that many would read into his provincial background; but there was a limit to what talk could do. As much as he enjoyed a real talk, Drake preserved a certain formality and distance. As he wrote in "Over the Mountains," a story recounting the suicide of a young man named Jim, "despite the floods of talk that surrounded you on every side, your life was often full of the things you couldn't say, not to anybody in this world" (*Encore*, 100). Reading that passage gives me chills even now since I have to wonder how much torment he concealed even from his closest friends. As he wrote in the same story: "You didn't say all you thought, you didn't tell all you knew, and shame was often king of the universe" (*Encore*, 100). It is a sad admission, but one I know to be true.

Under these pressures, Drake was understandably exasperated, angry, and even desperate to the point of tears. As he revealed in "By Thy Good Pleasure," an account of his father's death and funeral, his father's love "was the only love I had ever known that had accepted me fully, completely, and without asking any questions" (*Amazing Grace*, 114). I don't know if in later life he found some approximation of this unconditional love, but I rather doubt it. In what may be a self-revelatory and perhaps even prophetic tale, "Mr. Marcus and the Overhead Bridge," Drake writes of an eccentric Woodville resident, Mr. Marcus Bascomb, who had been educated at an Ivy League university and at Oxford and spent his years studying among writers and artists abroad, but who had returned suddenly one night to his home town and committed suicide by jumping from the overhead bridge.

Having reflected on the suicide for several days, the narrator wonders "whether Mr. Marcus had known all along that, when he finally ran out of places to go, Woodville—and the overhead bridge—would be right there waiting for him" (*Amazing Grace*, 108). The narrator identifies the cause of Mr. Marcus's despair as the unhappiness of a man who "has always been afraid to let himself get mixed up in anything enough to love some particular person or some particular place" (*Amazing Grace*, 107). I suspect that when he wrote these words, Drake was thinking of himself as well as the fictional character he so closely resembled, and, ironically, in one sense he would share Mr. Marcus's fate. In 1999 Robert Drake suffered a debilitating stroke, after which he was placed in the care of relatives in west Tennessee. He died two years later, never having regained his full faculties.

Right up to the end Drake remained, in several senses of the word, disillusioned with both the tendencies of literary fashion and the general direction of modern culture. But it was not really that Drake had *become* disillusioned: having grown up within the conservative Protestant culture of rural West Tennessee and having never forsaken its teachings, Drake had never been anything but disillusioned with the moral nature of human beings. He could almost laugh at, and certainly he could endure, whatever life threw at him because like the many survivors in his stories he had imbibed stoicism from earliest childhood. Nothing in life was *supposed* to be easy: that was the message Drake learned from his parents, whose relative poverty and late-life marriage were burdens that they accepted and bore ungrudgingly.

It was also the message of the Protestant religious culture in which he was raised. The Methodist hymns that helped shape his temperament included not just "Amazing



Grace,” which he borrowed as the title of his best-known story, but also such well-known titles as “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” “How Great Thou Art,” “Nearer My God, to Thee,” “Rock of Ages,” “The Old Rugged Cross,” and “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” All these hymns testify to the fact that men are born with a heavy cross to bear, but they also insist that Christ’s love makes the journey bearable. As Drake wrote toward the end of his life, “even now it still brings tears to my eyes, to think of grace so freely given and so freely received” (*Encore*, 58). Despite the crosses he had to bear, Drake never lost sight of the Good News at the heart of his religious tradition.

When it happened, I was very much shocked and surprised to hear that Robert Drake had suffered a debilitating stroke. I had always thought of him not just as a survivor, like the many old maids and widows in his stories, but as a man whose fierce self-sufficiency would not allow him to fall prey to the ravages of time. In his later years, in fact, Drake took great pleasure in physical fitness, and he appeared to be in excellent health right up to the time of his stroke. When word arrived of his death, I remember reading the brief e-mail and thinking, not without some relief, now he is home. In many ways, he had never left.

- 1 Robert Drake, *Survivors and Others* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), 100. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text.
- 2 Robert Drake, *My Sweetheart’s House: Memories, Fictions* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1993), xii. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text.
- 3 Robert Drake, *Amazing Grace*, 25th anniversary ed. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990), 77. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text.
- 4 James H. Justus, “Foreword,” *Amazing Grace*, 25th anniversary ed. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990), viii.
- 5 James A. Perkins, “Remembering Robert Drake (1930–2001),” *Modern Age* 44, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 238.
- 6 Robert Drake, *What Will You Do for an Encore? and Other Stories* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996), 9. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text.
- 7 Robert Drake, *The Home Place: A Memory and a Celebration* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1980), 62. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text.