

Essays, speeches & public letters
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William Faulkner ; edited by James B. Meriwether.

WILLIAM FAULKNER
ESSAYS,
SPEECHES &
PUBLIC LETTERS

UPDATED, WITH MATERIAL NEVER
BEFORE COLLECTED IN ONE VOLUME

Edited by James B. Merriam



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WILLIAM FAULKNER

William Faulkner was born in New Albany, Mississippi, on September 25, 1897. His family was rooted in local history: his great-grandfather, a Confederate colonel and railroad builder, was assassinated by a former partner in 1889, and his grandfather was a wealthy lawyer and banker. When Faulkner was five his parents moved to Oxford, Mississippi, where he was educated in local schools, dropping out of high school in 1915, early in his senior year. Rejected for pilot training in the U.S. Army, he joined the Royal Air Force in 1918, but the war ended when he was still in training in Toronto. After the war, he took some classes at the University of Mississippi and worked for a time at the university post office. Mostly, however, he educated himself by wide reading.

Faulkner had begun writing poems when he was a schoolboy, and in 1924 he published a poetry collection, *The Marble Faun*. His literary aspirations were fueled by his close friendship with Sherwood Anderson, whom he met during a stay in New Orleans. Faulkner's first novel, *Soldiers' Pay*, was published in 1926, followed a year later by *Mosquitoes*, a literary satire. His next book, *Flags in the Dust*, was heavily cut and rearranged at the publisher's in-

sistence and appeared finally as *Sartoris* in 1929. In the meantime he had completed *The Sound and the Fury*, and when it appeared at the end of 1929 he had finished *Sanctuary* and was ready to begin writing *As I Lay Dying*. That same year he married Estelle Oldham, recently divorced from Cornell Franklin, whom he had courted a decade and a half earlier.

Although Faulkner gained literary acclaim from these and subsequent novels—*Light in August* (1932), *Pylon* (1935), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), *The Unvanquished* (1938), *The Wild Palms* (1939), *The Hamlet* (1940), and *Go Down, Moses* (1942)—and continued to publish stories regularly in magazines, he was unable to support himself solely by writing fiction. He worked as a screenwriter for MGM, Twentieth Century-Fox, and Warner Bros., forming a close relationship with director Howard Hawks, with whom he worked on *To Have and Have Not*, *The Big Sleep*, and *Land of the Pharaohs*, among other films.

In 1944 all but one of Faulkner's novels were out of print, and his personal life was at low ebb. Before the war he had been discovered by Sartre and others in the French literary world. In the postwar period his reputation rebounded, as Malcolm Cowley's anthology *The Portable Faulkner* brought him fresh attention in America, and the immense esteem in which he was held in Europe consolidated his worldwide stature.

Faulkner wrote seventeen books set in the mythical Yoknapatawpha County, home of the Compson family of *The Sound and the Fury*. "No land in all fiction lives more vividly in its physical presence than this county of Faulkner's imagination," Robert Penn Warren wrote in an essay on Cowley's anthology. "The descendants of the old families, the descendants of bushwhackers and carpetbaggers, the swamp rats, the Negro cooks and farm

hands, the bootleggers and gangsters, tenant farmers, college boys, county-seat lawyers, country storekeepers, peddlers—all are here in their fullness of life and their complicated interrelations."

In 1950 Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. In his later novels—*Intruder in the Dust* (1948), *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), *A Fable* (1954), *The Town* (1957), *The Mansion* (1959), and *The Reivers* (1962)—he continued to explore what he had called "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself," but did so in the context of Yoknapatawpha's increasing connection with the modern world.

He died of a heart attack on July 6, 1962.

FOREWORD

James B. Meriwether

The first edition of this collection was published by Random House on January 7, 1966. Intended to be as complete a collection as possible of the nonfiction prose that Faulkner had published or planned to publish, it contained sixty-three different pieces. Since then, a number of new items have turned up that I would have included in the original edition had I known about them, and still others have become available that belong here. In all, thirty-nine new items are added to this edition.

The editorial principles of this new edition remain the same, as do the categories of the pieces. To avoid an awkward number of subdivisions, I have stretched the definition of Public Letters to include dust-jacket blurbs and newspaper ads and announcements and have included Drama with the Book Reviews. Several corrections of errors in texts in the first edition have been silently made, and the endnotes of others have been expanded where new information has become available.

Included here are the six reviews that Faulkner contributed to the University of Mississippi undergraduate newspaper, *The Mississippian*, in 1920, 1921, and 1922. Carvel Collins republished them in *William Faulkner: Early*

Prose and Poetry, Boston, 1962, a volume long out of print. Collins also edited *William Faulkner: New Orleans Sketches*, New York, 1968, which included as an appendix Faulkner's 1925 essay on Sherwood Anderson. Although that volume has recently been reprinted by the University Press of Mississippi, the Anderson essay has been included here because it so obviously belongs with Faulkner's other 1925 critical pieces.*



Readers of William Faulkner's fiction know its extraordinary variety. To take only three examples from among his best work: Could three great novels, written by one author, over a span of less than a decade and a half, differ more from one another than do *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*? On a much smaller scale, the same variety is to be found in his non-fiction prose. Such major pieces as the essays "Mississippi," "On Privacy," and "On Fear," and the Foreword to *The Faulkner Reader*, are small-scale masterpieces—and are strikingly different from one another. Or take the speeches: the Nobel Prize, Pine Manor, and Delta Council addresses are probably the best and, again, are very different. One can also learn a great deal about William Faulkner's intelligence, knowledge, imagination, talent, and sense of humor by observing in the differences of any

* In *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, edited by Joseph Blotner, New York, 1977, there are six public letters that would have been included in this collection had they not been available there. In order to make this volume as comprehensive a record as possible of Faulkner's nonfiction prose writings, I list here the recipients and page numbers of those letters: Sven Ahmen, pp. 308–309; Random House, p. 371; Bob Flautt, pp. 389–390; W. C. Neill, pp. 390–391; Secretary of Junior Chamber of Commerce, Batesville, pp. 401–402; selected writers, pp. 403–404.

one speech from all the others not only the variety of his interests and the strength of his beliefs but also how aware he is of his particular audience and of how he appears to that audience. Even the most minor pieces, like many of his letters to the editors of various periodicals, display the same variety, the same sorts of differences—for example, see the letters to the editors of the *New York Times*, December 26, 1954, the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 20, 1955, and the *Oxford Eagle*, October 15, 1960.

This collection is indeed a highly significant part of Faulkner's oeuvre. As the novelist and critic George Garrett emphasized in his review of the original edition of this book, Faulkner's essays were "written like everything else he wrote, as a part of his whole life's work. . . ." And he goes on to say that these essays, and many of the other pieces in the volume, "are couched in his own style and vocabulary, one which was designed not to sound like a great deal of other contemporary criticism and certainly not to partake of the accepted and debased jargon of any critical school. . . . Moreover, one must be aware of the relationship of one piece to another and to the whole of his work." (*Shenandoah*, Spring 1966; another excerpt from the review is quoted on the front cover of this book. More of Garrett's distinguished Faulkner criticism appears in the "Southern Literature and William Faulkner" section of Garrett's *The Sorrows of Fat City: A Selection of Literary Essays and Reviews*, University of South Carolina Press, 1992.)

In 1976, the novelist and critic Warren Beck published one of the finest, most massive, and—inexplicably—most neglected of all the books of Faulkner criticism, entitled, with misleading modesty, *Faulkner: Essays* (University of Wisconsin Press). His scattered remarks about the Nobel Prize address stand out as a superb example of what can

be learned about Faulkner, the writer of fiction, from his nonfiction prose, and how closely related his nonfiction is to his novels and stories. He called it "Faulkner's profound humanistic declaration . . . an artist's credo that could have stood as a preface to any of his novels. . . ." This speech, he said, "defined in large and lasting terms . . . the artist's role in the modern world, according to the august concepts upon which he based a dedication to his calling," and it declared "what his fiction had implied throughout, his position as committed humanistic realist." Carefully choosing his audience, Faulkner addressed younger writers, and did so "with concern not just for literature's future but for his ongoing service . . . by warning and heartening, linking courage and compassion as proved human values in a formidably restive world," speaking "out of his gathered convictions and invincible stamina. . . ." The phrasing of the address "echoes his lifetime fictional attempt to present the subjective existential reality of human beings in their struggling toward self-possession and integrity, still tempted to indifference, slackening into ambivalence, yet rousing themselves to moral assertion based on 'the old verities.' "

Everything in this collection of his nonfiction prose, then, is revelatory of Faulkner the artist and Faulkner the man. The pieces, in showing us some of what this immensely dedicated, immensely complex, and deeply secretive writer chose to reveal about himself publicly during the last four decades of his career, permit us to understand, a little better, the man and his work.

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—September 30, 2003

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EDITOR'S PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

At one time William Faulkner planned a book of five or six related essays, to be called *The American Dream*. But he wrote only two chapters of it, "On Privacy" and "On Fear," in 1955 and 1956. And apparently he never considered a more miscellaneous collection of his essays, though in the latter part of his career he did some of his best writing in that form. Presumably, had he approved and helped put together such a volume, it would have been selective, a smaller and more unified collection than this. But in the absence of any instruction from him, it seems best now to make of this book as complete a record as possible of Faulkner's mature achievement in the field of non-fiction prose.

His earliest literary essays and book reviews, written while he was still a student and apprentice poet, are omitted here, as are a few fragmentary or unpublished "public" letters. Otherwise this collection includes the text of all Faulkner's mature articles, speeches, book reviews, introductions to books, and letters intended for publication. Most of the pieces are from the latter part of his career, and many of them reflect the increased sense of his responsibility as a public figure which Faulkner

showed after he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950. And although some of his writing in this field was occasional, written to order and to meet a deadline, because he needed the money, there is no hackwork here. Faulkner did not accept commissions he did not find attractive and think he could execute well.



To establish the text, Faulkner's original typescripts and correspondence with his editors and agents were consulted whenever possible. If the text printed here depends upon such authority, it is indicated in the footnote at the end of each selection, which gives the original place and date of its publication.

In addition a number of editorial corrections have been silently made. Within some of the pieces a greater degree of consistency was imposed upon the original system of indention, punctuation, and quotation marks. Book and periodical titles have all been put into italics, titles of parts of books or contributions to periodicals have been put within quotation marks. Headings of letters have been made uniform. A number of obvious typing and printer's errors have been corrected. On the other hand I have retained, where I was aware of them, Faulkner's habitual, intentional, or idiosyncratic archaisms and innovations of spelling, punctuation, and construction.

J.B.M.

ONE



Essays

*A Note on
Sherwood Anderson**

ONE DAY during the months while we walked and talked in New Orleans—or Anderson talked and I listened—I found him sitting on a bench in Jackson Square, laughing with himself. I got the impression that he had been there like that for some time, just sitting alone on the bench laughing with himself. This was not our usual meeting place. We had none. He lived above the Square, and without any especial prearrangement, after I had had something to eat at noon and knew that he had finished his lunch too, I would walk in that direction and if I did not meet him already strolling or sitting in the Square, I myself would simply sit down on the curb where I could see his doorway and wait until he came out of it in his bright, half-racetrack, half-Bohemian clothes.

This time he was already sitting on the bench, laughing. He told me what it was at once: a dream: he had dreamed the night before that he was walking for miles along country roads, leading a horse which he was trying to swap for a night's sleep—not for a simple bed for the night, but for the sleep itself; and with me to listen now, went on from there, elaborating it, building it into a work of art with the same tedious (it had the appearance

* Faulkner's title; originally published as "Sherwood Anderson: An Appreciation."

of fumbling but actually it wasn't: it was seeking, hunting) almost excruciating patience and humility with which he did all his writing, me listening and believing no word of it: that is, that it had been any dream dreamed in sleep. Because I knew better. I knew that he had invented it, made it; he had made most of it or at least some of it while I was there watching and listening to him. He didn't know why he had been compelled, or anyway needed, to claim it had been a dream, why there had to be that connection with dream and sleep, but I did. It was because he had written his whole biography into an anecdote or perhaps a parable: the horse (it had been a racehorse at first, but now it was a working horse, plow carriage and saddle, sound and strong and valuable, but without recorded pedigree) representing the vast rich strong docile sweep of the Mississippi Valley, his own America, which he in his bright blue racetrack shirt and vermilion-mottled Bohemian Windsor tie, was offering with humor and patience and humility, but mostly with patience and humility, to swap for his own dream of purity and integrity and hard and unremitting work and accomplishment, of which *Winesburg, Ohio* and *The Triumph of the Egg* had been symptoms and symbols.

He would never have said this, put it into words, himself. He may never have been able to see it even, and he certainly would have denied it, probably pretty violently, if I had tried to point it out to him. But this would not have been for the reason that it might not have been true, nor for the reason that, true or not, he would not have believed it. In fact, it would have made little difference whether it was true or not or whether he believed it or not. He would have repudiated it for the reason which was the great tragedy of his character. He

expected people to make fun of, ridicule him. He expected people nowhere near his equal in stature or accomplishment or wit or anything else, to be capable of making him appear ridiculous.

That was why he worked so laboriously and tediously and indefatigably at everything he wrote. It was as if he said to himself: 'This anyway will, shall, must be invulnerable.' It was as though he wrote not even out of the consuming unsleeping appeaseless thirst for glory for which any normal artist would destroy his aged mother, but for what to him was more important and urgent: not even for mere truth, but for purity, the exactitude of purity. His was not the power and rush of Melville, who was his grandfather, nor the lusty humor for living of Twain, who was his father; he had nothing of the heavy-handed disregard for nuances of his older brother, Dreiser. His was that fumbling for exactitude, the exact word and phrase within the limited scope of a vocabulary controlled and even repressed by what was in him almost a fetish of simplicity, to milk them both dry, to seek always to penetrate to thought's uttermost end. He worked so hard at this that it finally became just style: an end instead of a means: so that he presently came to believe that, provided he kept the style pure and intact and unchanged and inviolate, what the style contained would have to be first rate: it couldn't help but be first rate, and therefore himself too.

At this time in his life, he had to believe this. His mother had been a bound girl, his father a day laborer; this background had taught him that the amount of security and material success which he had attained was, must be, the answer and end to life. Yet he gave this up, repudiated and discarded it at a later age, when older in years than most men and women who make that deci-

sion, to dedicate himself to art, writing. Yet, when he made the decision, he found himself to be only a one- or two-book man. He had to believe that, if only he kept that style pure, then what the style contained would be pure too, the best. That was why he had to defend the style. That was the reason for his hurt and anger at Hemingway about Hemingway's *The Torrents of Spring*, and at me in a lesser degree since my fault was not full book-length but instead was merely a privately-printed and -subscribed volume which few people outside our small New Orleans group would ever see or hear about, because of the book of Spratling's caricatures which we titled *Sherwood Anderson & Other Famous Creoles* and to which I wrote an introduction in Anderson's primer-like style. Neither of us—Hemingway or I—could have touched, ridiculed, his work itself. But we had made his style look ridiculous; and by that time, after *Dark Laughter*, when he had reached the point where he should have stopped writing, he had to defend that style at all costs because he too must have known by then in his heart that there was nothing else left.

The exactitude of purity, or the purity of exactitude: whichever you like. He was a sentimentalist in his attitude toward people, and quite often incorrect about them. He believed in people, but it was as though only in theory. He expected the worst from them, even while each time he was prepared again to be disappointed or even hurt, as if it had never happened before, as though the only people he could really trust, let himself go with, were the ones of his own invention, the figments and symbols of his own fumbling dream. And he was sometimes a sentimentalist in his writing (so was Shakespeare sometimes) but he was never impure in it. He never scanted it, cheapened it, took the easy way; never failed

to approach writing except with humility and an almost religious, almost abject faith and patience and willingness to surrender, relinquish himself to and into it. He hated glibness; if it were quick, he believed it was false too. He told me once: 'You've got too much talent. You can do it too easy, in too many different ways. If you're not careful, you'll never write anything.' During those afternoons when we would walk about the old quarter, I listening while he talked to me or to people—anyone, anywhere—whom we would meet on the streets or the docks, or the evenings while we sat somewhere over a bottle, he, with a little help from me, invented other fantastic characters like the sleepless man with the horse. One of them was supposed to be a descendant of Andrew Jackson, left in that Louisiana swamp after the Battle of Chalmette, no longer half-horse half-alligator but by now half-man half-sheep and presently half-shark, who—it, the whole fable—at last got so unwieldy and (so we thought) so funny, that we decided to get it onto paper by writing letters to one another such as two temporarily separated members of an exploring-zoological expedition might. I brought him my first reply to his first letter. He read it. He said:

'Does it satisfy you?'

I said, 'Sir?'

'Are you satisfied with it?'

'Why not?' I said. 'I'll put whatever I left out into the next one.' Then I realised that he was more than displeased: he was short, stern, almost angry. He said:

'Either throw it away, and we'll quit, or take it back and do it over.' I took the letter. I worked three days over it before I carried it back to him. He read it again, quite slowly, as he always did, and said, 'Are you satisfied now?'

'No sir,' I said. 'But it's the best I know how to do.'

'Then we'll pass it,' he said, putting the letter into his pocket, his voice once more warm, rich, burly with laughter, ready to believe, ready to be hurt again.

I learned more than that from him, whether or not I always practised the rest of it anymore than I have that. I learned that, to be a writer, one has first got to be what he is, what he was born; that to be an American and a writer, one does not necessarily have to pay lip-service to any conventional American image such as his and Dreiser's own aching Indiana or Ohio or Iowa corn or Sandburg's stockyards or Mark Twain's frog. You had only to remember what you were. 'You have to have somewhere to start from: then you begin to learn,' he told me. 'It don't matter where it was, just so you remember it and ain't ashamed of it. Because one place to start from is just as important as any other. You're a country boy; all you know is that little patch up there in Mississippi where you started from. But that's all right too. It's America too; pull it out, as little and unknown as it is, and the whole thing will collapse, like when you prize a brick out of a wall.'

'Not a cemented, plastered wall,' I said.

'Yes, but America ain't cemented and plastered yet. They're still building it. That's why a man with ink in his veins not only still can but sometimes has still got to keep on moving around in it, keeping moving around and listening and looking and learning. That's why ignorant unschooled fellows like you and me not only have a chance to write, they must write. All America asks is to look at it and listen to it and understand it if you can. Only the understanding ain't important either: the important thing is to believe in it even if you don't understand it, and then try to tell it, put it down. It won't

ever be quite right, but there is always next time; there's always more ink and paper, and something else to try to understand and tell. And that one probably won't be exactly right either, but there is a next time to that one, too. Because tomorrow America is going to be something different, something more and new to watch and listen to and try to understand; and, even if you can't understand, believe.

To believe, to believe in the value of purity, and to believe more. To believe not in just the value, but the necessity for fidelity and integrity; lucky is that man whom the vocation of art elected and chose to be faithful to it, because the reward for art does not wait on the postman. He carried this to extremes. That of course is impossible on the face of it. I mean that, in the later years when he finally probably admitted to himself that only the style was left, he worked so hard and so laboriously and so self-sacrificingly at this, that at times he stood a little bigger, a little taller than it was. He was warm, generous, merry and fond of laughing, without pettiness and jealous only of the integrity which he believed to be absolutely necessary in anyone who approached his craft; he was ready to be generous to anyone, once he was convinced that that one approached his craft with his own humility and respect for it. During those New Orleans days and weeks, I gradually became aware that here was a man who would be in seclusion all forenoon—working. Then in the afternoon he would appear and we would walk about the city, talking. Then in the evening we would meet again, with a bottle now, and now he would really talk; the world in minuscule would be there in whatever shadowy courtyard where glass and bottle clinked and the palms hissed like dry sand in whatever moving air. Then tomorrow forenoon and he would be