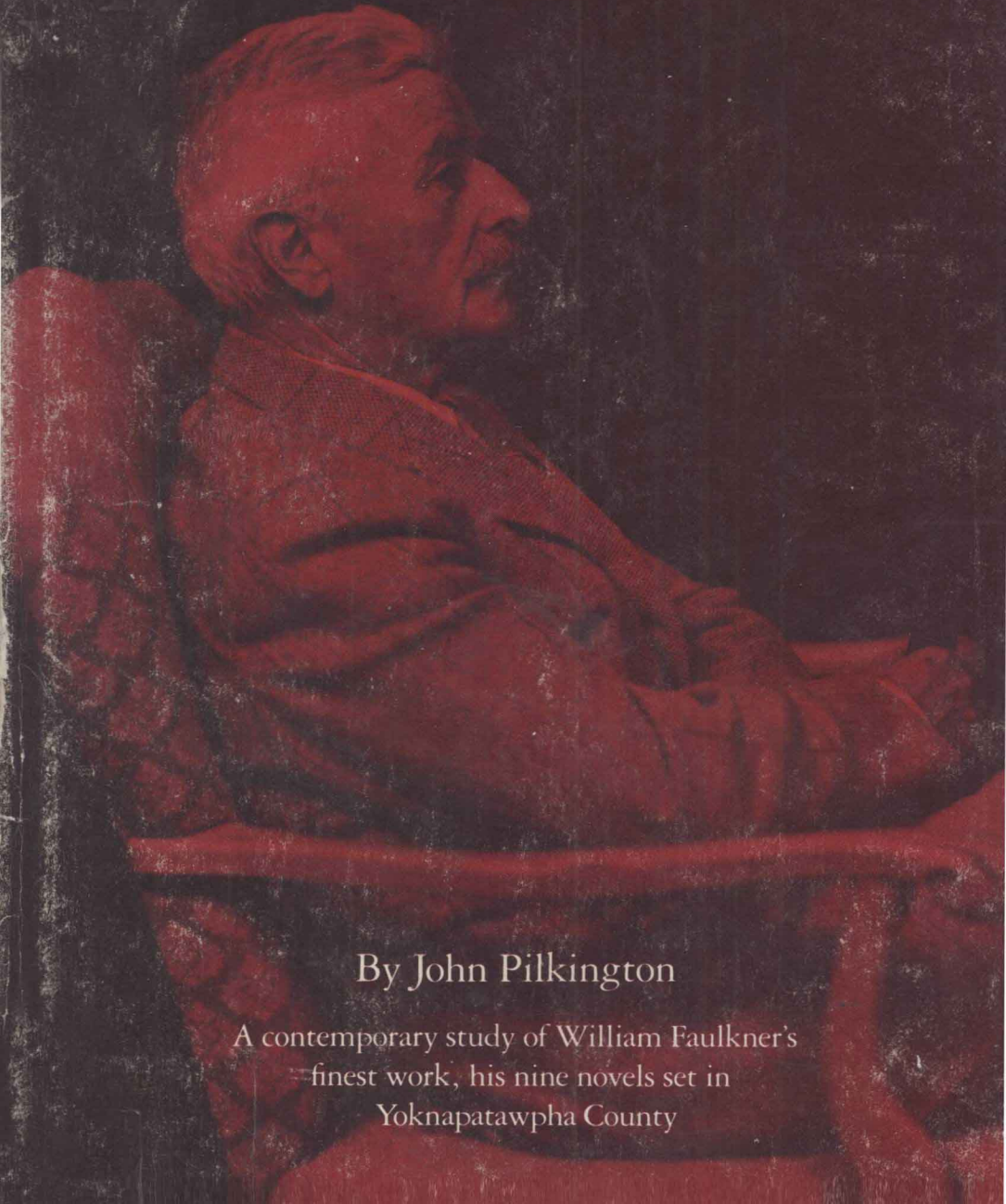


The Heart of Yoknapatawpha



By John Pilkington

A contemporary study of William Faulkner's
finest work, his nine novels set in
Yoknapatawpha County

The Heart of
Yoknapatawpha

BY
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Preface

WITH THE WRITING of *Sartoris* and its publication in 1929, William Faulkner discovered the immense fictional possibilities inherent in the hill country of north Mississippi, where he had been born and reared. Between this date and 1942, when *Go Down, Moses* was published, Faulkner wrote the novels upon which his enduring fame must always rest. Afterwards, his powers would slowly diminish; and although his second-best writing was still very, very good, he would never again reach the levels of excellence he had shown in *Sartoris*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Sanctuary*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Unvanquished*, *The Hamlet*, and *Go Down, Moses*. These works lie at the heart of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha saga, and they form the subject of this study.

The immense amount of critical exegesis and commentary that these nine novels have prompted has been staggering. Prior to 1950, when Faulkner received the Nobel Prize for Literature, almost no criticism of his work was available in hard-cover. Since that time, the Faulkner "industry" has been such that the academic community has scarcely been able to keep up with the dissertations, articles, and books dealing with almost every conceivable aspect of Faulkner's writing. The 1960s, especially, witnessed a great outpouring of Faulkner studies, a number of which, like the present volume, surveyed all or most of Faulkner's major works; and in the 1970s numerous dissertations, which often later appeared in hard-cover, examined in detail particular novels, while other books treated Faulkner's writing from philosophical and theoretical points of view. In the light of thirty years of intense examination by literally hundreds of critics, one might reasonably wonder if anything else remains to be said about the fiction of William Faulkner.

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This book rests upon the premise that not only does something else remain to be said, but also that so long as Faulkner's writings continue to speak to man's problems and to help man understand his perplexities and humanity, there will always be something more to be said. The conclusions of the general surveys made in the 1960s, valuable as they were and remain, must be modified by new perspectives made inevitable through the lapse of time, by the advance of knowledge about Faulkner's biography, and by the research now available in specialized studies which in themselves are necessarily fragmentary but influence the overall estimate of Faulkner's work. To phrase the matter directly, fifty years after *Sartoris* and almost forty after *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner's readers, entering the 1980s, should take a fresh approach to those novels that form the heart of the Yoknapatawpha fiction in the light not only of what has been said but also to discover what Faulkner has to say to the present.

This examination of Faulkner's work focuses upon the individual novels and upon their relationships to the totality of Faulkner's contribution. Criticism of the kind practiced here should always acknowledge its debts to earlier studies, but criticism of criticism must be kept to a minimum. My objective is to present balanced, even-tempered, perhaps slightly conservative studies of nine of Faulkner's best novels. I have endeavored to write from the perspective of literary history and from within the framework of the novels to reveal the close relationships among them; to explicate certain passages, notably in *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*, which have always been and remain perplexing to many readers; and to reach conclusions about the overall significance or implications of Faulkner's novels. In meeting these objectives, I have sought to support my interpretations with abundant quotations and citations from the novels themselves.

In general, critics dealing with Faulkner's work in the period under discussion have concentrated upon his uniqueness. Attention has been directed primarily to such literary concerns as his efforts to render psychological states or processes, his use of myth, the qualities of his literary style, and his innovations in narrative techniques. Much less has been said about his kinship with his fellow writers, particularly in the 1920s. The importance of the strictly literary or artistic aspects of his work, of course, should not be minimized, but for most readers these matters are secondary to Faulkner's commentary upon the humanity of man in the

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twentieth century. In any assessment of Faulkner's ultimate contribution to American literature, the critic must recognize that in his novels of the late 1920s and 1930s Faulkner handled themes that other writers had initiated earlier in their fiction. Faulkner's affinities with such writers as Sherwood Anderson, Edgar Lee Masters, Ellen Glasgow, Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and others cannot be overlooked. The general nature of these relationships can readily be identified but need not be examined here in detail.

When Faulkner began to write in the 1920s, American literature contained a number of sharply defined configurations to which he responded. Sherwood Anderson's theories about a new looseness of form in the novel—ideas which owed something to Edgar Lee Masters and found illustration in *Winesburg, Ohio*—clearly exerted an influence upon Faulkner's concept of the novel. In 1925, the year in which Faulkner was most closely associated with Anderson, Ellen Glasgow published *Barren Ground*, one of a long series of novels in which she endeavored to explore the history of Virginia from about the time of the Confederacy to modern times. When Faulkner decided to examine the history of north Mississippi in his Yoknapatawpha novels, he had her example before him. In this important mid-year of the decade, Faulkner could also have read Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, notable for containing Dreiser's fullest and most powerful statement of naturalism and his attack upon the administration of justice and organized religion in America. Faulkner would utilize these themes in several novels, perhaps the best examples being *As I Lay Dying* and *Sanctuary*. In Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and in Hemingway's *In Our Time*, both of which appeared in this same remarkable year of the American novel, Faulkner could have read the outpouring of the disillusionment of the Lost Generation, ideas that colored *Sartoris*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Sanctuary*, and probably *As I Lay Dying*. In Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* (1922), Faulkner might have seen a precursor of his own Jason Compson; and in Lewis' *Elmer Gantry* (1927), he could have viewed examples of religious bigotry that anticipated his own Doc Hines and Simon McEachern. The similarities between Faulkner's themes and those of his contemporaries demonstrate convincingly that despite the rather narrow focus of his fiction upon life in north Mississippi, Faulkner was very much a part of the pattern of the national literary scene and responded to the same subjects that occupied writers in

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other parts of the country. To a degree, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha was a literary microcosm of the 1920s.

Although he was ever willing to seize upon any material wherever he found it, Faulkner can never be called an imitator. The ideas or themes he took from others he so thoroughly assimilated into his own thinking that they emerged with a singular Faulkner stamp that marked them for his own. Thus, the record shows that Faulkner began the great years of his literary work, the period between *Sartoris* and *Go Down, Moses*, by choosing to deal with many of the subjects favored by his contemporaries. In *Sartoris*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Sanctuary*, one can observe his identification with many of the major problems that confronted America after World War I. At the same time, he was also beginning his measurement of Southern history from the Civil War to his own time in north Mississippi. In that assessment, the deterioration of great Southern families and the perversion of traditional American virtues became new and prominent features of his work. With *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner began to emphasize the need for man to tolerate the burden of his humanity and to assert the difficulties that lie in the way of the discovery of historical truth. Probably more than any other American novelist, Faulkner understood the movement of American history and the vital role of history in man's understanding, if not always justification, of his present. These elements of his work came to fruition in *The Unvanquished*, *The Hamlet*, and *Go Down, Moses*—novels in which he increasingly emphasized his conviction that man can never realize his freedom by living to himself alone. In these novels, especially, Faulkner insisted upon the dignity of every man whatever his color or condition in life; he continually affirmed that the poor, the sick, the elderly, the young, the mentally retarded, even the criminal, have yet their claim to the rights of man.

Faulkner believed that freedom, in America or in any other country, can only be attained in the context of the community. He recognized that two forces primarily inhibit man's realization of his freedom in society: his failure to recognize the humanity, the equality, the rights, the needs of others; and his vulnerability to the temptations of greed. More vividly and more persuasively than the works of any other American novelist, Faulkner's fiction reveals the depth to which the human spirit can be eroded by an insatiable greed for material possessions that is the beset-

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ting sin in modern times. Like Shakespeare, Milton, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman, Faulkner warned man against the evil that lies within himself but believed in man's potential for right living within the context of human brotherhood. These are the timeless truths that lie at the heart of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha.

Acknowledgments

FROM THE BEGINNING of this study of William Faulkner's best fiction, I have been indebted to literary historians and critics who have sought diligently over the past three decades to assist readers of his novels to appreciate his contribution to the literature of the twentieth century. With no intention of slighting any of these perceptive writers by not referring to them by name, I wish to mention especially my appreciation of the biographical research of Joseph Blotner and the critical studies of Cleanth Brooks, Melvin Backman, Warren Beck, Carvel Collins, Michael Gold, Elizabeth Kerr, James Meriwether, Michael Millgate, William Van O'Connor, Lewis Simpson, Olga Vickery, and Hyatt Waggoner.

Without permission to publish material from Faulkner's fiction, letters, and other writings, this volume would lose much of its effectiveness. For permission to publish excerpts from Faulkner's novels and his nonfiction writings, I am grateful to Mrs. Jill Faulkner Summers; for permission to publish quotations from Faulkner's novels and *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, I thank Random House, Inc.; and for permission to publish material from *Faulkner in the University*, I express my appreciation to the University Press of Virginia.

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The Heart of Yoknapatawpha

The Poles of Historical Measurement

Sartoris

TWO WEEKS after he had finished the manuscript of his third book and dated it 29 September 1927 on page 583, William Faulkner wrote his publisher, Horace Liveright: "I have written THE book. . . . I believe it is the damdest best book you'll look at this year, and any other publisher." When Liveright rejected the manuscript, Faulkner, shocked yet still confident, answered, "I still believe it is the book which will make my name for me as a writer."¹ To a degree, the argument over the merits of the work continues and relates not to one novel but two. In 1927 Faulkner entitled his lengthy manuscript "Flags in the Dust." When it was finally published by Harcourt, Brace, and Company on January 31, 1929, the title had been changed to *Sartoris*; and the manuscript had undergone substantial cutting—some might say tinkering—by Ben Wasson, Faulkner's literary agent. The circumstances are sufficiently pertinent to the study of the novel to warrant a brief account of them.

Very likely, the source of Faulkner's optimism about his book was his discovery that he could insert contemporary issues and ideas into an intensely local Mississippi setting. In other words, he had discovered Yoknapatawpha, and the discovery convinced him of the inexhaustible fund of stories that could be developed out of north Mississippi. Even as he wrote, he saw the emerging work as a turning point in his career. Looking at the finished manuscript from an entirely different point of view, Horace Liveright could not share his author's enthusiasm. Liveright wrote, bluntly, that the work lacked plot, character development, dimension, and cohesiveness; and virtually all of the other publishers to whom the novel was submitted voiced similar objections. Finally, Ben Wasson persuaded Harrison Smith, an editor at Harcourt, Brace, to rec-

commend it favorably to Alfred Harcourt. The firm decided to publish the manuscript only if it were cut substantially. Faulkner, then absorbed in another novel and, to say the least, unenthusiastic about the cutting, agreed for Wasson to undertake the revision. The story is told that late in September, 1928, Faulkner sat in Wasson's apartment in New York, writing *The Sound and the Fury*, while his friend and literary agent transformed "Flags in the Dust" into *Sartoris*. No one knows how or exactly when the change of name occurred. Roughly, one-fourth of the original manuscript, or about twenty thousand words, was excised. Although Wasson seems to have performed the major portion of the cutting, Faulkner also made revisions and probably approved the final typescript from which the printer set type for the book.² Unfortunately, this "setting" copy of *Sartoris* and the galley proof sheets have been lost.

Although Faulkner disliked the stripping of his novel, Ben Wasson's knife moved with direction. Wasson correctly understood that the focus of the novel should be upon the young Bayard Sartoris. Accordingly, he pruned away much of the material Faulkner had used to define the roles of Narcissa and Horace Benbow. Likewise, Wasson removed many of the pages relating to Belle Mitchell, Byron Snopes, and Virgil Beard. By thus sharpening the emphasis upon Bayard, Wasson tightened the form of the novel, but in the process he diminished the contrast between Horace and Bayard and notably reduced the attention given to the Yoknapatawpha community, which forms the baseline of the action. Most of the Sartoris material remained as Faulkner wrote it; the real cost to the work lay in the loss of the antithesis and balance provided by the Benbows.

Among his papers, Faulkner kept the autograph manuscript and a large quantity of typescript material that apparently represents various stages in the composition of the original *Flags in the Dust*. Faulkner's practice seems to have been to compose segments of his book in longhand and then type them, revising and adding as he typed. Before the final typescript was made, Faulkner often inserted further changes which sometimes involved the rearrangement of scenes as well as alterations in content. After his death, the manuscript and the typescripts were deposited in the Alderman Library of the University of Virginia. From them Douglas Day and Albert Erskine in 1973 published a "restored" version of the novel under the original title *Flags in the Dust*. Although it un-

doubtedly contains material by Faulkner associated with the original book Faulkner offered to Liveright and later to Harcourt, no one can absolutely say that *Flags in the Dust* now represents what Faulkner originally intended to be published. Although some of Faulkner's admirers prefer it to *Sartoris*, *Flags in the Dust* does exhibit weaknesses that Liveright, Harcourt, and several other publishers, as well as Ben Wasson and finally Faulkner himself, identified before Wasson and Faulkner began the work of cutting. In many respects, *Sartoris* remains the better book. Moreover, throughout Faulkner's lifetime, *Sartoris* was at least tacitly acknowledged by the novelist himself to be his third novel. In 1958 he recognized its claims by suggesting that it held "the germ of my apocrypha in it."³

Two brief fragments that are part of the surviving manuscript material of *Sartoris*, as well as Faulkner's later account of the writing of the novel, may help to identify the essential core of the work and the novelist's intentions. The two fragments seem to be the beginning of a short story. The first consists of five pages relating to the death of Evelyn Sartoris. In it a man arrives at a squadron office at an aerodrome near Arras and orders a drink for everyone present. He tells Evelyn Sartoris that there is someone named Sartoris in a replacement squadron recently arrived at the wing headquarters. Evelyn knows at once that this Sartoris must be his brother Bayard. The two men have not seen each other for eighteen months. Unable to get to headquarters that night, Evelyn arranges to rendezvous with Bayard the next morning over Arras; and the brothers communicate with each other by gestures. At this point, Faulkner interrupts the action to provide a short account of the two brothers. They are twins and between them there is more affection than there has ever been among other men of the Sartoris family. Evelyn has broken his leg in an accident suffered while he was trying to loop a Bristol scout plane too close to the ground. Meanwhile, Bayard was ordered to Memphis to train American pilots. He has married "Carolyn" White and returned to duty in England. Here Faulkner resumes the narrative of the brothers' rendezvous. As they meet the enemy, Bayard sees Evelyn's plane hit and set on fire by a machine gun burst from a German fighter. As the sun breaks through the clouds and reveals the stricken plane, Evelyn jumps from the cockpit, thumbs his nose at his brother, and salutes the German who has shot him down. The fragment ends at this point.

In the second fragment, which consists of two pages, Evelyn's name has been changed to John. Mississippi, which had been only casually mentioned in the first fragment, becomes a prominent part of the locale; and Bayard's marriage takes on marked prominence. By the time he wrote these pages, Faulkner may have begun to see that the center of his story would be not the death of John (Evelyn) but Bayard's reaction to John's death and that the locale would be Mississippi.⁴ This conjecture about the inception of the novel gains support from Faulkner's account of the composition of *Sartoris*.

In an essay written about two years after *Sartoris* was published, Faulkner recalled that he began to write with the intention of re-creating in a book the world and feeling of his youth, a world and feeling that he believed would pass from him as he grew old. "So I began to write, without much purpose, until I realised that to make it truly evocative it must be personal, in order to, to not only preserve my own interest in the writing, but to preserve my belief in the savor of the bread-and-salt."⁵ The passage seems almost a gloss upon Faulkner's tentative short story about the death of Evelyn Sartoris. One wonders if Faulkner was referring to his realization that the incident over Arras was not the right material but that Bayard's reaction to the war experience, set in north Mississippi, provided a means to utilize the personal, even biographical material that he wished to include. At that moment, Faulkner began to write with direction and purpose. "So I got some people," continued Faulkner, "some I invented, others I created out of tales I learned of nigger cooks and stable boys of all ages between one-armed Joby, 18, who taught me to write my name in red ink on the linen duster he wore for some reason we have both forgotten, to old Louvinia who remarked when the stars 'fell' and who called my grandfather and my father by their Christian names until she died. . . . Created I say, because they are composed partly from what they were in actual life and partly from what they should have been and were not: thus I improved on God, who, dramatic though He be, has no sense, no feeling for, theatre." These statements could hardly be more revealing.

In defining the "personal" aspect of *Sartoris*, Faulkner alluded only to the locale and the characters that had their origin in his Mississippi youth. About the more truly "personal" relationship between the characters of his fiction and Faulkner himself, as well as his family, he said very little. But Faulkner's silence upon these points does not mean that much of