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THE TRUTHS OF WILLIAM HOFFMAN'S FICTION, NEW AND OLD

Each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts.
All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful.
— Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*

I.

James Dickey liked to declare, "The true consciousness of the race is in the hands of the liars," by which he meant "the artists" with their powerful capacities to invent and/or fabricate resonant archetypal artifacts that at once transcend and speak for a given cultural moment. It is an assertion that proceeds from the old controversial idea of aesthetically-produced truths. Getting the dialogue going in earnest, the philosopher Kant denied that art could possess truth in general only to complicate his argument by offering that indeed it did contain something ineffable which lay somewhere beyond or between experience and reason. Schiller and others later would take up the banner. Closer to our own time, in the twentieth century Hans-Georg Gadamer, wandering away from Kant's position yet still dependent upon it, offered, "The work of art is the expression of a truth that cannot be reduced to what its creator actually thought in it." By this time the author had been dragged more into the equation, albeit as an ironic and peculiar kind of somnambulist variable that knows not what it does. And even now, as the philosophers and critics carry on the debate, the truths mysteriously continue to spring forth from the artists, be they earnest prophets, unconscious mediums or outright liars.

Ever since his days studying classical languages during the late 1940s as an undergraduate World War II veteran at Hampden-Sydney College, William Hoffman has entertained a powerful fascination, an insistent compulsion, for the truth of the powerfully constructed image and the memorably wrought word. The underpinnings of his vividly realized novels and stories, though sometimes autobiographical, seem almost to erase the presence of the authorial self altogether in allowing a work's visceral material and action to develop toward an end that seems not so much brought about as made to appear naturally inevitable. Ironically, however, Hoffman has asserted that his idea

of artistic destination in his work comes from perhaps American literature's most notorious and gifted prevaricator, Poe, and his famous (albeit somewhat dubious) essay "The Philosophy of Composition," that instructions-included formula for literary invention that may or may not actually have worked for Poe. Complicating matters further, not unlike Kant had for the philosophers who followed him, Hoffman has informed a number of literary acquaintances and interviewers — sometimes joking, sometimes not – that his epitaph should read, "He didn't cheat," a reference to his claim that none of his novels or stories ever proceeded from or were fueled by a consciously forced inclination or disingenuous gimmick. That a body of work of such constant and astonishing integrity should be built in part upon what may be one of literary history's most dubious compositional theories underscores for me both the suspect value and effect of artistic theory in general and the ongoing, unexplainable presence of the aesthetic ineffable, that strange shadow region (perhaps a making-cave, perhaps not) which lies somewhere between the talented artist, with all her well-meaning theories and conscious intentions, and the myriad unlooked-for truths of her achievement.

II.

William Hoffman's fourteenth and most recent novel, *Lies* (2005), published precisely fifty years after his first, marked a return to the primarily literary concerns of his earlier extended prose fiction following a trilogy of more commercially-oriented mystery novels: *Tidewater Blood* (1998), *Blood and Guile* (2000) and *Wild Thorn* (2002). Whereas buried formulas of circumstance lie at the operative heart of the trilogy, *Lies* is more concerned with the philosophically self-reflexive, wholly irrational mysteries of the buried and invented life: how, over the course of an existence, one adopts or is made into the identity or identities by which one comes to be known.

Like several of Hoffman's earlier novels — most notably *A Place for My Head* (1960), *A Walk to the River* (1972) and *Godfires* (1985) — and short stories, much of *Lies* takes place in a fictional projection of southside Virginia, a section of the state Hoffman has been living in and writing about now for more than half a century. Completely at home in this rural milieu, which is conveyed with unobtrusive skill, Hoffman unravels slowly and steadily the solid, yet finely nuanced elements of character and story for which he is most known

and celebrated, both as a novelist and as one of our best living practitioners of the short story form.

The protagonist of *Lies*, Wayland Garnett, suffers from what might be termed a late-life crisis. A product of the Depression and World War II, Wayland returns to the southside Virginia county where he was raised for the purpose of confronting and putting to rest the demons of poverty and social inferiority which constantly plagued him as a boy. Though his journey is made in earnest, he remains unsure as to what he is really searching for. Now a highly successful Florida businessman, Wayland marvels how he overcame a distant childhood of rural want to nibble "Brie and cold-broiled shrimp" at his daughter's Agnes Scott graduation while "tuxedoed musicians played Schubert's 'Trout' Quintet under candy-striped tents." Wayland knows he isn't "the same person who had left Howell County, Virginia, some forty years ago," yet the manner in which he conceptualizes his progress and success is flawed — a material rather than spiritual assessment, which, though he does not know it, informs the very root of his need to return. Minus his childhood deprivations, Wayland might dwell more on the qualities of love and devotion he both practices and receives, but instead he lies about his violent, poverty-stricken past and celebrates his Mediterranean-style four-bedroom house, big boat and the country club "with two eighteen-hole courses, an Olympic-size pool, and a ballroom lighted by a dozen chandeliers." For all the richness of his years and experiences, he remains marked and dominated by the corporeal absences of his youth — an old man still very much in the process of coming to terms with himself, and running out of time to do it.

On a conceptual and cultural level, a significant measure of the book's value lies in its preoccupation with various connections among the Depression, World War II and modern America as experienced by an author and a narrator who have lived through all of them but remain uncertain of their collective meaning. In a number of very real and brutal ways, the suffering concomitant with Depression-era rural Virginia forges and hones Wayland into the figure who is able to tolerate and function amid the savagery of modern warfare. For instance, Wayland likens the stench of deceased German soldiers laid out in a ditch to "dead cattle and hogs killed in the flood and left unburied." Later, when he fires a round into a fleeing Wehrmacht infantryman, he considers

the man's blood trail the way he would a "deer he's tracked and killed back in Howell County." In the wake of an engagement, when he discovers small pieces of shrapnel embedded in his skin, Wayland "pinches out seeds of it as he might have Howell County ticks." Psychologically, whether he realizes it or not, Wayland makes sense of the chaotic sufferings of war by comparing them to the less brutal, though physically punishing and almost equally senseless, dynamics of life and death in his rural upbringing. This process enables him to relate and process his considerable wartime trauma.

In 2005 Louisiana State University Press reissued, as part of its *Voices of the South* series, another World War II Hoffman novel, *Yancey's War* (1967), a book that masterfully and hilariously filters the maddening qualities of conflict and military life through satire. However, with that notable exception, Hoffman's staggeringly realized view of war, as it appears across some of his most memorable novels and short stories, remains one of life-defining suffering and struggle. A Medical Corpsman in the 91st Evacuation Hospital during the Normandy Invasion, Hoffman witnessed first hand some of the worst injuries modern warfare can inflict, recording much of that experience in his powerful first novel, *The Trumpet Unblown* (1955). Some of the grim, unflinching beauty of that prose is recaptured in *Lies* via Wayland's wartime reflections. When a grenade explodes near his shallow foxhole, he "feels the squish and smells the stink of his asshole letting go. He becomes wailing, cringing flesh nosed into defying earth." Later, near a burning farmhouse, Wayland comes upon a dead heifer that has been riddled with small arms fire by drunk German soldiers, discovering, upon closer inspection, that "bullets have splattered the udder, causing milk and blood to fuse."

Though such passages may weigh heavily and unpleasantly on the minds of some readers, Hoffman does not record them for the shock value, but rather to give his accounts an authentic immediacy, portrayed as they are by one who has lived them. And there are occasional glimmers of happiness, islands of joy, rendered just as vividly as the carnage that surrounds them. When, for instance, Wayland's unit meets up with a contingent of the Red Army along the Elbe, Hoffman skillfully captures the ecstatic union of American and Russian soldiers: "Unauthorized celebrations erupt. Wayland and a husky Russian private armed with a rifle dance and kiss. She smells of sweat, cordite,

and onions. They drink vodka from her canteen as soldiers fall laughing and whooping into the river."

If *Lies* supplies a seed for readerly frustration, it may be its difficulty in crafting and establishing smooth transitions and connections between and across its various time periods and disparate milieus: 1930s southside Virginia, 1940s western Europe, modern America. However, this occasional disconnectedness also functions as an accurate and perhaps necessary narrative composite of Wayland, who is arduously seeking to reconcile the poor country boy with the combat veteran and wealthy businessman across bewildering chasms of time and experience. Any rough edges the book's episodes possess ultimately reenforce the various jagged wounds to Wayland's character. However, reliving and reflecting upon the traumas of the past over the course of his journey, Wayland learns and reconciles much, though he decides that some falsehoods are, after all, sometimes worth the effort of cultivating and sustaining. And wisdom is the reward of the reader who accompanies Wayland's reminiscences and discoveries over the course of the book. A subtle portrait of a generation, rendered by one of its finest writers, *Lies*, for all its fictions, is a book possessed of many truths.

III

Its substantial chronology and wide-ranging themes notwithstanding, *Lies* only barely reflects the substantial complexity of Hoffman's collective fictional concerns established over more than a half century of writing. Unfortunately, nearly all of his books up through the mid-1990s are out of print, which means interested readers will need to contact their local libraries or haunt the aisles and internet sites of used book stores if they wish to peruse them. Fortunately, a skilled and detailed scholarly assessment of Hoffman's literary achievement up though the late 1990s exists in the form of *The Fictional World of William Hoffman* (University of Missouri Press, 2000), a broad yet penetrating collection of essays edited by former Longwood University professor William Frank. However, little criticism beyond book reviews has appeared since this noteworthy publication. In his introduction to the collection, George Core notably asserts that the achievement of Hoffman's fiction has "seldom been equaled and only rarely exceeded," while also labeling Hoffman's neglect "on the critical front"

as "both mysterious and unfortunate." Despite the strength and value of the essays in *Fictional World* the climate of puzzling critical neglect continues today unchanged.

What manner of questions and considerations might change that? What are the apparent strengths of Hoffman's overall *oeuvre* and what might remain to be said about them? In an undergraduate course I teach on contemporary southern writers, Hoffman's short stories often have a powerful and inspirational effect on students, particularly those who are aspiring writers (as opposed to aspiring literary critics). They frequently marvel at the visual and psychological range of what Hoffman is able to achieve while employing minimal materials and fictional conventions. Moreover, they delight in (and sometimes are stumped by) the fact that his approach almost always is standard and traditional while the end product — the collective achievement of a given story — typically is not.

At the beginning of an essay on Hoffman's short fiction, which originally appeared in *The Sewanee Review* and was later reprinted in *Fictional World*, Fred Chappell reacts in a manner similar to the students. He says of Hoffman's tales, "They are lean but strong, moving with quick grace from point to point, and when they conclude, the figure they have shaped is a memorable and pleasing one." Chappell also speculates convincingly upon Hoffman's general lack of variation, offering, "He rarely writes what we could call an 'experimental' story; he probably feels no need, being so expert in the art of straightforward narrative." To Chappell's fitting observations I would add that the paragraphs of Hoffman's short fiction typically are notable for their brevity, while the spare yet deft prose style contained within them keeps the authorial self thoroughly reined in and affords a startling resonance to the archetypal and natural forces contained within the pages. The end product of this combination is a kind of brilliance that is as seamless as it is subtle and indirect. Indeed, its profound naturalness, expertly rendered with such standard materials, appears to deflect any academic critical endeavor to a significant degree. Instead, what often emerges among literary commentators is a sincere appreciation. Case in point: reviewing Hoffman's third collection of stories, *Follow Me Home*, in 1994, the vigorous reader and reviewer Robert Buffington glowingly declared, "He is the best pure storyteller I have read in these two years," but did not elaborate at

much length on what in fact made Hoffman the best. Considering *Follow Me Home* among the hundreds of other titles he had perused, Buffington simply recognized that it was so.

Beyond the difficulties associated with formally-oriented academic considerations of Hoffman's fiction, there is much that is tantalizing, promising and largely unexamined in terms of its range of subject matter and the concepts and philosophies that surround it. In *Fictional World* both George Garrett and William Frank comment at length on Hoffman's war fiction with the former unreservedly offering that Hoffman's military novels are "at the highest rank of the American fiction coming out of World War II." Appearing across several novels and a number of short stories, Hoffman's war-related narratives excel in reflecting the social alienation, psychological trauma and moral ambiguity that generally define the best military writing. Setting this work more fully alongside that of other contemporary fiction-writing veterans such as Tim O'Brien would seem not only appropriate but potentially valuable.

A lesser-known early novel of Hoffman's likely demands equal attention. *A Place for My Head* (1960) unfolds in the midst of a racially-charged representation of late 1950s Farmville, Virginia, the town in which Hoffman lived and worked during the tumultuous years of Brown v. Board of Education. The book's white lawyer protagonist, Angus McCloud, elects to represent an African-American man, Edwin Trent, whose children have been killed in an auto accident involving a wealthy white driver. Though McCloud wins the case against long odds, he discovers to his amazement that his client, as well as a number of influential African-American leaders, actually had wanted him to lose for various political reasons. A vivid and occasionally disturbing reflection of that complex era, McCloud is a conflicted character: like most white citizens of that time and place he supports segregation in the schools but, unlike most, believes he has a moral duty to provide legal counsel for African Americans, even when pressured by intimidating and potentially violent local whites to desist and drop the case. The ongoing public and scholarly interest in Brown v. Board and the recent appearance of novels such as Dennis McFarland's *Prince Edward* (2004), much of which takes place in the Farmville of the same period, conspire to make a new edition of Hoffman's book appear both highly relevant and long overdue.

Near the conclusion of his essay "Mary Poppins's Mouth" in *Fictional World*, Dabney Stuart perceptively points out that Hoffman's novel *A Death of Dreams*

(1973) provocatively bridges his preferred settings of southside Virginia and West Virginia coal country, a region in which Hoffman spent his childhood and from which his ancestors hail. Like the Farmville of *A Place for My Head*, Hoffman's West Virginia settings often are mired by terrible local upheavals of a political nature, and in both environments Hoffman notably excels in providing believable composites of the disparate forces and players at work. For example, his first definitively West Virginia narrative, *The Dark Mountains* (1963), anticipates the coal novels of Denise Giardina in its balanced characterizations of both everyday miners and the despotic owners who employ as well as govern them. Hoffman also succeeds in creating conflict in the reader by relating the poverty-stricken, starvation-tinged beginnings of the novel's owner-protagonist, James MacGlauglin, who eventually rises to become the wealthy operator of a successful coal camp. As Hoffman once pointed out to me in an interview, "Now you might not think of a coal-mining tycoon like James MacGlauglin as an underdog, but he was when he was a penniless immigrant, and he was again when it came to fighting the United States government." A proverbial robber baron MacGlauglin may turn out to be, yet his origins are humble and his empire self-made. It is a tribute to the power and complexity of Hoffman's characterization that we continue to sympathize with him a little even as his mining operation comes to resemble a dehumanizing fiefdom.

Among other things *The Dark Mountains* led to an invitation from legendary West Virginia editor Jim Comstock for Hoffman to write for *The West Virginia Hillbilly*, a peculiar and arresting publication offering unique commentary on both mountain culture and national events. Although Hoffman would not return to dwell in West Virginia in person, he would visit imaginatively in his 1990 novel *Furors Die* and periodically over the course of his relatively recent mystery trilogy. Martha Cook and Jeanne Nostrandt offer finely nuanced readings of *The Dark Mountains* and *Furors Die*, respectively, in *Fictional World*, yet more remains to be observed through a number of promising interpretive lenses and in comparison to the substantial body of contemporary fiction dealing with similar subject matter. That these novels are both out of print and generally unknown among contemporary readers of West Virginia coal narratives and Appalachian literature in general is particularly lamentable and seems to me another clear and notable symptom of what Core earlier described as Hoffman's "mysterious and unfortunate" neglect.

The philosopher Heidegger thought truth was already there; Nietzsche believed it to be something that was actively made up. Both thinkers are often feared and/or willfully misinterpreted, but it is the latter, with his occasionally musical language and outrageous declarations, who had more of the artist about him. For the artist the rapture of the creative impulse ultimately trumps reason. The philosopher's often tin-eared premise and inference give way to the artist's siren voice, which might say any number of things but usually speaks with a sound resembling the timbre of Keats: "I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Philosophers and contemporary literary critics often scoff at this sort of passage, as well as the irrationality of creations such as, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" or the line from Yeats's final letter: "Man can embody truth but cannot know it." Yet neither Keats nor Yeats was chiefly interested in being logical or rational, though some scholars have had the presumption to reckon both philosophers. Nevertheless, it is hard to fathom that either would ever have accepted a mantle such as "speculative epistemologist" over that of "poet." Likewise, Hoffman's best work, the most evocative truths of his fiction, often, like life, are of a conflicted nature — difficult to talk about critically, as if arriving to us from a place we might never have predicted, and that remains perhaps traceless, yet is always made to feel resonant and right. With so much work behind him, the truths of his fiction, often seamless and beautiful, appear to have rendered his own theories and intentions, well-meaning or suspect as they may have been, irrelevant. And it is to our enduring advantage that he possessed the courage to allow the truths to have their way. He didn't cheat.