FAULKNER'S *Requiem for a Nun*

A Critical Study

NOEL POLK

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TO MY MOTHER
AND TO THE MEMORY OF
MY FATHER

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PREFACE

> . . . don't worry about the reception given your books. Maybe one day a badly received book will be acclaimed a masterpiece.
>
> —*Lion in the Garden,* p. 280

Requiem has long been considered one of the idiot siblings in the Faulkner canon, interesting only for what it tells us, first, about the history of Yoknapatawpha County in its prologues and, second, about the change in Faulkner, after receiving the Nobel Prize in 1950, from a despairing and tragic view of man to a more positive and hopeful view. Reviewers and critics saw *Requiem,* Faulkner's first novel after the Nobel Prize, as an exudation from his acceptance speech, confused Faulkner's art with that public pronouncement, and completely misread the novel as a simple—indeed, simple-minded—fable of Temple Drake Stevens's redemption by the martyred "nigger dope-fiend whore," Nancy Mannigoe, who murdered Temple's baby in order to force Temple not to abandon her husband and child.

In his 1951 review of the novel, Malcolm Cowley, who was at that time the single most influential Faulkner critic, became the first to suggest that Faulkner himself had "become a different man":

> Once there was an unregenerate Faulkner, careless of his readers but not unwilling to shock them; the author of novels about incest, rape, arson and miscegenation. Now there is a reformed Faulkner, conscious of his public duties, who has become the spokesman for the human spirit in its painful aspirations toward "love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice," to quote from his Nobel Prize address. Soon his read-

> ers on the five continents will have to decide which of the two authors they prefer.

Cowley ends the review uncertain which of the two Faulkners he prefers: "The new one I vastly respect for his defense of human dignity, but I'm not sure the old unregenerate and scampish Faulkner wasn't the greater novelist."[1] Herbert Poster's review, entitled "Faulkner's Folly," is even more condescending: Poster read *Requiem* as a didactic exemplification of the Nobel Prize acceptance speech, in which Gavin Stevens acts as Faulkner's spokesman, and Nancy Mannigoe represents "a condensation of Faulkner's central, ethical viewpoint."[2] It is true that most critics conceded some admiration for the novel's unusual structure, in appreciation of Faulkner's continuing efforts to redefine, to reshape, the conception of the novel as an art form. But they even turned this around on him: because Faulkner has become a moralist, they argued, he cannot be an artist. *Requiem* was, in Irving Howe's invidious phrase, an "ambitious failure."[3]

Thus critical response to *Requiem* rigidified very early; no one took it seriously as anything more than a product of Faulkner's weakened artistic powers during his "preachy" later years. *Requiem* was Faulkner's "solution" to the outrage of his earlier, more powerful books: Nancy Mannigoe was his martyred saint; Gavin Stevens was his "voice"; Temple Stevens was damned lucky.

This reading overlooked some serious problems, most important among them the monstrous fact that Nancy had coldbloodedly murdered a helpless infant. Some critics, granted, were more than a little uncomfortable with this, but they were so in tune with Nancy's and Stevens's conclusions that Temple Drake, the evil young lady from *Sanctuary,* needed saving that they allowed themselves to forget the horror of Nancy's act. That is, the question of *Nancy's* guilt or innocence was completely brushed aside; the purity of her motive, and of Stevens's,

was unquestioned. Temple Drake Stevens became the unqualified villain of the novel, and was made by critics to bear the responsibility for the murder of her own baby.

There are at least two reasons for this misunderstanding. *Requiem* was published during an era when it would have been politically inexpedient among the critics who dominated the major review journals to adopt any attitude other than the most sympathetic toward Negroes. In *Requiem* they found, premolded to their enlightened views, a Negro character from a book by the most famous white southern novelist of the day (who had previously written so sympathetically of southern Negroes exploited and mistreated by southern whites), a character who appeared very much like the venerable Dilsey from *The Sound and the Fury* and the gentle, patient Molly Beauchamp of *Go Down, Moses:* Nancy, in addition, mouthed all the proper pieties about motherhood, virtue, and repentance. What these critics failed to see, for whatever reason, was that while Nancy was *saying* the right thing, she was in fact *doing* the wrong one. I suggest that the reader imagine how different the critics' reactions to Nancy would have been had Faulkner made her white instead of black. At the very least, they would have allowed themselves to be outraged by the enormity of her crime and would not have let her off so lightly, regardless of her stated motives.

Another reason for the misreading of *Requiem for a Nun* has to do with the domination of the dramatic sections by Gavin Stevens, the garrulous, idealistic lawyer who also dominates much of Faulkner's late work. Critics who have found him too garrulous, too idealistic in the other works in which he appears as a major character, and who have seen how far he misses the mark in both compassion and understanding in the other novels, have nevertheless rallied around the Stevens of *Requiem* as some moral sage who, they assume, speaks directly for Faulkner in his dissection of the characters and events of this novel.

Requiem, then, as I have said, has come to be read as Faulkner's fable of sacrifice and salvation, in which the morally vacu-

ous Temple Drake is saved from herself by Nancy Mannigoe's selfless sacrifice and Gavin Stevens's intervention. At the same time, by extrapolation from that misreading, it is seen as a statement by Faulkner of his own beliefs, of his own late grappling with some form of Christian orthodoxy, vague though it be, and as a rejection of and perhaps an apology for the despair and pessimism of his early work. Thus *Requiem* has come to be seen as a "statement" and a "sermon" and, consequently, as a bad novel.

The reading advanced in this study is quite the opposite of what I have just described. I shall argue that Nancy's murder of Temple's baby is the most savage and reprehensible act of violence in all of William Faulkner's fiction; that it is totally without justification; that it is the act of a madwoman and not of a saint; that Nancy's and Stevens's stated motives are not necessarily their real ones; that Stevens is not at all out to "save" Temple but rather to crucify her; and that Temple rather than Nancy is at the moral center of the novel. I shall not outrage Faulknerians by arguing that *Requiem* is a major work in the Faulkner canon (though I in fact believe it is), but I do hope to persuade them that, read correctly, it is a powerful and complex novel, perhaps the darkest and least hopeful of all of Faulkner's work. At the very least, I would like to convince readers that *Requiem for a Nun,* like all of the late Faulkner, is very much worth taking seriously.

Berney Geis, of Grosset and Dunlap, heard that Faulkner's forthcoming "Requiem for a Nun" included an interlude of three acts for a play and said to the author, "I thought you didn't generally visit the theatre." "I don't," replied Faulkner. "I can count on my fingers all the plays I've seen in the past twenty years." "Evidently that didn't prevent your including what amounts to an entire play in your new book," pursued Geis. Faulkner's reply stopped him cold. "I don't read many novels, either," he said.

—*Saturday Review,* 9 June 1951

O for a Falkners voice.

—Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet.*

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completed the Snopes trilogy, begun in the mid-twenties, at the start of his prose career; he wrote essays and public letters and gave speeches defining his philosophical and artistic credos and discussing complex domestic, social, and moral issues; and he submitted to interview after interview in which he elaborated, more or less straightforwardly, on his work.

The impulse to "sum up" was not, of course, new to him: at least as early as 1932 he started a series of biographical sketches of his characters entitled "The Golden Book of Jefferson & Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi as compiled by William Faulkner of Rowanoak, Rowanoak, MCMXXXII."[2] It was apparently to have been a sort of Who's Who of his world; he wrote less than five pages before abandoning the project. About fifteen years later, however, the impulse struck him again. After seeing *The Portable Faulkner*, which reorganizes the Yoknapatawpha works into a semblance of chronological unity, Faulkner inscribed a copy of *The Sound and the Fury* to the editor. "To Malcolm Cowley," he wrote, "Who beat me to what was to have been the leisurely pleasure of my old age."[3] Faulkner's original contribution to the *Portable*, "The Compson Appendix," recalls "The Golden Book" manuscript; that is, it is a series of short biographical sketches of the principal characters in *The Sound and the Fury*. In so far as the Compson family history is inextricably related to the history of Jefferson, "The Compson Appendix" is the direct ancestor of the historical prologues of *Requiem for a Nun*, wherein Faulkner tells (finally) the complete story of the founding of Jefferson in the first half of the nineteenth century and traces its history up through 1951. For this reason, if for no other, *Requiem* occupies an important place in the Faulkner canon.

It is highly significant that Faulkner finally decided to give Jefferson a more or less formal history; the chronological perspective of the prologues afforded him an unusual opportunity not just to survey his own created world but to encompass in that survey the history of the "real" Mississippi and to point to relationships between the two states. Jefferson, which had al-

ways served him well as a microcosm of the universe, becomes in *Requiem* a more direct vehicle for Faulkner's study of the foundations of civilization and of the relationship between civilization and individual man. Nowhere does Faulkner relate Yoknapatawpha more deliberately or meaningfully to the world outside his fiction; in *Requiem* Yoknapatawpha is an integral part of the "real" world, whose history is inextricably linked with Jefferson's.

The historical perspective in *Requiem* gave Faulkner a particularly broad frame of reference for his dramatic analysis of the legal, moral, and social forces that have created the problems his characters—and modern man—have to contend with. So much of the significance of *Requiem* is contained in that historical perspective—"history" is both the method of the novel and one of its central themes—that it may be useful to deal at the outset with a few of the issues connected with Faulkner's use of history in his work. I do not mean to explore this subject in detail here, both because that is partly the burden of this entire book and because the topic has been dealt with by a number of other critics.[4] But I do think it worthwhile to look briefly at some of the issues as they relate to *Requiem*, and thus to establish a context in which some of the philosophical and moral issues raised in *Requiem* can be more easily understood and in which its central place in the Faulkner canon may be more readily assessed.

Part of the problem in discussions of Faulkner's "attitude" toward history is that most critics have approached the subject as though it were one of Faulkner's major preoccupations. I would be among the last to deny its importance to Faulkner; at the same time I would insist that in and of itself, history is a secondary matter to him: it is essentially just one more of the tools of his trade, which he used in much the same way that he used myth and literary allusion, as a device for the illumination of character. History, the past, is only one of many things that concern him and his people.

It is curious, to say the least, to find Faulkner critics approving so readily of Gavin Stevens's obsession with Temple Drake's past, his harsh insistence, in *Requiem*, that only through a complete exposure of her past can she purge that past and "redeem" herself from that past, since they approve of such obsessions with the past in no other Faulkner work. Their attitude is all the more curious in that they usually note, whenever it occurs, Faulkner's disapproval of his characters who are obsessed with anything—the past, sex, religion, money, respectability, time—if that obsession cripples them, distorts their whole view of life, and renders them incompetent for living in the present moment. The list of such characters in Faulkner is a long one—Zilphia Gant, Miss Jenny, both Bayard Sartorises, Gail Hightower, Joanna Burden, Quentin Compson, both Jason Compsons, Wilfred Midgleston, Rosa Coldfield, Thomas Sutpen, Flem Snopes, Isaac McCaslin, Nancy Mannigoe, and Mink Snopes; these and many others make Grotesques of themselves, in the sense defined by Sherwood Anderson in *Winesburg, Ohio:* they grasp a single truth, convert it into Truth, and then try to force the world to operate in terms of that Truth.

Related to this is the problem created by critics who consider only the undeniable fact that Faulkner's works are, in Cleanth Brooks's phrase, "drenched" in history,[5] without the counterbalancing and probably more important consideration that, as James B. Meriwether has argued, Faulkner is primarily a novelist of the present.[6] Indeed, except for a handful of novels and stories the past appears only peripherally in his work, usually as one dimension of a particular problem confronting one of his characters. His standard temporal frame is his own lifetime, and he usually takes some pains to keep the present action of his fiction as close to the time of the writing as possible; in *Requiem* he pointedly brings the action up to the year of the novel's publication: "now, in 1951."[7] Faulkner, then, used history as he used his other thematic and metaphorical tools, in the service of his fiction; it was never the other way around. History is important, he told an interviewer, "only in so far as

[it] is the work of men and we should thus learn all we can from it. It always has its uses."[8] This reply, especially the final sentence, is not unlike those he made at various times to questions about the presence of Christianity in his work: "I just reached into the lumberroom. . . ." Any discussion of Faulkner as historian that does not keep these considerations firmly in mind is apt to distort both Faulkner's meaning and his method.

These caveats issued, however, it is still necessary to discuss the historical dimension in Faulkner's work as a fundamental part of their meaning and structure. In no novel is this truer than in *Requiem for a Nun*; nowhere does Faulkner try to come to grips so directly with what history *is*—not just with how the past affects us in the present, but with what it *is*, what it means. Even in *The Unvanquished*, which is one of the few pieces of Faulkner's fiction set entirely in the nineteenth century, Faulkner does not deal with the "past" except as it concerns the events of an era preceding his own lifetime; although the events of Bayard's childhood have a profound effect on his adulthood, the novel is not particularly *about* his or our "past." Not even in *Absalom, Absalom!* is history treated quite so explicitly as it is in *Requiem*; that is, the historical dimension in *Absalom* erupts out of one tortured soul's attempt to piece together out of various related but hardly coherent bits of rumor and gossip a past preceding his own lifetime, the facts of which are mostly undocumented and unverifiable, and generally interpreted for him by someone either grotesquely subjective or two or three times removed from them. Besides, Quentin's motives are hardly those of an objective historian, for there is in him something that senses analogues between that past and his own life, though the analogues are never explicitly stated; his own emotional problems are responsible for his desperate need to understand exactly what happened sixty years before, at Sutpen's Hundred. He is more concerned, finally, with his own present than with Jefferson's—or the South's—past.

The past functions in *Requiem* quite differently. The historical prologues are narrated by an omniscient historian; it is true that he is dealing with some degree of legend, with facts that have been obscured by the passage of time, and it is true that he is, as I shall argue in chapter 2, the voice of the mythic consciousness of the people of Jefferson. But it is also significantly true that the Jefferson townsfolk, unlike Quentin, don't care as much about the facts as they do about the larger picture, the myth, and they feel free to convert that dream into a truth that suits their own needs: "so vast, so limitless in capacity is man's imagination to disperse and burn away the rubble-dross of fact and probability, leaving only truth and dream" (261). Jeffersonians are not at all tortured by their collective past; they rather revere it, as they do Cecilia Farmer's name scratched in that jailhouse windowpane, and the more they can work their imaginations upon the few "facts" available to them, the happier they are with themselves and with the world. Faulkner neither condemns nor praises them for this, but merely observes it as a characteristic; it is harmless enough except when the "old irreconciliables" let their memories of the past keep them from living fruitfully in the present. In general, their reverence for the past is a healthy thing, since it does give their lives some meaning.

The situation in the dramatic portions of *Requiem* is a bit more complex. The historical dimension is limited to a time only eight years before the present time of the action; there is no disputation of or confusion about the historical facts; even Stevens's conjectures about Temple's life with Gowan go unchallenged by either Temple or the evidence of the book, and there is little reason to doubt that he is essentially correct in his factual reconstruction of that past, especially since we know that Nancy, Stevens's client and confidante, has been an eyewitness to much of their marriage. But Stevens's concern with Temple's past is anything but harmless; he uses it, a past not his own, as a cross on which to crucify her, and fairly well succeeds.