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St George Tucker's "Narrative of Moses Do-Little": An Edition with Critical Commentary

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ST. GEORGE TUCKER'S NARRATIVE OF MOSES DO-LITTLE

¹³

An Edition with Critical Commentary

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

James A. Frazier

1981

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....iv

ABSTRACT..... v

INTRODUCTION..... 2

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION..... 5

TUCKER'S ESSAY NO. 17 6

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN TEXTUAL NOTES.....13

NOTES TO ESSAY NO. 1714

TUCKER'S ESSAY NO. 1818

NOTES TO ESSAY NO. 1825

CRITICAL COMMENTARY.....27

NOTES TO CRITICAL COMMENTARY.....47

APPENDIX49

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the literary and historical context and implications of two unpublished essays by St. George Tucker (1752-1827). The essays considered are numbers seventeen and eighteen of Tucker's intended contributions to William Wirt's "Old Bachelor" series, and together constitute "The Narrative of Moses Do-little." This study offers an annotated text of both essays together with a critical evaluation of them.

The introduction considers the circumstances under which the essays were composed, deals briefly with Tucker's major accomplishments as a writer, and presents a physical description of the manuscripts. This is followed by annotated texts of the two essays in exact transcriptions of the holograph manuscripts that are now in the Tucker-Coleman Collection at the Earl Gregg Swem Library, The College of William and Mary.

The critical commentary considers Tucker's essays as part of the tradition of the American essay serial of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Tucker's debt in these two essays to an oral tradition is also delineated. His concern with such typical Virginia pastimes as horse racing and his satirical descriptions of provincial activities and land speculation are discussed as examples of his use of local color. The conclusion reached in this study is that the major significance of these two essays lies in the extent to which they prefigure techniques later employed by the Southwest humorists. Tucker's essays combine the methods of the periodical essayist with those of the vernacular humorist, thus illuminating the evolution of an important form of American humor.

ST. GEORGE TUCKER'S NARRATIVE OF MOSES DO-LITTLE

An Edition with Critical Commentary

Introduction

On December 22, 1810, William Wirt began to publish in Thomas Ritchie's Richmond Enquirer a series of informal essays by several hands entitled The Old Bachelor. In March, 1811, Wirt's friend, St. George Tucker, resigned his position as a judge on the Virginia Court of Appeals. This confluence of circumstances--Tucker's retirement and Wirt's solicitation of essay contributions from his friends--provided Tucker with the leisure and the occasion to compose at least twenty-eight essays which he designated "For the old Batchellor", in August and September 1811. Only one of these essays was published, and seven or eight of the manuscripts would seem to have been lost; however, twenty manuscripts are extant, and they are housed, along with many more of Tucker's papers, in the Tucker-Coleman Collection of the Swem Library at the College of William and Mary.¹

St. George Tucker (1752-1827) wrote copiously throughout the last half of his life.² Much of what he wrote remains unpublished, although a number of his works did appear in print during his lifetime. The Knights and Squires: An Historical Tale, after the manner of John Gilpin was published in New York in 1786; it was followed by Liberty: A Poem on the Independence of America in 1788, several poems in the American Museum magazine in 1790 and 1792, A Dissertation on Slavery and The Probationary Odes of Jonathan Pindar in 1796-97, and a five-volume edition of Blackstone's Commentaries in 1803. Tucker's most famous poem, "Resignation," written in 1807, was published in London in 1823.

Although Tucker's edition of Blackstone is recognized as one of the most

important law books of the early nineteenth century, Tucker's talents as a belletrist are only beginning to be acknowledged. The purpose of this thesis is to bring to publication a segment of the large corpus of Tucker's literary manuscripts.

The two essays presented here are numbers seventeen and eighteen of the intended "Old Bachelor" contributions, and together constitute what might be called "The Narrative of Moses Do-little". The following essay texts were transcribed from two holograph manuscripts, each covering recto and verso of two folio sheets of foolscap measuring twenty-one by thirty-five centimeters. The essays are numbered, apparently by Tucker, "17" and "18" respectively. Each bears the heading "For the old Batchellor," and the second essay (no. 18) is signed with the capital letter "N". The numbers apparently reflect the order in which the essays were composed and in which Tucker intended them to be published. Other essays are signed with other letters, but the significance of these is not known. These two essays are sewn, along with other manuscripts, into a cover composed of multiple layers of blue paper, yellowed and tattered around the edges. This cover has been labelled, by a hand other than Tucker's:

The Old Bachelor / _____/ Notes to Tyranny--a Poem /

Tributes to the Memory of Bishop / Madison, and W. Nelson / _____

The manuscripts themselves are remarkably well preserved and, aside from the minor difficulties inherent in deciphering an eighteenth-century hand in faded ink quite easily readable.

This thesis is primarily concerned with the literary and historical significance of Tucker's essays, rather than with whatever value they might have as physical artifacts. Therefore, although the essays have been carefully transcribed, retaining Tucker's erratic spelling and punctuation and

his use of the ampersand, this is not a "barbed wire" edition. That is, Tucker's emendations of his manuscript text have not been reproduced; rather they are described in the notes to the text, which also gloss unfamiliar words, names, and concepts. Legitimate eighteenth-century spellings of words still currently in use have been allowed to stand and are reproduced without annotation. Simple misspellings have been indicated by [sic], and Tucker's swash "S" has, when it occurs, been silently amended by the editor to conform with modern practice. A critical afterword to the essay deals with Tucker's themes and craftsmanship and attempts to locate him in the literary scene of his day.

Notes to the Introduction

¹For the provenance and circumstances of composition of Tucker's "Old Batchellor" essays see: Carl Dolmetsch, "Tucker's Hermit of the Mountain' Essay[s]: Prologomenon for a Collected Edition," in Essays in Early Virginia Literature Honoring Richard Beale Davis, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay (New York: Burt Franklin, 1977), pp. 257-75.

²For further details see: Mary Haldane Coleman, St. George Tucker: Citizen of No Mean City (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1938). A more recent, accurate, and succinct account of Tucker's life is in Robert Bain, et al., Southern Writers: A Biographical Dictionary (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 465-66.

17.

#

For the old Batchellor.

Sir,

I have the honor of being descended from one of the most ancient and hounourable families in this Country; my progenitors for several Generations before the Revolution were Members of his Majesty's most honourable privy Council for this Colony, and not a few of my uncles and great unclès, were members of the assembly, and Magistrates in the County Courts;¹ and scarce a man among them that was not at some time or other a County Lieutenant, or a Colonel in the Militia.² When the Revolution came on it was resolved by the heads of our family not to oppose it, nor yet to take any part in it.³ Some few of them from that Circumstance were thought to be Tories in their hearts, but as every one⁴ knew the family to be very harmless, they incurred no suspicion. My Father form'd some exception from this general character; my Grandfather having married into the family of the Busy-bodies, it was thought by many that he took after his mother's family, rather more than his father's. He went regularly to the Court house every Court Day,⁵ was often the first man in the Courtyard, and shook every man by the hand as soon as he got from his horse. He generally went upon the Bench, and sat long enough to have his name entered among the Gentlemen Justices, present;⁶ after which, unless there was to be a recommendation for Sheriffs,⁷ or militia officers, he generally quitted the Bench, and spent the rest of the day among his neighbors and County-men, over a bowl of Toddy, enquiring after every individual in their families, and talking over the news of the day. He was no less attentive to his duty as a militia officer, never missing a muster, & sometimes ordering

the Roll to be called; but as he was a very indulgent officer, the Absentees were never cross'd, and it was generally too hot, or too cold, or too wet, to exercise the men. When it came his turn to serve as Sheriff, he farm'd the office⁹ to an active clever fellow, against whom there could be no possible objection but the Suspicion that he was not honest, as the three preceding high Sheriffs had all been ruined, as they said by his Delinquency. This, however, did not stop my Father from farming the office to him, as he relied upon one of my Mothers Brothers who was said to understand Accounts, to have an Eye upon him, & see that he did not cheat the public, or himself. This precaution proved insufficient, for a Judgement [sic] in behalf of the Commonwealth was obtained against my Father for an immense sum, of money, immediately after which his Deputy with all his securities¹⁰ disappear'd, and settled themselves in different parts of the western, & southern Country.¹¹ This proved a severe stroke, and utterly disabled my Father from completing a large Merchant Mill,¹² with six pair of stones, which he was building upon a stream that was very abundant during four, and sometimes five, months in the year, but was perfectly Dry all the rest of it. The reason that my Father gave for erecting so large and expensive a Mill upon such an inconstant stream was, that by having so many pair of Stones, he could manufacture as much flour in four months, as Men of less enterprise, activity, and capital, could in twelve. The Mill was very nearly finish'd, having cost an immense sum of money, when an Execution in behalf of the common-wealth was levied upon it, and it was sold for very little to a neighbour, who having reduced the works to a single pair of stones, repented of his Bargain, as he found the neighbourhood could not furnish Wheat enough to keep them employed above half of the time, that there was water enough to work them. My Father, after this unlucky Business, determined

to repair his injured fortune by speculating in the western Lands. He entered into partnership with a surveyor, who undertook to locate and survey several millions of Acres, for which my Father obtained Land warrants, by the sale of one of his best plantations; he now considered himself as the future Lord of a German principality at least. Every Opportunity brought him Letters from his friend in the western Country informing him of their rapid progress towards wealth; new supplies of money were from time to time required, and not without great inconvenience and loss, remitted. The Day of Reimbursement could not be far off; every Dispatch brought it nearer, and nearer. At length the Surveyor returned with his saddle-bags filled¹³ with platts,¹⁴ and Certificates of Survey. Here were Rivers and Vallies [sic], fertile as the Banks of the Nile; there were plains of immeasurable extent, covered with the most luxuriant Poplars, Hiccories [sic], Sugar-trees,¹⁵ and other¹⁶ natives of the farthest soil, interspersed with beautiful streams, Mill-seats, and navigable waters, for the future transportation of their rich produce to a profitable market. My Fathers eyes glistened as he examined the platts, but whenever he saw the mark of a Mill-seat, he felt a secret horror creep over him, least [sic] they should prove as fatal to him as the former.--With difficulty, money was now procur'd for obtaining Patents.¹⁷ The Surveyor very prudently proposed, as they would amount to a large sum, that patents should be taken out, for the present, only for one half the Lands; that they should be in his name, only, that he might have less difficulty in disposing of them on their joint account, in Philadelphia, or Newyork [sic]; and that he would as soon as he was in Cash remit my Father money enough to take out the Patents for the other half, in his own name, only, as he proposed to retain the greater part for his own Family, when he was very desirous of restoring once more to its Ancient

Opulence, and Importance. This proposal met with my Fathers hearty concurrence, & warmest approbation. The Patents for one half amounting to something short of three millions of Acres, were taken out in the Surveyors name, who posted off immediately with them to Philadelphia: there it was said that he entered into some connexion with a famous Land company, embarkd [sic] for Europe, as their agent, and according to the last accounts of him, it was he that imposed upon the unfortunate Tu-Buoef¹⁸ the twenty thousand Acres of Rocks & Mountains, which that unhappy Gentleman and his friends crossed the Antlantic [sic] to settle themselves upon. Be that as it may, my Father never received a Letter, from him, nor as much money as would have paid the postage of¹⁹ one: he consoled himself however with the reflection, that the fellow had not cheated him out of all the Lands.--So he sold a negroe [sic], or two, and rais'd as much money as would pay for the patents for the other half. By this time the frauds practiced by the Land Speculators began to be detected; it was discovered that a great part of the Lands they took up were only Rocks & Mountains, such as pore [sic] Tu-Buoef had purchased; or that if there were any good Lands in fact surveyed, in ninety nine Acres out of an hundred there were prior Titles to them. Nobody would now buy Lands upon the faith of a patent only, but they required a general warranty.²⁰ Here was a new obstacle to my Fathers Expectations. To remove it he employed an Agent, at a considerable expence, to go to the western Country to look for the Lands, and examine the Titles, and their Quality, &c. The Agent at the End of two years made a faithful report, from which it appeared, that not a twentieth part of the plats were genuine, there being in reality no such Lands as they described, and that not a single parcel, or tract of Land that could be found, in actual Existence, was without a prior claimant. This Intelligence was a severe stroke, indeed,

to my Father. All his magnificent dreams were dispell'd, and he found himself more embarassed than ever: for he had continued to live as when he first came to his Estate, and though every now and then he had sold a plantation, with all the Slaves and Stocks upon in, he kept up his spirits, from the prospect he had of retrieving his Affairs from this indubitable source, of which I have been speaking. My great-Uncle²¹ Jack Busy-body now proposed to him to join him in the purchase of a newly imported Stud-horse. He represented how much money had been made by other Gentlemen from this fruitful Source, and my Father gave into [sic] it without Hesitation. The purchase was made in the month of September, and the Horse which had not yet recovered from his Sea-voyage was brought home, and a new, and commodious stable built for him; and the English groom who attended him on his passage was hired at a pretty considerable Salary to continue his attendance. As the Horse's name stood very high in the racing Calender [sic],²² and the risque and expense of his Importation had been considerable, and as the purchase was made upon a twelvemonths Credit, the money being secured by a Deed of Trust, on some Lands and negroes, the price of the horse was very high, amounting to several thousand dollars. My Uncle Busy-body was to have one fourth of the²³ horse, but my Father was to advance the money for him. My Uncle now proposed an addition to their plan; which was to purchase eight or ten fine blooded²⁴ mares, whose Colts at three or four years of age, would always command a capital price, & yield immense profits. My Father saw the Advantage of this Scheme, in the clearest light, and eight or ten brood Mares were procured by the activity of my Uncle, in a short time, as nearly as good terms as the horse himself. They were brought home about the beginning of the Winter, and the Stables were further enlarged for their Accomodation. It happen'd most unfortunately that a severe gust in the month

of August had done great damage to my Father's²⁵ Corn, so that he had a very short crop both of Corn and Fodder. Nor were any of his neighbours better off. In consequence of this misfortune he was obliged to purchase almost his whole years Corn, at a very high price, that his Stud might not suffer; and as there was no Fodder to be got any where, he bought from Tom Thrifty's crop of Hay, which had been a little damaged in the Stacks, for something more than double price, and had to bring it twelve miles, into the bargain. Every thing²⁶ now went on very well; the horse recovered his Flesh, and the Mares lost none of theirs. My Uncle Busy-body, now discovered that neither my²⁷ Fathers plantation, nor his own were good Stands for so fine a horse, and therefore proposed to take²⁸ Will Whip and Tom Stirrup,²⁹ into partnership with them. That the horse should stand at their plantations, alternately, every week, and in going & returning stop at their respective houses, &c.--This arrangement was accordingly made, and a due compensation was to be given for it.--April came, and Fearnought³⁰ in all the pride of imported stateliness,³¹ importance, and Superiority, was exhibited at the Court-house, at the Races, and the Musterfield. No Turk in his Seraglio³² ever strutted with more magnificence, nor did the Horse of Darius³³ neigh with more significant Vehemence. Hundreds of Visitants³⁴ were engaged, the terms for the first year being rather moderate, and upon credit. Every time that Fearnought passed my Fathers, where he always stop'd for one night, the Groom reported the immense profits that he had earn'd. My Father's Spirits reviv'd and my Uncle Jack Busy-body was never still. As he had some knowledge of Figures he was always calculating how much they should share that Season: and how much more they should make the next, when the horses's Fame should be fully established; and what immense profits the Brood mares would yield. But, sad mischance! About the middle of May the

horse was taken suddenly very ill with a Cholic [sic], and in spite of the Groom's, and my Uncle Busy-body's skill he died in a few hours; on opening him his Stomach was found full of Grubs; my Father met this Misfortune in perfect dismay. Evey my Uncle Jack's hopes began to fail him; but he endeavoured to console himself by having a pair of very fine Boots made out of Fearnought's hide, and Will Whip, and Tom Stirrup paid the same compliment to the deceased horse. I must reserve the sequel of my Fathers History for another Letter. I am sir your humble Servant

Moses Do-Little

Abbreviations Used in Textual Notes

(For complete citations, see bibliography)

Brewer	<u>Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable</u>
CLD	<u>The Cyclopedic Law Dictionary</u>
Culver	<u>Blooded Horses of Colonial Days</u>
DAE	<u>Dictionary of American English</u>
Edgar	<u>The American Race-Turf Register</u>
Mahon	<u>The American Militia: Decade of Decision, 1789-1800</u>
OED	<u>Oxford English Dictionary</u>
Payne	<u>The Miller in Eighteenth-Century Virginia</u>
Sydnor	<u>Gentlemen Freeholders</u>
Webster	<u>Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language</u>

Notes to Essay 17

¹ The Virginia Colonial Council, a body of advisers to the royal governor, constituted the upper house of the colonial legislature. The members of the council, who were appointed by the king upon the governor's recommendation, automatically became supreme judges in the general court and had the power to veto bills passed by the burgesses. The House of Burgesses was the lower house of the colonial legislature. Two members, or "burgesses," were chosen from each county and one each from Jamestown, Norfolk, Williamsburg, and the College of William and Mary. They were charged with determining policy, managing elections, and filling a variety of offices. The county courts of Virginia were generally composed of ten or fifteen justices, or magistrates, chosen by the governor on the recommendation of those already on the court. Individually the justices were empowered to settle suits for small debts, issue peace bonds, and order persons to appear before the county courts to answer indictments. Collectively, the courts exercised considerable power and directly or indirectly chose every other county official (Sydnor, 80-83). The point that Moses is trying to make in this part of the essay is that his family was influentially involved in every important aspect of colonial government.

² Although there were no colonels per se in the militia, lieutenant colonels invariably styled themselves so. They were placed in office by the legislature upon recommendation of the county courts. (Mahon, 35)

³ "in" added above the line with a caret.

⁴ "one" added above the line with a caret.

⁵ County courts met monthly on a day fixed by law. Often the court continued in session for several successive days, though seldom more than three. Court days were important social, economic, and political occasions, since court business brought people to the county seat, and the assemblage of farmers and planters made this a convenient time for transacting private business. (Sydnor, 85-86)

⁶ MS. originally read "Gentlemen Justices who were present ("who were" lightly cancelled).

⁷ Sheriffs were commissioned by the governor upon recommendation of the county court. Generally the candidates for sheriff were chosen from among the justices themselves; the justices were required to present the names of three candidates to the governor, from which he would select one to serve as sheriff. These were usually the three oldest justices in point of commission who had not previously held the shrievalty. (Sydnor, 84)

⁸ Militia regiments and batallions were required by law to meet for training once a year. These Muster Days were marked by a festive atmosphere in the towns where they were held, much like the court days mentioned above. In addition to performing regimental maneuvers before the General of Militia, or even the Governor, the troops frequently engaged in a sham battle. (Mahon, 39-41)

⁹ i.e., farmed it out, or turned it over for performance for a fee to the "active clever fellow" mentioned in the essay. (Webster)

¹⁰ "A person who becomes the surety for another, or who engages himself for the performances of another's contract " (CLD)

¹¹ Presumably what was then western and southern Virginia, and what is now West Virginia and Kentucky.

¹² Many Virginia planters had on their plantations grist mills at which they ground corn and wheat for the use of their own families. Since few plantations could keep a mill busy all the time, most plantation mills also did custom grinding for neighboring farmers. Out of this combination of plantation-custom mill grew the merchant mill, which bought wheat, ground it, and sold it at a profit as flour or ship's bread. Pioneered in Virginia by William Byrd in 1685, the business of merchant milling did not catch on or become important until the late eighteenth century, when wheat became important to tobacco growers as a second export crop. (Payne)

¹³ Two or three words heavily cancelled after "saddle-bags"; "filled" added above the line with a caret.

¹⁴ Obsolete form of "plat," a chart of a piece of land showing all its features which must be filed with every deed at the courthouse. (DAE, CLD)

¹⁵ Sugar maples. (DAE)

¹⁶ "other" added above the line with a caret.

¹⁷ Tucker uses the word in its original sense, as meaning a conveyance or grant of public lands. (CLD)

¹⁸ Francis Peter de Tubeuf, leader of a group of French immigrants, received in 1792 a loan from the Assembly of £600 to enable him and his friends to settle on a tract of land they had purchased in Russell County, Virginia. If twenty thousand acres of Tubeuf's land were "Rocks and Mountains," he owned at least thirty-five thousand more acres. In 1795 he was murdered, presumably by thieves who were after his money. It is to the manner of Tubeuf's demise that the adjectives "unhappy" and "unfortunate" refer. A more thorough, though still sketchy, account of Tubeuf's tragic career may be pieced together from scattered references in Palmer, Calender of Virginia State Papers, vols. 5-6, 8-9; and in Shepherd, The Statutes at Large of

of Virginia. vols. 13 and 15.

19 "of" added above the line with a caret.

20 "A covenant whereby the grantor warrants and agrees to defend the title to the premises conveyed against all persons whatsoever...."

(CLD)

21 "great-" added above the line with a caret.

22 Tucker uses the word in the sense of a list or register. Apparently the horse had a good record as a winner of races.

23 "the" added above the line with a caret.

24 Entirely or largely or pure blood; pedigreed.

25 MS. originally read "his corn" ("his" lightly cancelled; "my Father's: added above the line with a caret).

26 "thing" added above the line with a caret.

27 "my" added above the line with a caret.

28 "to take" added above the line with a caret.

29 Another word, underlined, has been heavily cancelled, with "Stirrup" written in above the cancellation.

30 A horse named Fearnought was imported from England by Col. John Baylor of Virginia in March, 1764. He was one of the most distinguished stallions of his day, and his name is to be found in the pedigree of almost any thoroughbred horse in Virginia that traces back to his time. A number of American-born horses named Fearnought are also on record. (Culver)

31 "stateliness" added above the line with a caret.

32 Italian word for harem (as in Mozart's "Abduction from the Seraglio")

33 Darius was a Persian nobleman who, according to legend, conspired with six other nobles to overthrow Smerdis, usurper of the throne of Persia. The nobles agreed that he should be king whose horse neighed first. The

horse of Darius was the first to neigh; Darius became king in 521 B.C. and is honored with the title "Darius the Great." (Brewer)

³⁴ Mares to be bred with Fearnought. The word is either a neologism of Tucker's or a euphemism current in Tucker's day, and may represent a survival of the obsolete and rare meaning of "visit" as "to have cohabitation with," of which the latest example given in the OED is dated 1553.

18.

For the Old Batchellor.

—
Sir,

I shall now proceed in my poor Father's history, which draws near to a close; the loss of Fearnought depressed his Spirits more than any thing that had ever happened to him; but misfortunes, they say, never come single, and so it proved in my poor Father's case; his Fine mare Camilla¹ from whom he expected a foal by Fearnought staked herself in jumping over the fence that divided her pasture from a wheat-field, and died in less than an hour. Diana,² the only one except Camilla, that proved pregnant, slunk her foal³ not long after,--Will Whip borrowed Kitty Fisher⁴ for a purse race in the fall; she slipt her shoulder in running, and falling was crippled in such a manner, that she was knock'd in the head out of pure Compassion. The others were taken in Execution to satisfy the person from whom my Father had purchased his corn. The time of payment for them and for Fearnought being arrived, suits were brought, and Executions levied upon every shilling's worth of personal property, which he possessed, except what was comprehended in the Deed of Trust.--The Trustees, when the day of payment arrived, were called upon to proceed to sell. But my unhappy Father did not live to see the day of sale; it was postponed several times at his request, but he did nothing more to prevent it, and died just a week before the last of his property was sold.

Such, Sir, was the Life, and such the End, of an honest Man, of unblemished Morals, and originally of very large property. I am confident that he

never ow'd a debt that he did not honestly pay, and some, two or three times over, for he kept no books, nor ever took a receipt. The influence that his⁵ uncle Jack Busy-body had over him, who advised him⁶ first to build his Merchant Mill, & then engaged him in other projects of the same sort, was a great Injury; for my Father possessed no learning, no knowledge of any Business whatever, nor any, the least energy of Character. And for such men to embark in projects which require knowledge, Information, Judgement, and incessant attention, appears to me, from his sad example, to be one of the surest, & readiest Ways to Ruin.--

Our family has, indeed, been generally unfortunate; at least for the last five and thirty years. My Uncle Robert, my Fathers next Brother, was a Member of Assembly, and was nominated to fill a Vacancy in a high office, and though every body spoke of him as a very good kind of man, of whom they never heard any harm in their Lives, he got but one vote, and that was supposed to be his Colleague's.⁷ He was several years in the Assembly, and always made it a point to vote on Col: Patriot's side, who was a great speaker and a very popular Member, but it all would not do. My Uncle Benjamin never was in the Assembly; he used to ride over his plantation, always attended by his man Billy, on horseback, with his double barrel'd fowling piece, powder-horn, and shot-bag, and a dozen times in the course of his ride would he call to Billy to hand him his Gun; but the partridges generally got out of Gunshot before he fired. I don't think he ever kill'd a dozen in his whole life. I said, before, he never was in the assembly; he offer'd once, and Col. Patriot, with whom he was a favorite, made a Speech, and recommended him very strongly, and concluded with telling the people, "they might rely upon him, for he was sure he would never do any Harm."--Col:Readywit, who opposed him, ask'd the people if they expected

"he would do them any good." This Sarcasm turn'd the current at once; my Uncle did not get ten votes, and Col: Readywit carried his election all hollow. All this is very surprising considering what intimate friends he and Col: Patriot were. But it proves the people will sometimes think for themselves: for, Col. Patriot was Judge of the County Court, and had great Influence, on all Occasions. It was said in the County, that when my Uncle Benjamin first took his seat as a Magistrate, Col. Patriot, being in the Chair, when the Lawyers had done arguing, called for my Uncles opinion. "I am of your Opinion, Sir;" said my Uncle, in the simplicity of his heart. The Col. with great Gravity proceeded to take the Opinion of the other Members, and then pronounced the decision of the Court to be according to his own, reckoning my Uncle, as one who had concurred with himself. My Uncle Richard was sent to England for his Education; he return'd [sic] one of the most elegant and accomplish'd Gentlemen that I ever remember to have seen; nothing could exceed the elegance of his person, manners, & address; he was a man of the nicest and most unblemish'd honor, and Integrity; his heart was open, generous, benevolent. He won the esteem of his own sex, and the affection of the Fair, wherever he went. He had studied a profession,⁸ and brought over with him the proper credentials, respecting his progress; in short he had obtain'd [sic] a Degree.--He entered on the Exercise of his profession and gave favourable hopes of his Success in it. He married a Lady of very large Fortune; retired to the Country; lived moderately; was guilty of no Excess that I ever heard of. He seem'd in short to have every thing in his favor, except that degree of Attention to his Estate, (for he quitted his profession when he married) which so large a one required. In a very few years it begun to be suspected that he was embarassed, but as his Estate was very large, and he made no Complaints, none of his friends

supposed that he was much involved.--The loss of his Lady had induced him to break up his Establishment: he occasionally resided there a few weeks, but lived a Rambling sort of a Batchellors Life, with never more than one Servant, & a couple of horses attending him, when all of a sudden it was reported that he was ruin'd. How, or by what means was never known to his most intimate friends; but he died about a year⁹ ago, without leaving a shilling of his once immense Fortune. I never more sincerely regretted the Misfortune of any friend, for I can with Truth aver that I never heard of any thing to the prejudice of his moral Character, in any respect, and I have ever considered him among the most honourable, benevolent, and generous hearts that I was ever acquainted with; nor can I persuade myself that he had a Fault, except his too easy temper in pecuniary transactions, and an Inattention, which must have been more real than visible, to the management of his Estate. Such, Sir, was my Uncle Richard--and his history is, I think, even a stronger Evidence of the fatal Consequence of the want of that Energy, which in this Country is necessary for a man, to keep his Estate together, than that of my Father. My Father was the dupe of projectors,¹⁰ and Speculators; and so, I am inclined to suppose my Uncle Richard must have been, though I have never heard in what Instances. My Uncle James was the youngest of the Brothers. He was passionately fond of hounds, and of hunting. At first he kept a large pack of hounds; but in a few years the number was considerably reduced; his principal plantation was about five or six miles from his dwelling house. He mounted his horse regularly, every morning, as soon as Breakfast was over, to go & visit it, generally attended with two or three couple of hounds, and some other Dogs; if they happened to put up a hare, or start a Fox, Tallyo! Tallyo! was the word immediately, and away he rode pell-mell after the Dogs, till they caught the Game, or

the Game had made its escape from them. The consequence was, that my Uncle did not see his plantation three times a year, and as he had a manager who understood, & was very attentive to his own Interest, at least, my good Uncle died insolvent before he was forty years old, and his manager became the purchaser of his Estate.

My own story is not very long; my good old Grandfather, whose name-sake I am, left me, on that account, a plantation and some slaves, by his will. I was then about a year old; as I was provided for in that manner, my father thought there was no occasion to send me to school till I was twelve years old, when I went for six months to learn to read & write to a School in the neighbourhood. My Schoolmaster us'd to say, Ah! Moses! Moses! I am afraid you will do little." My Schoolfellows caught the expression, and teas'd me in such a manner with it, that I ran away from School, and never was sent back again to it, nor to any other. The little Girls, too, caught the Story, and I could hear them say to one another, as they look'd at me, Ah! Moses! Moses! then, away they all ran, gigling [sic], and laughing, ready to split their sides.--Polly Languid, indeed, was an exception: I never saw her do any thing like what her playmates did, and I began to feel a regard for her on that account. She sometimes look'd at me with great Kindness, or, perhaps Compassion, and would say, "indeed, Moses, I think everybody treats you very ill." This won my heart, and so I made her an offer of it, which she was good enough to accept, and we have now been married more than three weeks, and I have never in all that time had an unkind word from her; no Complaints, whatever: so that I begin to hope that my School masters Joke will some day or other be forgot.

But, now to the Business of this Letter.--Since I have got possession of the estate which my grandfather left me, which was only last January,¹¹

my Uncle Tom Project, a Brother of my Mothers, and my Cousin Will Busy-body, a Son of my great Uncle Jack's, have been incessantly endeavouring to persuade me to sell my Lands and negroes, and join them in a retail-store, a distillery, a Merchant-Mill, a tannery, a Cotton-gin, to go by water, and a cotton-spinning manufactory, which they propose engaging in, as soon as they can raise a sufficient Capital, which they tell me I can very easily furnish; the Business to be conducted by themselves, without my having any trouble at all, under the Firm of "Project, Busy-body, Do-Little, & Company". They point out so many advantages, and make so sure of making immense fortunes for themselves, as well as for me and my Children (for I am not without hopes of having some,) that sometimes¹² they have almost persuaded me to come into their plan. But, whenever I think of my Father's Mill with six pair of stones; his three million of counterfeit surveys; and the death of poor Fearnought, and Camilla, my heart fails me; when I ask my dear Wife's opinion, she answers only, "My dear Mr. Do-Little, you know best." Buy my neighbour, Major Stirabout, who is one of the best Managers in this part of the Country, advises me to hold fast, what I have got, and turning to my Dilworth's spelling¹³ he read me the Fable of the Waggoner and Hercules,¹⁴ which I never understood, before, and tells me,¹⁵ I had better come and see him often, and he will instruct me how to manage my plantation; and this advice I find myself inclining to take:--but let me do what I will I am afraid my unfortunate name will operate against me. So I have prevaild [sic] on the Major to write you these two Letters, that you may¹⁶ thoroughly understand my Case, and request the favor of you to prepare a petition to the next general assembly to enable me to change my name to Stirabout; a name which I prefer an account of the good advice I have received [sic] from my good neighbour, who is kind enough to say, he hopes I shall become worthy

of it, in time. So no more at present from your humble Servant to
command,

Moses Do-Little

N.

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Notes to Essay 18

¹ In Greek legend, the virgin warrior queen of the Volscians. She figures in the Aeneid as being killed by the Trojans. Also: In Lyly's Euphues, a lady with whom Philautus falls in love; an opera by Owen McSwiney, translated from the Italian in 1706; and a novel by Fanny Burney published in 1796. Tucker may have had any or all of these Camillas in mind. Moreover, several horses named Camilla lived during the colonial and early national periods in Virginia, at least three of them the daughters of Baylor's Fearnought (Edgar).

² An ancient Roman deity, goddess of the moon, protectress of the female sex, goddess of the hunt and the woods, protectress of chastity, and patroness of childbirth. Again, several horses of this name actually lived; one of them, foaled in 1801, was descended from Baylor's Fearnought.

³ miscarried.

⁴ Kitty Fisher, an imported grey mare, was foaled in 1755 and bred with Baylor's Fearnought. (Edgar)

⁵ MS. originally read "my" ("my" lightly cancelled; "his" added above the line with a caret.

⁶ "him" added above the line with a caret.

⁷ "Candidates did not vote for themselves in eighteenth-century Virginia... A candidate would naturally vote for the man with whom he had joined interests.. not for a rival who might be put ahead by one or two more votes." (Sydnor, 74-75)

⁸ This term has historically been applied to the three learned professions of divinity, law, and medicine, and secondarily also to the military profession. (OED)

⁹ MS. originally read "month" ("month" cancelled).

¹⁰ A projector is "a schemer; one who lives by his wits; a promotor of bubble companies; a speculator, a cheat." (OED)

¹¹ Presumably Moses came into his estate when he reached the age of majority, twenty-one years. We may therefore assume that, at the time of these letters, he is between twenty-one and twenty-two years old.

¹² "sometimes" added above the line with a caret.

¹³ Thomas Dilworth's A New Guide to the English Tongue was one of the most widely used spellers in early America. Originally published in London in 1740, it was first reprinted in America by Benjamin Franklin in 1747; the National Union Catalogue lists nearly forty American editions from 1747 to about 1840. It was eventually supplanted by Webster's American Spelling-Book (1798).

¹⁴ See Appendix.

¹⁵ A word has been heavily cancelled between "and" and "tells."

¹⁶ A misspelling of "thoroughly" (?) has been cancelled between "may" and "thoroughly."

Critical Commentary

St. George Tucker's narrative of Moses Do-little was intended by its author for publication in William Wirt's The Old Bachelor, an essay serial which first appeared in twenty-eight issues of the Richmond Enquirer between December 22, 1810, and December 24, 1811, and was later reprinted with five additions in book form (Richmond, 1814). Although Moses Do-Little's story was never printed, some consideration of the nature of Wirt's enterprise is necessary if we are to understand Tucker's purpose in writing these essays.

One of the major literary concerns of post-Revolutionary America was that the newly-independent nation should have a new and equally independent literature. Yet, as Robert Spiller has pointed out, "art is form, and new form does not suddenly appear."¹ At the same time as the former colonies were searching for a literary form suited to the American experience, romanticism was replacing rationalism as the philosophic basis of British and continental literature. Although, in Spiller's words, "the accepted way of declaring literary independence of Britain was to write something on an American theme as nearly as possible in the manner of a favorite British author," the masters of the nascent Romantic school began to displace such earlier, more formal models as Defoe, Pope, Addison, and Swift.² The periodical essay, a British form no longer popular even in its native land, soon fell into decline in America. Washington Irving, launching in 1809 the essay serial Salmagundi, lampooned the traditional moral purposes of the periodical essay:

Our intention is simply to instruct the young, reform the old, correct the town and castigate the age; this is an arduous task, and therefore we undertake it with confidence. We intend for this purpose to present a striking picture of the town; and as every body is anxious to see his own phiz on canvas, however stupid or ugly it may be, we have no doubt but that the whole town will flock to our exhibition.³

The cynical, jaded tone of the young northerner was not matched in the south; for Wirt, launching The Old Bachelor in 1811, announced that the purpose of his serial was "'virtuously to instruct and innocently to amuse' the reader and to work a reform of manners in town as well as country."⁴ Wirt's serious intentions are more in line than Irving's light-hearted ones with the concerns that gave rise to the English periodical essay. Reacting in neoclassical fashion to the egocentricity of such essayists as Montaigne, early eighteenth-century British essayists stressed the social responsibility of the writer. Richard Steele, in the opening number of The Guardian, wrote:

The main Purpose of the Work shall be to protect the Modest, the Industrious, to celebrate the Wise, the Valiant, to encourage the Good, the Pious, to confront the Impudent, the Idle, to condemn the Vain, the Cowardly, and to disappoint the Wicked and Prophanes.⁵

In imitation of The Guardian, The Tatler, and The Spectator, all of which Steele published in collaboration with Joseph Addison, more than five hundred essay serials with similar intentions appeared in eighteenth-century

London. The popularity of the form spread to the New World. The New-England Courant, the Boston weekly in which James Franklin published his younger brother Benjamin's "Silence Dogood" letters in 1722, was the first colonial newspaper to carry an essay serial. Franklin was followed by Mather Byles, who, with Matthew and John Adams, published Proteus Echo in 1727-28. In Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin repeated his earlier success by publishing The Busy-Body in 1728-29. Other Philadelphia serials included the Rev. William Smith's The Prattler (1757-58) and a precursor namesake of Wirt's series, The Old Bachelor (1775-76), principally authored by Thomas Paine and Francis Hopkinson. In the south, The Maryland Gazette carried The Plain-Dealer (1727); The Virginia Gazette carried The Monitor (1736-37); and The South-Carolina Gazette carried The Meddlers Club (1735) and The Humourist (1753-54).

By 1811, however, the periodical essay was virtually a moribund form. According to Harrison Meserole, after the War of 1812 there was "a slow turning away from the 'morals and manners' type of essay and a turning toward the kind of subjectivity which...we generally look for in the familiar essay."⁶ A magazine critic, writing in 1822 of Irving's The Sketch Book, characterized it as "the last link in the series of periodical essay writing"; even The Sketch Book, the critic noted, "has no direct moral purpose, but is founded on sentiment and deep feeling", while the periodical essay had been written "with a direct moral tendency, to expose and to reform the ignorance and the follies of the age."⁷ This moral tendency is not lacking in Wirt's series and, at least in the early part of the serial, the moral purpose centers mainly upon education, which preoccupies "Dr. Cecil" (the old bachelor of the title) and his imaginary friends, the other pseudonymous contributors. The education of public servants, the education of women,

the responsibility of parents for their children's education, the need for a system of public education and a national university, are all discussed. Moreover, the series examines such subjects as industry, avarice, and patriotism, with a view to instructing the young in the relative merits and shortcomings of these things.

The Old Bachelor was by no means the only forum where education was being considered. Virginians generally, and Jeffersonians particularly, were concerned with the role of learning in the life of a citizen of a republic. Thomas Jefferson's visionary Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge (1779), although it failed to pass the legislature, was praised in 1803 by Wirt, who called it a "simple and beautiful scheme, whereby science...would have been carried to every man's door."⁸ Not only in newspaper and collected essays, but in patriotic and inaugural addresses, the need for and the importance of universal education were stressed.

Given the intellectual climate in which it was written, it is not surprising that Tucker's "Narrative of Moses Do-Little" should be didactic in purpose and illustrate a moral precept. By relating the stories of men who, for all their good qualities, failed to realize the importance either of getting an education or of putting that education to good use, Moses demonstrates the advantages of literacy. Tucker moralizes his tale neatly, working the lesson into his summary of the lives of Moses's fathers and uncles, ultimately sending the reader to his Dilworth's speller to learn the moral of the tale as a whole. The narrative, which cites a fable at its close, is thus a fable itself. Moreover, it is an allegory, as the names of its characters--Do-little, Busy-body, Readywit, Stirabout, et al.--suggest. Even the name "Moses" is allegorical, suggesting as it does the biblical hero who, found as a child floating in a basket by a pharaoh's daughter and raised as a

grandchild of the king of Egypt, found immortality only through his exertions in leading the children of Israel out of bondage. Tucker's pairing of the names "Moses" and "Do-little" is ironic, as are the names of such later literary characters as Arthur Dimmesdale and J. Alfred Prufrock. The elegance suggested by the forename is undercut by the distinct frumpiness or antiheroic significance of the surname. Moses Do-little, however, learns that success is more a matter of activity and intelligence than of family connection or political power. In the end of the second essay he reveals that he is trying to change his last name to "Stirabout," a name more in keeping with the connotations of his forename.

The use of aptronym is one of the features Tucker's essays have in common with the periodical essay in general. Aptronym was a convention of the essay serial, as were the persona, the club, fictitious letters, dream visions, foreign visitors, oriental tales, and mock advertisements.⁹ Seldom if ever, of course, did all these conventions occur in a single essay. Although Tucker made use of other conventions in other essays (dream vision, for instance, in his essay of 1796, "A Dream," and several others), the persona, the fictitious letter, and aptronymous characters are the most significant conventional aspects of the Moses Do-little essays. It is the way in which Tucker combines these conventions with elements now considered more characteristic of later forms of writing that makes these essays worthy of consideration by the modern scholar.

For all the moral earnestness of Tucker's essay, the most interesting, and probably the most important, feature of the Do-little narrative is the extent to which it pre-figures (or anticipates) the writings of the

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For all the moral earnestness of Tucker's essay, the most interesting, and probably the most important, feature of the Do-little narrative is the extent to which it pre-figures (or anticipated) the writings of the

humorists of the old southwest in the first half of the 19th century. Although the first book of Southwestern humor is thought to be A. B. Longstreet's Georgia Scenes, Characters, Incidents, & C. (1835), the tradition has been traced back to William Byrd II of Westover, and certainly has its roots in an enduring oral tradition. Tucker possibly came into contact with this oral tradition during his long career as a lawyer and judge. Philip Paxton wrote in 1853:

The origin and perpetuity of many of our queer and out-of-the-way phrases, may be traced to the semi-annual meetings of the gentlemen of the bar at the courts of our Southern and Western States.

These gentlemen, living as they do in the thinly inhabited portion of our land, and among a class of persons generally very far their inferiors in point of education, rarely enjoying anything that may deserve the name of intellectual society, are apt to seek for amusement in listening to the droll stories and odd things always to be heard at the country store or bar-room. Every new expression and queer tale is treasured up, and new ones manufactured against the happy time when they shall meet their brother-in-law at the approaching term of the district court.¹⁰

While Tucker was hardly the type of backwoods lawyer described by Paxton, he undoubtedly came into contact with many such men at the court days and militia musters mentioned by Moses Do-little. That the humor of "The Narrative of Moses Do-little" is most readily apparent when the essay is read aloud is some proof of the debt Tucker owes to this oral tradition. In

a few instances, the narrative does come close to the vivid, terse, idiomatic style of the oral tale:

...if they happened to put up a hare, or start a Fox, Tallyo! Tallyo! was the word immediately, and away he rode pell-mell after the Dogs, till they caught the Game, or the Game had made its escape from them. The consequence was, that my Uncle did not see his plantation three times a year.

Since reading silently to oneself was less common in Tucker's time than it is today, it is perhaps natural that Tucker should aim for occasional aural effects. On the whole, however, the tale is faithful to the fictitious letter form in which it is couched. There is little direct discourse, and the tale unfolds through the use of leisurely, rambling narrative prose.

The letter format, while harking back to Addison and Steele, also anticipates the frame tale, with its box-like structure, used so effectively by the southwest humorists. The framework method, according to Walter Blair, serves to underline three types of incongruity upon which the tale depends for its humorous effect:

- (1) Incongruity between the grammatical, highly rhetorical language of the framework on the one hand, and, on the other, the ungrammatical racy dialect of the narrator.
- (2) Incongruity between the situation at the time the yarn was told and the situation described in the yarn itself....
- (3) Incongruity between realism, discoverable in the framework...and fantasy, which enters into the enclosed narrative because the narrator selects details and uses figures of speech,

epithets and verbs which give grotesque coloring.¹¹

Obviously, not all of these types of incongruity appear in Tucker's "Do-little" essays. Of the three, the second type--incongruity between past and present situations--operates to most effect: Moses, having come under the influence of Major Stirabout, can relate the story of his father and uncles with a reasonable degree of assurance that he will not make the same mistakes they did. Because of the lack of direct discourse or dialogue here, Blair's third type of incongruity can hardly be said to be present at all in these essays. Blair's first type of incongruity, involving the juxtaposition of grammatical language in the framework with the ungrammatical language of the narrator, is chiefly interesting in regard to Tucker's tale in that it suggests a fourth possible incongruity: incongruity between the educated, erudite St. George Tucker and his fictive persona, the ill educated, naif Moses Do-little. The use of the persona is nothing new. Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift may be cited as two examples of essayists who took noms de plume and created literary personalities to go with them. Rarely, if ever, were these personae made to appear less intelligent than the writers whose personalities they masked, however, and the ill-educated persona might possibly be a Tucker innovation. Certainly this anticipates the methods of the southwest humorists (Samuel Clemens behind "Mark Twain" behind Huck Finn for instance); yet in some ways it is the weakest feature of these essays. For while Moses is the central character of the essay, the one whose personality we most want to grasp, he is partially obscured by the figure of Major Stirabout, who is writing the letter for him. One moment Moses is the very type of the ingenuous narrator:

Such, Sir, was the Life, and such the End, of an honest Man,

of unblemished Morals, and originally of very large property. I am confident that he never ow'd a debt that he did not honestly pay, and some, two or three times over...

At the next, he seems fully aware of his father's mistakes, of their cause, and of the lesson lying behind them:

...my Father possess'd no learning, no knowledge of any Business whatever, nor any, the least energy of Character. And for such men to embark in projects which require knowledge, Information, Judgement, and incessant attention, appears to me, from his sad example, to be one of the surest, & readiest Ways to Ruin.--

Since, on the whole, Tucker sustains the naif persona very well throughout the essay, we might be able to assume that these moralistic passages are intended as obvious interpolations by the Major--instances where, perhaps, as he is taking Moses' dictation, he encourages (perhaps helps) Moses to articulate the lesson to be learned by the example of his relatives. To interpret the passages in this manner, however, seems excessively kind to Tucker. More likely, these are accidental intrusions of the auctorial voice in the otherwise well-sustained narrative, points at which Tucker found it more congenial to instruct than to amuse.

If Tucker's use of the persona is sometimes confusing, his use of local color--of references, however oblique, to persons, places, and institutions of the time and place in which he was writing--is quite thorough; and it is in his use of local color that Tucker seems most clearly to prefigure the southwest humorists. As a Virginian writing for an audience of Virginians,

Tucker was careful to make frequent reference to things which would make his readers seem at home with his writing. Horses and horseracing, for instance, were of particular importance to early Virginians. At first horses were simply a means of transportation, to be used on long trips that could not be made by water. By the end of the colonial period, when the English horseman J. F. D. Smyth visited Virginia, horseback riding had become such a passion that "nobody walks on foot the smallest distance, except when hunting. Indeed a man will frequently go five miles to catch a horse, to ride only one mile upon afterwards."¹² Since horses were usually ridden at a gallop (the so-called "planter's pace"), speed and endurance were important to the horses' owners, and the sport of horseracing developed from informal contests of these qualities. Owners rode their own horses in these races, and backed them with their own money, while spectators laid side bets. These wagers were regarded as legal contracts by the county courts, which also settled disputes over the outcome of the race or the payment of winnings. With the increasing popularity of racing--first "quarter-racing" (along a straight path one quarter of a mile long), then course racing on a circular mile-long track--came the breeding of horses especially suited for racing. The breeding stock was strengthened by the importation of fine horses from England. The first of these was an Arabian stallion named Bulle Rock, who was brought to this country in 1730; between 1730 and 1774, the year of the Non-Importation Agreements which ended the practice, fifty English stallions are known to have been imported to Virginia, out of 217 brought to all the colonies combined. When injuries, age, or other factors made these horses no longer suitable for racing, they were frequently put to stud and mated for a price to the mares of other owners. Baylor's Fearnought, a particularly excellent stallion,

commanded a stud fee of eight or ten pounds; other horses brought about four pounds.¹³ It is from this enterprise of horsebreeding, as well as from racing the younger horses got on his own mares, that Moses Do-little's father hopes to profit when he imports his own Fearnought, Camilla and Diana.

As even the most cursory reading of Moses Do-little's narrative reveals, Tucker frequently refers to the law, to social and political occasions, and to events which place his story squarely in Virginia at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He also lampoons the Virginians' emphasis on the importance of family, and burlesques the working of the "old boy" system whereby members of prominent families shared political power. By writing in this vein, Tucker challenged some of the assumptions about family that were prevalent in his day, according to William Woodward:

In the air there floated the mystic sense of exclusive possession, the aura of a superiority which would exist forever despite the talents, the wealth, the beauty, and the daring of those who did not possess it. If an eighteenth century Virginian had been gifted with telescopic vision of the future he would have seen, in distant years, the constellation of F F V's-- or First Families of Virginia.¹⁴

Even though they now require glossing, the references would have been readily comprehensible to the reader of Tucker's day. There is more art to Tucker's use of local color than is involved in merely peppering a fictional narrative with references to real life. Longstreet said of his own sketches that they

consist of nothing more than fanciful combinations of real incidents and characters; and throwing into those

scenes some personal incident or adventure of my own, real or imaginary, as it would best suit my purpose; usually real but happening at different times and under different circumstances from which they are here represented.¹⁵

The same may surely be said of Tucker's work. Thus, while there really were horses called Fearnought and Kitty Fisher, ~~Camilla~~, and Diana, the circumstances of their importation and demise do not coincide with the stories of the horses Tucker mentions. Similarly, Moses' father bears some resemblance to the ill-fated William Byrd II. Both men, for instance, wanted no part of the Revolution; both were improvident and devised elaborate schemes for extracting themselves from financial difficulties; both imported race horses. But if the elder Do-little has some of the features of Byrd, they are combined with features which may belong to one or more other historical personalities or only to creatures of Tucker's imagination.

Tucker ties local color to what Bernard DeVoto calls "the comedy of the land"¹⁶ when he treats of land speculation, a favorite theme of the humorists of the old southwest. It was a theme that Tucker himself had used as early as 1795-96, in his play The Wheel of Fortune, and in his unpublished essay "A Dream" (1796). In that essay, the ghost of Franklin is expounding the history of America to the ghost of Rittenhouse, who has just arrived in paradise after a post-mortem sleep of seven hundred years:

...the seeds of the Evil were then sown in that immense national debt, which was necessarily, & fatally incurred in the struggle for Independence; the inability of the States to perform their just engagements to their Creditors

laid the foundation of that rapacious speculation which ground the faces of the poor; & filled the Coffers of the Oppressors, as soon as the Means of Redemption were found to be in the power of the nation: it created discordant & irreconcilable [sic] interests among the people; honest Industry was discountenanced, whilst rapacity & extortion were sure to thrive. New Schemes of pillage were daily devised, and new victims daily became a Prey to the Artifices of those who lived but to plunder and to amass; to this Evil one of a still more opprobrious nature was soon united. The vast speculations in Land, which either had no actual existence, or was not capable of supporting one Man for a thousand Acres of its Mountainous and rocky extant [sic], had proceeded so far as to shut mens [sic] hearts, as well as their Ears against the Dictator of Humanity or Justice. Thousands & ten [sic] of thousands were the innocent victims of these nefarious practices. They migrated from all parts of Europe under the Idea of purchasing, or having already purchased, comfortable & extensive farms for themselves & their families, and found that a barren Mountain, or, perhaps a patent without Lands was the full amount of their purchase.¹⁷

Land speculation was rife in the get-rich-quick atmosphere of post-Revolutionary American. Indeed, as A. M. Sakolski has pointed out:

America, from its inception, was a speculation. It was a speculation to Columbus. It was considered a speculation by the kings of Spain, France, and England. They looked

upon it as a source of riches in gold, silver, and pelts.

It was from the land that these precious goods were produced, and the ownership of the land was as essential to them as the political jurisdiction over it. Royal favorites were accordingly given vast territories, and land was distributed to individuals and companies as royal rewards.¹⁸

By the mid-eighteenth century, these royal grants had ceased, but colonies still regarded the ownership of large landed estates as a badge of nobility. In order to acquire sizeable tracts, many colonials formed land companies competing for the grants of western land which were still available. Such a notable Virginian as George Washington was involved in one of these ventures, the Ohio Company. In general, these were legitimate enterprises, and because ownership of land, not money, was held in esteem, partners in land companies proposed to settle the land rather than sell it. Things were different, however, after the Revolution, when land--and practically everything else--was mainly valued for the profit it would realize on the domestic or European market. Again, most land schemes were probably legitimate, but profit-seekers were not above selling non-existent lands, then absconding with the proceeds. Two schemes in particular may have inspired Tucker in his writing of the Moses Do-little narrative. The first of these was the 1786 scandal involving, among others, Wilson Cary Nicholas, Henry Carter Lee, John Preston of Smithfield, and George Keith Taylor of Petersburg. These Virginians were involved in the sale to a group of Connecticut speculators of 300,000 acres of land in western Virginia which, when surveyed, turned out to be only 133,874 acres. Lee was identified as the ringleader and arrested in Boston as he was about to embark for the West Indies; he made restitution by giving up some of his Pennsylvania land

holdings. Of his partners, Preston and Nicholas were prosecuted in Virginia. According to Sakolski, there is no record of the outcome of their cases, except that Preston went on to become, in 1814, governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia.¹⁹

A notorious scandal that may have suggested to Tucker the "famous Land company" the elder Do-little's surveyor runs off to join was the fraudulent "Scioto Associates." The Scioto project was a scheme concocted by William Duer and a company of anonymous "associates" to encourage French emigrants to settle on some three million acres in what is now the state of Ohio. The Scioto Associates did not own this land; rather, they had an option to buy it, and in selling it before it was paid for they were indulging in a practice known as "dodging." The time was the late 1780's and the company hoped to attract the beleaguered French aristocracy as purchasers. To this end, they sent the young poet, Joel Barlow, to Paris as their agent. Barlow founded a subsidiary company, which he called the "Compagnie du Scioto," that arranged to purchase three million acres from the Scioto Associates at one dollar per acre, with the privilege of reselling the land in large or small tracts and of sending out colonists to settle the land. Barlow guaranteed the purchasers against eviction and attack, an arrangement that was met with some disapproval by the Scioto group, who merely wanted to sell the land at a profit and were not prepared to receive settlers. Nevertheless, when the first colonists disembarked in Alexandria, Virginia, in March, 1790, they found that the company had made some arrangements for their transportation to the proposed place of settlement, "Gallipolis." Both the journey and the arrival proved disappointing, so much so that a delegation of the former aristocrats went to New York to lodge their protests with Duer. Duer appeased them by

wining and dining them in the best circles; but the poorer immigrants, who had remained in Ohio, experienced hunger and Indian attacks. Many deserted, but a few stayed to suffer miserably. Meanwhile, Duer had become involved in speculation in government bonds and bank shares, to the end that he went to debtor's prison without ever paying for the Scioto lands. Congress, taking pity on the few remaining settlers (of the original five hundred families, only sixteen were left by 1800), passed a law giving them small parcels of land in the Scioto Valley, but the project is still regarded as "the most shameful piece of land jobbery that ever disgraced our country."²⁰

In the Moses Do-little narrative, land speculation serves to further Tucker's didactic purpose. Like all of Moses's father's ventures--including also merchant milling and horse breeding--speculation in western lands is a means of realizing a hasty profit. Not only is Moses's father ill-educated, and not only does he fail to learn from his mistakes; he is also guilty of the sin of avarice. He is swept away by the spirit of his times, which promised to the unscrupulous much financial return on very little expenditure of effort. Moses's education will include not only the practical lessons to be learned from Dilworth's spelling, but also the moral lesson of the fable of the Waggoner and Hercules: "Lazy Wishes never do a Man any Service; but if he would have Help from God in the Time of Need, let him not only implore his Assistance, but make use of his own best Endeavours."²¹ Although Tucker, in The Wheel of Fortune, dealt with the shady pursuits of amoral land dealers, his concern in the Do-little narrative is quite simply with what he apparently sees as the misguided wish to get something for nothing.

Tucker's criticism of the avarice of his time is clear; unfortunately,

because the Do-little essays were never published, it was never heeded, and because so little of what Tucker wrote ever saw print, it is difficult to assess his importance as a literary figure. He can hardly be considered an influential writer. Historically his reputation has rested on his edition of Blackstone's Commentaries; such of his poems and other belletristic writings as were published during his lifetime have, until the current revival of interest in early American literature, been little read in after years. Even now, Tucker's work is not widely read, although one poem, "Resignation," has been frequently anthologized. Tucker's unpublished writings, although they probably circulated among a limited circle of his friends during his lifetime, had at best an even smaller audience--and consequently less influence--than his published works. No author, it seems, has ever claimed St. George Tucker as a model.

It must be admitted that St. George Tucker was a literary dilettante. "Dillettante" is not necessarily a pejorative term to use of any writer in any age, and particularly must it not be considered pejorative in this context. Until the time of Washington Irving, America's first professional author, all American writers followed the advice of Philip Freneau and grafted their "authorship upon some other calling as the helpless ivy takes hold of the vigorous oak."²² Tucker's relative obscurity may be partly the result of his dillettantism; partly, too, it may be accounted for by the fact that he had the misfortune to write often in moribund forms--the Pindaric ode, the heroic couplet, the periodical essay--that had received their death blows at the end of the eighteenth century.

Still, Tucker wrote; and that fact is of considerable value to the literary historian. For by writing, even in outmoded forms at a time when most American writers felt called upon to come with something new, Tucker

illuminates the process whereby our literature has evolved. It is doubtful that Edgar Allan Poe would be heralded as the inventor of the modern short story, or Charles Brockdon Brown as the first American novelist, had not American literature served an apprenticeship with the periodical essay. In its later history, the essay serial tended away from its original didactic purpose and towards the sketch or tale, a new form brought to flower by Washington Irving and to full fruition by Poe. The epistolary novel, also didactic in purpose, is also directly related to the periodical essay: one of the first American novels formed a part of Judith Sargent Murray's essay serial The Gleaner, which appeared in the Massachusetts Magazine between February, 1792, and December, 1794. Like Murray, Tucker worked in a literary tradition upon which later, greater writers were to build, and his importance is as a point on a line between the great periodical essayists and the humorists of the old southwest. To the literary historians who are likely to be his only modern readers, Tucker's Moses Do-little narrative may reveal a fact that has not previously been noticed: there is a remarkable similarity between the conventions of the periodical essay and the conventions of southwestern humor. Both use the persona, the frame tale, the mock letter (translated from essay to humor as the mock address), the dream vision, and the foreign visitor (or simple outsider). To these Tucker added elements which were not traditional to the periodical essay but which he evidently considered congenial to it: aural humor and local color. Moreover, these innovations may have resulted from Tucker's having been exposed to some of the same influences--the circuit-riding lawyers, for instance--that the southwest humorists were later to claim as the sources of their inspiration. Tucker, then, may be seen as a paradigm of literary evolution, a crossroads at which the periodical

essay began to merge with the vernacular humor of the frontier. Later writers, although they certainly would not have known Tucker's essays, would undoubtedly have read some periodical essays. Thus the southwest humorists, seeking to couch personal experience in acceptable form, borrowed (perhaps almost unconsciously) the conventions of the periodical essay, with a result amazingly similar to what one finds in Tucker's Moses Do-little essays.

It is, of course, impossible now to say why Tucker wrote. Did he feel a gnawing urge to express himself that could only be relieved by the exercise of his pen? Was he trying to add a measure of popular esteem to his already considerable professional reputation? Was he constantly encouraged by friends like Wirt to put his best thoughts down on paper for the benefit of posterity? Did he, like Oliver Wendell Holmes, have an exalted idea of his own literary talents? Or did he write simply to amuse himself and, when possible, others? If Tucker's were, indeed, the modest ambitions of the hobbyist, we may overlook in assessing his writing a multitude of sins: his failure to create any new forms, to be in the vanguard of American romanticism, to introduce any unforgettable characters, to make readers marvel at the infinite felicity of the English language. There is something thrilling to the spirit of democracy in considering a man who, though he did not aim for greatness, achieved significance, a man to whom Richard Beale Davis' description of William Wirt might also well apply:

This early national emanation of the Southern literary mind came from a man of humble origins who by hard work and gay and amiable disposition climbed to the top of the legal profession...of his time. His tone is mild, but his

criticism had its edge. He entertained as he instructed,
and he wrote of a South he knew.²³

Notes to Critical Commentary

¹ Robert E. Spiller, The Cycle of American Literature: An Essay in Historical Criticism (1955; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 19.

² Spiller, pp. 21-22.

³ Washington Irving, Salmagundi, ed. Bruce I. Granger and Martha Harzog (Boston: Twayne, 1977), pp. 67-68.

⁴ Bruce Granger, American Essay Serials from Franklin to Irving (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1978), p. 191.

⁵ Quoted in Granger, p. 5.

⁶ Harrison T. Messerole, "The American Familiar Essay, 1815-1835," diss., Univ. of Maryland, 1960, as quoted in Granger, p. 230.

⁷ "Essay Writing," North American Review, 14 (Apr., 1822), 332, 333, as quoted in Granger, p. 231.

⁸ Richard Beale Davis, Intellectual Life in Jefferson's Virginia, 1790 - 1830 (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1972), p. 31.

⁹ Granger, p. 6.

¹⁰ Philip Paxton, A Stray Yankee in Texas (New York, 1852), pp. 113-14, as quoted in Walter Blair, Native American Humor (1937; rpt. San Francisco: Chandler, 1960), p. 73.

¹¹ Blair, p. 92.

¹² J. F. D. Smyth, A Tour in the United States of America (London: G. Robinson, 1784), vol. 1, p. 23, as quoted in Jane Carson, Colonial Virginians at Play (Williamsburg, Va.: Colonial Williamsburg, 1965), pp. 103-104.

¹³ Carson, pp. 105-20.

¹⁴ William E. Woodward, The Way Our People Lived: An Intimate American History (1944; rpt. New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), p. 88.

¹⁵ Bishop O. P. Fitzgerald, Judge Longstreet: A Life (Nashville, 1891), as quoted in Blair, p. 66. The italics are Longstreet's.

¹⁶ Bernard DeVoto, Mark Twain's America (Boston, 1932), as quoted in Blair p. 69.

¹⁷ St. George Tucker, "A Dream," transcribed by Franklin J. Hillson from the original manuscript in the Tucker-Coleman Papers, Swem Library, The College of William and Mary.

¹⁸ A. M. Sakolski, The Great American Land Bubble (1932; rpt. New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1966), p. 1.

¹⁹ Sakolski, p. 44.

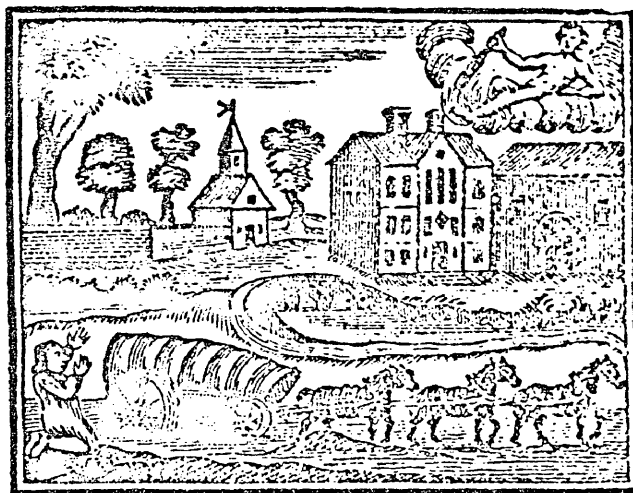
²⁰ Sakolski, p. 110.

²¹ See Appendix.

²² Spiller, p. 22.

²³ Richard Beale Davis, introd., The Letters of the British Spy, by William Wirt (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1970) p. xix.

SELECT FABLES.



He that will not help himself, shall have
Help from no Body.

FABLE I. *Of the Waggoner and Hercules.*

AS a Waggoner was driving his Team, his Waggon
sunk into a Hole, and stuck fast.

The poor Man immediately fell upon his Knees, and
prayed to *Hercules* that he would get his Waggon out of
the Hole again.

Thou Fool, says *Hercules*, whip thy Horses, and set thy
Shoulders to the Wheels; and then if thou wilt call upon
Hercules, he will help thee.

The Interpretation

*Lazy Wishes never do a Man any Service; but if he would
have Help from God in the Time of Need, let him not only re-
quest his Assistance, but make use of his own best Endeavours.*

G 5

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