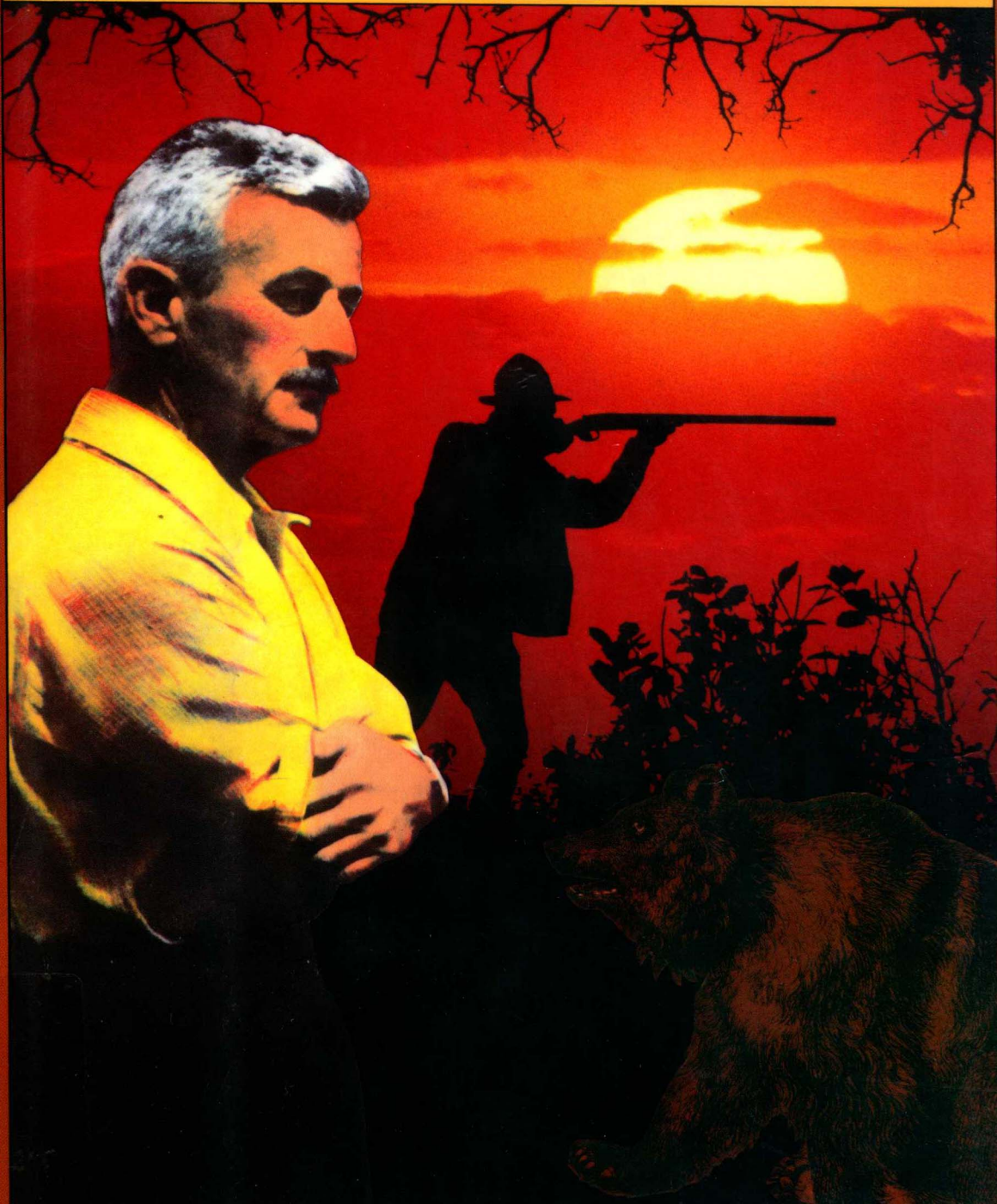


*Modern Critical Views*

# WILLIAM FAULKNER

Edited and with an introduction by  
**HAROLD BLOOM**



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*Modern Critical Views*

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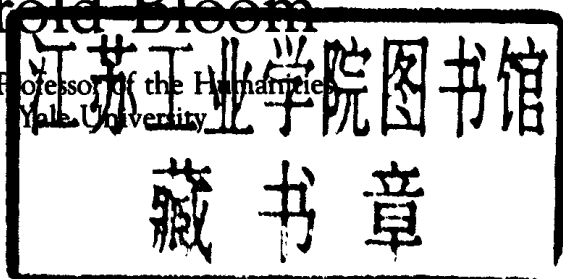
# WILLIAM FAULKNER

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*Edited with an introduction by*

Harold Bloom

Sterling Professor of the Humanities  
Yale University



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THE COVER:

The cover illustration represents Faulkner's superb short novel, *The Bear*, where the beast, at once mythological and realistic, serves something of the function of the noble synecdoche of Melville's great White Whale, *Moby Dick*.—H.B.

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## *Modern Critical Views*

- |                            |                         |                        |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Chinua Achebe              | Geoffrey Chaucer        | Nikolai Gogol          |
| Henry Adams                | John Cheever            | William Golding        |
| Aeschylus                  | Anton Chekhov           | Oliver Goldsmith       |
| S. Y. Agnon                | Kate Chopin             | Mary Gordon            |
| Edward Albee               | Chrétien de Troyes      | Günther Grass          |
| Raphael Alberti            | Agatha Christie         | Robert Graves          |
| Louisa May Alcott          | Samuel Taylor Coleridge | Graham Greene          |
| A. R. Ammons               | Colette                 | Thomas Hardy           |
| Sherwood Anderson          | William Congreve & the  | Nathaniel Hawthorne    |
| Aristophanes               | Restoration Dramatists  | William Hazlitt        |
| Matthew Arnold             | Joseph Conrad           | H. D.                  |
| Antonin Artaud             | Contemporary Poets      | Seamus Heaney          |
| John Ashbery               | James Fenimore Cooper   | Lillian Hellman        |
| Margaret Atwood            | Pierre Corneille        | Ernest Hemingway       |
| W. H. Auden                | Julio Cortázar          | Hermann Hesse          |
| Jane Austen                | Hart Crane              | Geoffrey Hill          |
| Isaac Babel                | Stephen Crane           | Friedrich Hölderlin    |
| Sir Francis Bacon          | e. e. cummings          | Homer                  |
| James Baldwin              | Dante                   | A. D. Hope             |
| Honoré de Balzac           | Robertson Davies        | Gerard Manley Hopkins  |
| John Barth                 | Daniel Defoe            | Horace                 |
| Donald Barthelme           | Philip K. Dick          | A. E. Housman          |
| Charles Baudelaire         | Charles Dickens         | William Dean Howells   |
| Simone de Beauvoir         | James Dickey            | Langston Hughes        |
| Samuel Beckett             | Emily Dickinson         | Ted Hughes             |
| Saul Bellow                | Denis Diderot           | Victor Hugo            |
| Thomas Berger              | Isak Dinesen            | Zora Neale Hurston     |
| John Berryman              | E. L. Doctorow          | Aldous Huxley          |
| The Bible                  | John Donne & the        | Henrik Ibsen           |
| Elizabeth Bishop           | Seventeenth-Century     | Eugène Ionesco         |
| William Blake              | Metaphysical Poets      | Washington Irving      |
| Giovanni Boccaccio         | John Dos Passos         | Henry James            |
| Heinrich Böll              | Fyodor Dostoevsky       | Dr. Samuel Johnson and |
| Jorge Luis Borges          | Frederick Douglass      | James Boswell          |
| Elizabeth Bowen            | Theodore Dreiser        | Ben Jonson             |
| Bertolt Brecht             | John Dryden             | James Joyce            |
| The Brontës                | W. E. B. Du Bois        | Carl Gustav Jung       |
| Charles Brockden Brown     | Lawrence Durrell        | Franz Kafka            |
| Sterling Brown             | George Eliot            | Yasunari Kawabata      |
| Robert Browning            | T. S. Eliot             | John Keats             |
| Martin Buber               | Elizabethan Dramatists  | Søren Kierkegaard      |
| John Bunyan                | Ralph Ellison           | Rudyard Kipling        |
| Anthony Burgess            | Ralph Waldo Emerson     | Melanie Klein          |
| Kenneth Burke              | Euripides               | Heinrich von Kleist    |
| Robert Burns               | William Faulkner        | Philip Larkin          |
| William Burroughs          | Henry Fielding          | D. H. Lawrence         |
| George Gordon, Lord        | F. Scott Fitzgerald     | John le Carré          |
| Byron                      | Gustave Flaubert        | Ursula K. Le Guin      |
| Pedro Calderón de la Barca | E. M. Forster           | Giacomo Leopardi       |
| Italo Calvino              | John Fowles             | Doris Lessing          |
| Albert Camus               | Sigmund Freud           | Sinclair Lewis         |
| Canadian Poetry: Modern    | Robert Frost            | Jack London            |
| and Contemporary           | Northrop Frye           | Robert Lowell          |
| Canadian Poetry through    | Carlos Fuentes          | Malcolm Lowry          |
| E. J. Pratt                | William Gaddis          | Carson McCullers       |
| Thomas Carlyle             | Federico García Lorca   | Norman Mailer          |
| Alejo Carpentier           | Gabriel García Márquez  | Bernard Malamud        |
| Lewis Carroll              | André Gide              | Stéphane Mallarmé      |
| Willa Cather               | W. S. Gilbert           | Sir Thomas Malory      |
| Louis-Ferdinand Céline     | Allen Ginsberg          | André Malraux          |
| Miguel de Cervantes        | J. W. von Goethe        | Thomas Mann            |

## Modern Critical Views

- Katherine Mansfield  
Christopher Marlowe  
Andrew Marvell  
Herman Melville  
George Meredith  
James Merrill  
John Stuart Mill  
Arthur Miller  
Henry Miller  
John Milton  
Yukio Mishima  
Molière  
Michel de Montaigne  
Eugenio Montale  
Marianne Moore  
Alberto Moravia  
Toni Morrison  
Alice Munro  
Iris Murdoch  
Robert Musil  
Vladimir Nabokov  
V. S. Naipaul  
R. K. Narayan  
Pablo Neruda  
John Henry Newman  
Friedrich Nietzsche  
Frank Norris  
Joyce Carol Oates  
Sean O'Casey  
Flannery O'Connor  
Christopher Okigbo  
Charles Olson  
Eugene O'Neill  
José Ortega y Gasset  
Joe Orton  
George Orwell  
Ovid  
Wilfred Owen  
Amos Oz  
Cynthia Ozick  
Grace Paley  
Blaise Pascal  
Walter Pater  
Octavio Paz  
Walker Percy  
Petrarch  
Pindar  
Harold Pinter  
Luigi Pirandello  
Sylvia Plath  
Plato  
Plautus  
Edgar Allan Poe  
Poets of Sensibility & the Sublime  
Poets of the Nineties  
Alexander Pope  
Katherine Anne Porter  
Ezra Pound  
Anthony Powell  
Pre-Raphaelite Poets  
Marcel Proust  
Manuel Puig  
Alexander Pushkin  
Thomas Pynchon  
Francisco de Quevedo  
François Rabelais  
Jean Racine  
Ishmael Reed  
Adrienne Rich  
Samuel Richardson  
Mordecai Richler  
Rainer Maria Rilke  
Arthur Rimbaud  
Edwin Arlington Robinson  
Theodore Roethke  
Philip Roth  
Jean-Jacques Rousseau  
John Ruskin  
J. D. Salinger  
Jean-Paul Sartre  
Gershom Scholem  
Sir Walter Scott  
William Shakespeare  
Histories & Poems  
Comedies & Romances  
Tragedies  
George Bernard Shaw  
Mary Wollstonecraft  
Shelley  
Percy Bysshe Shelley  
Sam Shepard  
Richard Brinsley Sheridan  
Sir Philip Sidney  
Isaac Bashevis Singer  
Tobias Smollett  
Alexander Solzhenitsyn  
Sophocles  
Wole Soyinka  
Edmund Spenser  
Gertrude Stein  
John Steinbeck  
Stendhal  
Laurence Sterne  
Wallace Stevens  
Robert Louis Stevenson  
Tom Stoppard  
August Strindberg  
Jonathan Swift  
John Millington Synge  
Alfred, Lord Tennyson  
William Makepeace Thackeray  
Dylan Thomas  
Henry David Thoreau  
James Thurber and S. J. Perelman  
J. R. R. Tolkien  
Leo Tolstoy  
Jean Toomer  
Lionel Trilling  
Anthony Trollope  
Ivan Turgenev  
Mark Twain  
Miguel de Unamuno  
John Updike  
Paul Valéry  
Cesar Vallejo  
Lope de Vega  
Gore Vidal  
Virgil  
Voltaire  
Kurt Vonnegut  
Derek Walcott  
Alice Walker  
Robert Penn Warren  
Evelyn Waugh  
H. G. Wells  
Eudora Welty  
Nathanael West  
Edith Wharton  
Patrick White  
Walt Whitman  
Oscar Wilde  
Tennessee Williams  
William Carlos Williams  
Thomas Wolfe  
Virginia Woolf  
William Wordsworth  
Jay Wright  
Richard Wright  
William Butler Yeats  
A. B. Yehoshua  
Emile Zola

## Editor's Note

This volume gathers together, in the chronological order of its publication, a representative selection of the best criticism devoted to William Faulkner during the last quarter-century. A number of scholars regard this as the second phase of significant Faulkner criticism, following upon the first phase which dates from Malcolm Cowley's *The Portable Faulkner* (1946) and which can be said to culminate in *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* by Cleanth Brooks (1963).

After the editor's "Introduction," which centers upon Faulkner's agon with his own sense of belatedness, this volume begins with Cleanth Brooks at his strongest, analyzing Faulkner's "discovery of evil" in that grand shocker, *Sanctuary*, and its belated coda in *Requiem for a Nun*. Three other Faulkner critics of the sixties follow. Michael Millgate usefully charts Faulkner's Balzacian design in *The Hamlet* and the entire Snopes saga. Richard Poirier and James Guetti provide an interesting juxtaposition in two very different readings of *The Bear*, Poirier's centering upon American literary tradition and Guetti's upon the limits of trope, a reading carried over in Guetti's remarks upon *The Sound and the Fury*.

Criticism of the sixties is exemplified here by Joseph W. Reed Jr.'s rather formalist account of *Light in August* and then by Irving Howe's more socially aware defense of *The Wild Palms*. Hugh Kenner, the critical high priest of Anglo-American literary modernism, follows with his ironic celebration of Faulkner as "the last novelist," before the coming-on of the Post-Modernist fictions of Barth, Nabokov, and Pynchon. John T. Irwin's study of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* is the pioneering work that inaugurates the characteristic Faulkner criticism of the eighties, with its Freudian, Nietzschean, deconstructive and feminist components. The candid description of Faulkner's prevalent misogyny by Albert J. Guerard is another prelude to what have become the critical concerns of our moment.

Nearly half this volume is given over to those concerns, starting with David Minter's superb critical biography, represented here by the chapter on the genesis of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Sanctuary*. Richard H. King's *A Southern Renaissance*, which shares Minter's theme of Faulk-

ner's obsessions with belatedness, contributes a sensitive reading of *Go Down Moses*. I have followed these essays with Alan Holder's analysis of *The Unvanquished* and Jan Bakker's reconsideration of *As I Lay Dying*, both of them good examples of revisionist meditations upon Faulkner and the traditions of Faulkner criticism.

A balanced feminist consideration of Faulkner's misogyny is provided by Judith Bryant Wittenberg. Freud's mappings of the psyche, influential in Faulkner criticism for some time, inform the very advanced analysis of *Absalom, Absalom!* by Peter Brooks. The final essay, by Judith L. Sensibar, returns to the origins of Faulkner's rhetorical art by centering upon the moment of transition from his poetry to his far stronger fictional prose.

# Contents

Editor's Note . . . . .	ix
Introduction . . . . . Harold Bloom . . . . .	1
Discovery of Evil . . . . . Cleanth Brooks . . . . .	7
<i>The Hamlet</i> . . . . . Michael Millgate . . . . .	27
<i>The Bear</i> . . . . . Richard Poirier . . . . .	49
<i>The Sound and the Fury</i> and <i>The Bear</i> . . . . . James Guetti . . . . .	55
<i>Light in August</i> . . . . . Joseph W. Reed, Jr. . . . .	63
<i>The Wild Palms</i> . . . . . Irving Howe . . . . .	93
<i>The Last Novelist</i> . . . . . Hugh Kenner . . . . .	101
<i>Doubling and Incest</i> . . . . . John T. Irwin . . . . .	115
<i>Faulkner's Misogyny</i> . . . . . Albert J. Guerard . . . . .	143
<i>The Self's Own Lamp</i> . . . . . David Minter . . . . .	171
Working Through: Faulkner's <i>Go Down Moses</i> Richard H. King . . . . .	193
An Odor of Sartoris: William Faulkner's <i>The Unvanquished</i> . . . . . Alan Holder . . . . .	207
<i>As I Lay Dying</i> Reconsidered . . . . . Jan Bakker . . . . .	221
William Faulkner: A Feminist Consideration Judith Bryant Wittenberg . . . . .	233
Incredulous Narration: <i>Absalom, Absalom!</i> . . . . . Peter Brooks . . . . .	247
A New Beginning: "The Thunder and the Music of the Prose" (1921 to 1925) Judith L. Sensibar . . . . .	269
Chronology . . . . .	281
Contributors . . . . .	283
Bibliography . . . . .	285
Acknowledgments . . . . .	287
Index . . . . .	289



# Introduction

## I

No critic need invent William Faulkner's obsessions with what Nietzsche might have called the genealogy of the imagination. Recent critics of Faulkner, including David Minter, John T. Irwin, David M. Wyatt and Richard H. King, have emphasized the novelist's profound need to believe himself to have been his own father, in order to escape not only the Freudian family romance and literary anxieties of influence, but also the cultural dilemmas of what King terms "the Southern family romance." From *The Sound and the Fury* through the debacle of *A Fable*, Faulkner centers upon the sorrows of fathers and sons, to the disadvantage of mothers and daughters. No feminist critic ever will be happy with Faulkner. His brooding conviction that female sexuality is closely allied with death seems essential to all of his strongest fictions. It may even be that Faulkner's rhetorical economy, his wounded need to get his cosmos into a single sentence, is related to his fear that origin and end might prove to be one. Nietzsche prophetically had warned that origin and end were separate entities, and for the sake of life had to be kept apart, but Faulkner (strangely like Freud) seems to have known that the only Western trope participating neither in origin nor end is the image of the father.

By universal consent of critics and common readers, Faulkner now is recognized as the strongest American novelist of this century, clearly surpassing Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and standing as an equal in the sequence that includes Hawthorne, Melville, Mark Twain and Henry James. Some critics might add Dreiser to this group; Faulkner himself curiously would have insisted upon Thomas Wolfe, a generous though dubious judgment. The American precursor for Faulkner was Sherwood Anderson, but perhaps only as an impetus; the true American forerunner is the poetry of T. S. Eliot, as Judith L. Sensibar demonstrates. But the truer precursor for Faulkner's fiction is Conrad, inescapable for the American novelists of Faulkner's generation, including Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Comparison to Conrad is dangerous for any novelist, and clearly Faulkner did not achieve a *Nostromo*. But his work of the decade 1929-39 does include four permanent books: *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light*

in August and *Absalom, Absalom!* If one adds *Sanctuary* and *The Wild Palms*, and *The Hamlet* and *Go Down, Moses* in the early forties, then the combined effect is extraordinary.

From Malcolm Cowley on, critics have explained this effect as the consequence of the force of mythmaking, at once personal and local. Cleanth Brooks, the rugged final champion of the New Criticism, essentially reads Faulkner as he does Eliot's *The Waste Land*, finding the hidden God of the normative Christian tradition to be the basis for Faulkner's attitude towards nature. Since Brooks calls Faulkner's stance Wordsworthian, and finds Wordsworthian nature a Christian vision also, the judgment involved necessarily has its problematical elements. Walter Pater, a critic in a very different tradition, portrayed a very different Wordsworth in terms that seem to me not inapplicable to Faulkner:

Religious sentiment, consecrating the affections and natural regrets of the human heart, above all, that pitiful awe and care for the perishing human clay, of which relic-worship is but the corruption, has always had much to do with localities, with the thoughts which attach themselves to actual scenes and places. Now what is true of it everywhere, is truest of it in those secluded valleys where one generation after another maintains the same abiding place; and it was on this side, that Wordsworth apprehended religion most strongly. Consisting, as it did so much, in the recognition of local sanctities, in the habit of connecting the stones and trees of a particular spot of earth with the great events of life, till the low walls, the green mounds, the half-obliterated epitaphs seemed full of voices, and a sort of natural oracles, the very religion of those people of the dales, appeared but as another link between them and the earth, and was literally a religion of nature.

A kind of stoic natural religion pervades this description, something close to the implicit faith of old Isaac McCaslin in *Go Down, Moses*. It seems unhelpful to speak of "residual Christianity" in Faulkner, as Cleanth Brooks does. Hemingway and Fitzgerald, in their nostalgias, perhaps were closer to a Christian ethos than Faulkner was in his great phase. Against current critical judgment, I prefer *As I Lay Dying* and *Light in August* to *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, partly because the first two are more primordial in their vision, closer to the stoic intensities of their author's kind of natural piety. There is an *otherness* in Lena Grove and the Bundrens that would have moved Wordsworth, that is, the Wordsworth of *The Tale of Margaret, Michael* and *The Old Cumberland Beggar*. A curious movement that is also a stasis becomes Faulkner's pervasive trope for Lena. Though he invokes the imagery of Keats' urn, Faulkner seems to have had the harvest-girl of Keats' *To Autumn* more in mind, or even the stately figures of the *Ode to Indolence*.

We remember Lena Grove as stately, calm, a person yet a process, a serene and patient consciousness, full of wonder, too much a unitary being to need even her author's variety of stoic courage.

The uncanniness of this representation is exceeded by the Bundrens, whose plangency testifies to Faulkner's finest rhetorical achievement. As *I Lay Dying* may be the most original novel ever written by an American. Obviously it is not free of the deepest influence Faulkner knew as a novelist. The language is never Conradian, and yet the sense of the reality principle is. But there is nothing in Conrad like Darl Bundren, not even in *The Secret Agent*. As *I Lay Dying* is Faulkner's strongest protest against the facticity of literary convention, against the force of the familial past, which tropes itself in fiction as the repetitive form of narrative imitating prior narrative. The book is a sustained nightmare, insofar as it is Darl's book, which is to say, Faulkner's book, or the book of his daemon.

## II

Canonization is a process of enshrining creative misinterpretations, and no one need lament this. Still, one element that ensues from this process all too frequently is the not very creative misinterpretation in which the idiosyncratic is distorted into the normative. Churchwardenly critics who assimilate the Faulkner of the Thirties to spiritual, social and moral orthodoxy can and do assert Faulkner himself as their preceptor. But this is the Faulkner of the Fifties, Nobel laureate, State Department envoy and author of *A Fable*, a book of a badness simply astonishing for Faulkner. The best of the normative critics, Cleanth Brooks, reads even *As I Lay Dying* as a quest for community, an exaltation of the family, an affirmation of Christian values. The Bundrens manifestly constitute one of the most terrifying visions of the family romance in the history of literature. But their extremism is not eccentric in the 1929–39 world of Faulkner's fiction. That world is founded upon a horror of families, a limbo of outcasts, an evasion of all values other than stoic endurance. It is a world in which what is silent in the other Bundrens speaks in Darl, what is veiled in the Compsons is uncovered in Quentin. So tangled are these returns of the repressed with what continues to be estranged that phrases like “the violation of the natural” and “the denial of the human” become quite meaningless when applied to Faulkner's greater fictions. In that world, the natural is itself a violation and the human already a denial. Is the weird quest of the Bundrens a violation of the natural, or is it what Blake would have called a terrible triumph for the selfish virtues of the

natural heart? Darl judges it to be the latter, but Darl luminously denies the sufficiency of the human, at the cost of what seems schizophrenia.

Marxist criticism of imaginative literature, if it had not regressed abominably in our country, so that now it is a travesty of the dialectical suppleness of Adorno and Benjamin, would find a proper subject in the difficult relationship between the 1929 business panic and *As I Lay Dying*. Perhaps the self-destruction of our delusive political economy helped free Faulkner from whatever inhibitions, communal and personal, had kept him earlier from a saga like that of the Bundrens. Only an authentic seer can give permanent form to a prophecy like *As I Lay Dying*, which puts severely into question every received notion we have of the natural and the human. Darl asserts he has no mother, while taunting his enemy brother, Jewel, with the insistence that Jewel's mother was a horse. Their little brother, Vardaman, says: "My mother is a fish." The mother, dead and undead, is uncannier even than these children, when she confesses the truth of her existence, her rejecting vision of her children:

I could just remember how my father used to say that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time. And when I would have to look at them day after day, each with his and her single and selfish thought, and blood strange to each other blood and strange to mine, and think that this seemed to be the only way I could get ready to stay dead, I would hate my father for having ever planted me. I would look forward to the times when they faulted, so I could whip them. When the switch fell I could feel it upon my flesh; when it welted and ridged it was my blood that ran, and I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever.

This veritable apocalypse of any sense of otherness is no mere "denial of community." Nor are the Bundrens any "mimesis of essential nature." They are a super-mimesis, an over-representation mocking nature while shadowing it. What matters in major Faulkner is that the people have gone back, not to nature but to some abyss before the Creation-Fall. Eliot insisted that Joyce's imagination was eminently orthodox. This can be doubted, but in Faulkner's case there is little sense in baptizing his imagination. One sees why he preferred reading the Old Testament to the New, remarking that the former was stories and the latter, ideas. The remark is inadequate except insofar as it opposes Hebraic to Hellenistic representation of character. There is little that is Homeric about the Bundrens, or Sophoclean about the Compsons. Faulkner's irony is neither classical nor romantic, neither Greek nor German. It does not say one thing while meaning another, nor trade in contrasts between expectation

and fulfillment. Instead, it juxtaposes incommensurable realities: of self and other, of parent and child, of past and future. When Gide maintained that Faulkner's people lacked souls, he simply failed to observe that Faulkner's ironies were Biblical. To which an amendment must be added. In Faulkner, only the ironies are Biblical. What Faulkner's people lack is the blessing; they cannot contend for a time without boundaries. Yahweh will make no covenant with them. Their agon therefore is neither the Greek one for the foremost place nor the Hebrew one for the blessing, which honors the father and the mother. Their agon is the hopeless one of waiting for their doom to lift.

### III

Faulkner writes tragic farce rather than tragedy, more in the mode of Webster, Ford and Tourneur than that of Shakespeare. In time, his genius or daemon may seem essentially comic, despite his dark houses and death drives. His grand family is Dickens run mad rather than Conrad run wild: the hideous saga of the Snopes, from the excessively capable Flem Snopes to the admirably named Wallstreet Panic Snopes. Flem, as David Minter observes, is refreshingly free of all influence-anxieties. He belongs in Washington D. C., and by now has reached there, and helps to staff the White House. Alas, he by now helps to staff the universities also, and soon will staff the entire nation, as his spiritual children, the Yuppies, reach middle age. Ivy League Snopes, Reagan Revolution Snopes, Jack Kemp Snopes: the possibilities are limitless. His ruined families, burdened by tradition, are Faulkner's tribute to his region. His Snopes clan is his gift to his nation.



CLEANTH BROOKS

## *Discovery of Evil*

THE theme of *Sanctuary* is the discovery of the nature of reality with the concomitant discovery of evil, and it recurs throughout Faulkner's work. In *The Unvanquished* Bayard Sartoris triumphantly passes the crucial test of courage in which his initiation culminates. But in *Sanctuary* the initiation of Horace Benbow has a much more somber ending. Instead of victory and moral vindication, Horace receives a stunning defeat. Horace is, of course, a different kind of man from Bayard and furthermore the times have changed. The traditional society has given place to a modern world in which amoral power is almost nakedly present.

Here, as in *Sartoris*, Horace is the man of academic mind, who finds out that the world is not a place of justice and moral tidiness. He discovers, with increasing horror, that evil is rooted in the very nature of things. Horace represents a type that appears often in Faulkner's work, not only in the early novels but again prominently in his last novels. He is an "intellectual." He has a great capacity for belief in ideas and a great confidence in the efficacy of reason. In *Sanctuary* Faulkner has made Benbow ineffectual in his contest with evil, but Faulkner has succeeded so well that many of his readers accord Horace something less than his due. Yet he must have his due, for if Benbow is a mere weakling, one loses the very point of the novel, which is a sense of the horrifying power of evil.

The truth of the matter is that a stronger man and a more aggressive lawyer than Horace Benbow might have failed under the circumstances. Horace demonstrates a good deal of pertinacity, shrewdness,

and vigor. Having interested himself in Lee Goodwin and his wife, he works steadily to try to get his clients to talk. Lee Goodwin's own fatalism and his specific fear of the gangster Popeye's gun make it very difficult for Horace to get any help from his client. Later on, however, Ruby does give him a hint, namely that there was a girl on the Old Frenchman's Place the day that Tommy was shot. Horace tries to track down this mysterious girl, who may become his key witness. His getting the tip from Clarence Snopes has, of course, to be put down to sheer luck, but he follows up the tip vigorously and even wins the sympathy of Miss Reba, the madam of the brothel. This in itself is no small accomplishment. With her help, he persuades Temple Drake to agree to testify in favor of Lee Goodwin.

Horace takes what measures he can to ensure that Temple will remain in Memphis, where he can keep in touch with her as he awaits Goodwin's trial. This last point, by the way, is worth some comment, for at least one critic has reproached Benbow for waiting "until the night before the trial before he can decide to expose her as a witness. By that time it is too late." But Horace calls up Miss Reba about a week after he had visited Temple, some nine or ten days before the trial, "just to know if she's still there. So I can reach her if I need to." Miss Reba replies that Temple is still there all right, "but this reaching. I don't like it. I don't want no cops around here unless they are on my business." But Horace does call once more, the day before the trial, and this time finds that Temple has suddenly disappeared.

Horace is not, however, paralyzed by Temple's failure to show up at the trial. He carries on without her and has good hopes of success. (Had his sister, Narcissa, not betrayed him to the district attorney, he probably would have won his case.) What Horace, understandably, was not prepared for was Temple's *volte-face*—her appearance on the second day of the trial with perjured testimony against which almost any attorney would have contended in vain. It is true that Horace does collapse after this body blow. The fight has been taken out of him, his rebellion against family pressures is over, and he goes back to the wife whom he should never have married and whom he has tried to leave. But as Faulkner has plotted this novel, a man much more practical, hard-headed, and belligerent than Horace Benbow would have been defeated.

One has also to remember that *Sanctuary* shows the stamp of its time and of its genre. It is a gangster novel of a sort: the brilliance of the writing cannot conceal that fact. In a gangster story it is almost impossible to get the witnesses, including the gangster's victims, to testify against him. The gangster leads a charmed life, for the lethargic community, the corrupt public official, and the ordinary citizen, paralyzed with fear, allow



him to escape punishment. All this is as true of stories laid in Cook County, Illinois, as of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. In this connection, it may be worth noting that the real fatalist is the man on trial, Lee Goodwin, the rough-hewn hill man, and not his attorney, Horace Benbow, the son of a distinguished judge, with a love for Venetian glass and world-weary poetry. Lee Goodwin is certain that he is "doomed" and that Popeye, whether by a bullet through the jail window or by some other means, will see to it that he does not go free. By contrast, it is Benbow who remains hopeful to the end.

*Sanctuary* is not only a gangster novel; it is, as André Malraux has suggested, also something of a detective novel, in that the meaning of certain events is not revealed until the end, and the author builds suspense, complicates his plot, and presents his reader with sudden and surprising developments. Indeed, there is something of a puzzle about just what does happen in the courtroom scene at the end of the novel; and some readers have been puzzled also by Popeye's conduct after he has been arrested for murder.

Part of the difficulty arises because the author is obviously concerned with something more important than a mere story of crime, with its plot suspense and exciting action. But some of the difficulty is to be referred to certain of Faulkner's methods of presentation. For one thing, he deliberately refrains from entering into the minds of his characters at the moments when they make their decisions. For another, he refuses—perhaps for fear of killing the psychological suspense—to fill in certain gaps in the action. The result is that the motive for an act is often merely implied, and sometimes the act itself is merely implied. The reader may therefore be confused, not only as to why something happened but as to what actually did happen.

Faulkner's chosen methods are very effective for presenting scenes of action with almost intolerable immediacy, for rendering psychological states, and for building up a sense of foreboding and horror. In his concern with this mode of presentation, however, he has slighted the analysis of motive, the articulation of action with thought, and the usual methods for working out the plot. We are not, for example, allowed inside Popeye's mind as he awaits his execution. The scene is vividly rendered: the curious little man methodically crushing out his cigarettes and carefully arranging the butts in a neat line to form a sort of calendar marking the days that have elapsed. But what is going on inside his head? Why is it that he will not summon a lawyer? Has he resolved upon a kind of suicide? Or is it that he simply cannot believe that he is to be hanged? The author does not show us—or if he does, it is only through hints and suggestions.