

Edited by Tao Jie

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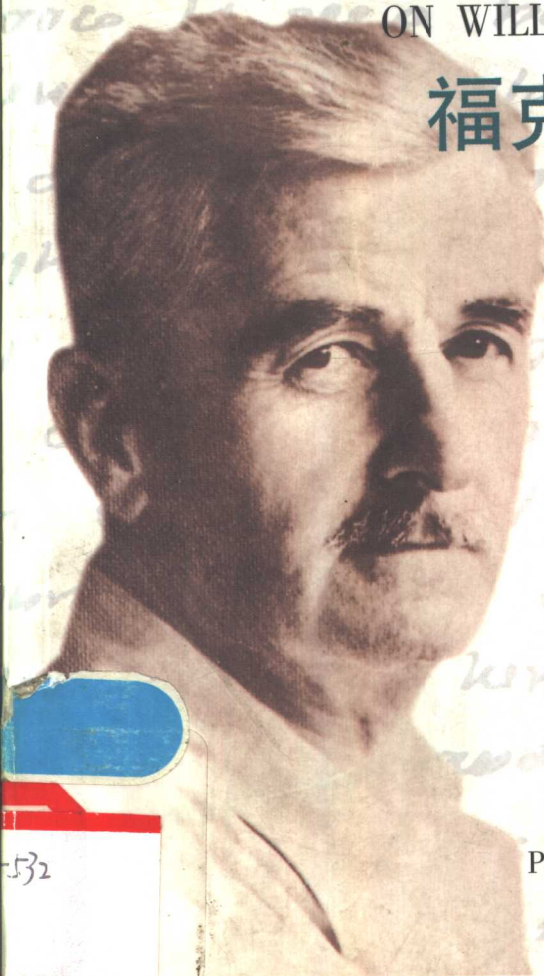
Achievement and Endurance

SELECTED PAPERS

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

ON WILLIAM FAULKNER

福克纳的魅力



PEKING UNIVERSITY PRESS

532

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陶 洁 主编

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Foreword

The *International Faulkner Symposium* was convened by the Department of English of Peking University, the Department of English of Hong Kong Baptist University and the Hong Kong-America Center at the Chinese University of Hong Kong on November 1 - 4, 1997. The purpose of the conference was to commemorate Faulkner's centennial and to exchange views and ideas about this great writer of the United States. Participating in the conference were about 40 scholars from the United States, Brazil, Japan, and China.

These selected papers deal with many aspects of Faulkner's writings, his writing techniques, his themes and his influence. They are results of teaching, research and translation that are involving more and more scholars in China and elsewhere. We sincerely hope that the publication of this volume will further the study of William Faulkner in China.

We are grateful to the Lam Institute for East-West Studies of Hong Kong Baptist University for its support that partly funded the publication of this volume. Thanks must also be given to the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Shanghai Translation Press, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, Yilin Press, and the Training Center of the Department of English, Peking University for their generous contributions. I would also like to thank Wei Yujie of Beijing University of Science and Technology and Liu Feng and Liu Jianhuan of the English Department of Peking Univer-

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Faulkner and Modernism: History and Subjectivity in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Esther M. K. Cheung

Discussions on literary modernism and its relation to William Faulkner generally take two directions. Some critics, in an attempt to place Faulkner together with his Anglo-American and European peers, observe that Faulkner was by and large a solitary "man who cannot be regarded as a part of the avant-garde". Hugh Kenner asserts that Faulkner was neither willing to be involved in "literary politics" (183) nor to "reform public taste" (185) as what his contemporaries strove to do. This observation seems to gather its strength when one reads Faulkner's own defence. His constant reluctance to acknowledge the association with or influence from his peers (for example, James Joyce, Thomas Mann) which critics now and then often assumed, sometimes emerge in amusingly articulated answers. For example, when speaking about nonliterary influence, he refused to admit Sigmund Freud's influence on him and made generalizations about other writers: "Neither did Shakespeare I doubt if Melville did either, and I'm sure Moby Dick didn't" (Kartiganer and Abadie viii).¹ This kind of intentional reduction, also characteristic of many other creative writers, should not be taken only at face value. It aims primarily to tease the simplistic assump-

tion of affinity and influence that some people adopt, bringing to bear the question of how much of the subtle force of circumstances are at work in a cultural artifact. It does not, however, in any sense, deny the intricate relation between text and context. Whether Malcolm Cowley is right to claim that Faulkner's "magical and mythopoeic vision" (Harrington and Abadie x) comes from his "unconscious" (Cowley 15) is not at issue here, what strikes us is the coexistence of Faulkner's unique Americanness (or "Southernness") and the shared concerns he expresses with his peers on the other side of the Atlantic, including the literary and the non-literary ones.

Along the line of the above assertion, some studies on the relation of Faulkner and modernism are engaged in the discussion of how his experimentalism in form and narrative technique characterizes him as a modernist writer. Despite all the above-mentioned Faulknerian defences, critics generally take the "readerly" liberty to connect him with his peers especially the Anglo-American ones such as Joyce, Sherwood Anderson, T. S. Eliot and so on. The connection is often made with specific reference to the techniques of novelistic experimentation. However, recent scholarships on Faulkner and his relation to other modernist writers have called for a less provincial approach to this topic. André Bleikasten proposes to do comparative study on Faulkner outside the confines of the English-speaking world. He places Faulkner among twelve fiction writers of international stature from the early 20th century (4) and explores "their shared modernity" (Zacharaseiwicz xiv). But it must be stressed that Bleikasten's discussion is important not only because he sees Faulkner's association with his contemporaries but also because he

does not dismiss the importance of Faulkner's "Southernness" and "Americanness" (2). To highlight this claim does not only mean to address the necessity of balance but to acknowledge the convergence of the culture of the American South and modernist experimentalism. This is true to Faulkner's works in general and is especially dominant in one of his most widely acclaimed novel, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), which will be selected for discussion in this paper.² In my view, this dual concern needs to be stressed. On the one hand, modernism as an aesthetic movement reacting against the Enlightenment notion of modernity is commonly shared by both Anglo-American and European writers, thinkers, and artists as a whole. On the other hand, specific art practitioner or philosopher may have their own preoccupations occasioned by circumstances, background or individual choice. This explains why modernism in the arts never represents a unified vision nor a uniform aesthetic practice. More importantly, there are writers like Faulkner whose preoccupations cannot be divorced from his land of origin which is the source of some of the naturalistic passages in his book.

The other strand of discussions on modernism concerns mainly the problem of representation raised by Marxist literary critics. Georg Lukacs, in a critical discussion of what he calls "modernist anti-realism" (142), proposes that individual existence "cannot be separated from the context in which they were created" (143). Insisting on the importance of a "real language" for fiction, he describes Faulkner's works, along with many other modernist works, as embodiment of the subjectivization of reality which only breeds "abstract potentiality" (145-46). To him, "abstract potentiality" cannot achieve what "concrete potentiality" can do, that is "the di-

alectic between the individual's subjectivity and objective reality" (146). It confines the individual to "the realm of subjectivity" and hence causes the "disintegration of the outer world" (147). Lukacs' discussion, manifesting his Marxist tenet of the theory of novel, involves inevitably the problem of ideology. To him and other Marxist critics, what underlies modernist writings is ideology although ideology is in no way a unified set. However in recent studies on modernism as an ideology being shaped by circumstances, discussions have extended beyond the relation between form and content to encompass debatable questions about the relation of text and context. If ideology is an integral part of the social structure, can a text which mediates the ideology of its time also challenge the ideology? In this regard, I depart from the orthodox Marxist notion of ideology as falsehood that exists to preserve the interest of the dominant class; instead I would like to take on Louis Althusser's structuralist view of ideology as "the imaginary relationship" of people to "their real conditions of existence" (162). This view of ideology, from my perspective, does not necessarily imply an evil connotation. Ideology could be Janus-faced; if the way people live their "imaginary relationships" is a form of fiction, why can't it embody both the ideological and utopian dimensions? Due to the loss of the "aura" as an attribute to the author and the text in the theory of ideology, Donald Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie assert that the reader/critic thus becomes the beneficiary (xii) and takes on the task of "uncovering" ideology. Such a shift in critical stance does not merely aim to grant the reader/critic unlimited power or freedom to interpret a text; more importantly, it draws people's attention to the context in which a text is produced. However, any such study should not only

dwell on the historical, social, and political dimensions of cultural artifacts; it should engender a rigorous textual and contextual reading in the reader's process of hermeneutical meaning-reconstruction.

In the above outline of debates on literary modernism, there are diverse issues about Faulkner and his relation to modernism: text and context, form and content, criticism and ideology. However, they are also related questions "cohere" to form the critical backdrop for this paper. The central concern here is to decipher whether *Absalom* is a modernist text, a presupposition to which critics agreeably and unquestionably adhere. In this discussion, I am less interested in disputing this generally accepted assumption than bringing to bear the "impurity" of this modernist text.³ By "impurity", I mean the coexistence of naturalistic features and modernist experimentalism. Therefore, there are two parts of my thesis that I will dwell on. I will first discuss how the formal elements of *Absalom*, such as narrative fragmentation, disintegrated personality, multiple points of view, carry a "modernist" epistemology which responds to and critique the Enlightenment notion of subjectivity and modernity. The re-construction of the philosophic backdrop will enable us to see how the aesthetic is the means for individuals to confront the real conditions of their time to reiterate the Althusserian stance again. Then, this paper will proceed to decipher how the naturalistic mode has its material relationship with Faulkner's *Mississippi*. The latter discussion will uncover the various subtle forces of circumstance which are at work in a cultural artefact.

No doubt, there has been an abundant amount of criticisms on modernism mainly with the emphasis on the formal features of the texts. I propose to read *Absalom*, as a modernist text because it is a

response to and a critique of the notion of modernity, a preoccupation that many other modernist works also demonstrate. To assert this shared response to modernity does not mean to eradicate or to diminish the range of attitudes and sensibilities – from the ambivalent to the hostile – towards the idea of the “modern”. In very broad terms, such a modernist project started in Europe and in North America in mid 19th century when writers and thinkers responded in very diverse manner to the Enlightenment project. Among them, Charles Baudelaire’s irony of modernity is perhaps the most frequently cited description of the modern moment: “modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent,” he asserts, “it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and immutable” (403). In short, it is an ideal of the unchanging beauty complicated by a sense of change in the present. Peter Nicholls is right to observe that Karl Marx and Ralph Waldo Emerson also responded to the intriguing “modern” moment. Both saw modernity in the context of industrialism but expressed different attitudes. Marx and Friedrich Engels, who are in no way associated with modernist epistemology, articulated modernity as a paradox: innovation and diversification were accompanied by false modernity as shown in industrial reproduction. In contrast, earlier in *America*, Emerson expressed the notion of the “fleeting” and “contingent” present in an optimistic manner celebrating the development of technological change. Be it optimistic or ambivalent, the modern moment is understood to be full of flux and impermanence accompanied by the yearning for the eternal and the immutable, which in Baudelaire’s view is distinguishable from “Neo-classical idealism” (Nicholls 5). Such a distinction is of great significance since the modernist aesthetic ideal derives from the idealization