

**WILLIAM
FAULKNER
HIS LIFE AND WORK**

DAVID MINTER

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS
BALTIMORE AND LONDON

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David Minter is professor of English at Emory University and dean of Emory College. He is the author of *The Interpreted Design as a Structural Principle in American Prose* and editor of *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Light* in August.

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Printed in the United States of America

The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland 21218
The Johns Hopkins Press Ltd., London

Originally published, 1980
Second printing, 1981
Third printing, 1981

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Minter, David L.
William Faulkner, his life and work.

Bibliography: p. 261
Includes index.
1. Faulkner, William, 1897-1962. 2. Novelists,
American—20th century—Biography. I. Title.
PS3511.A86Z913 813'.52 [B] 80-13089
ISBN 0-8018-2347-1

FOR CAROLINE

*remembering especially the Old Vicarage,
Grantchester, January-July 1976*

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PREFACE

The Writing of a Life

MY FOCUS in this book is double. On one side, I recount Faulkner's life and try to convey the sense of it; on the other, I discuss his published and unpublished writings and try to illuminate them. Yet I do not present this book either as a compilation of new data on Faulkner's life or as a series of new readings of his novels. In relating his life, I draw on scores of essays, monographs, and books, particularly Joseph Blotner's *Faulkner* (1974), which is a storehouse of facts. Throughout I try to subordinate critical discussions of Faulkner's writings to the task of sketching the "mysterious armature" (to borrow Mallarmé's phrase) that binds Faulkner's life and art together.¹ My claim to the reader's attention is specific, then; and it stems from the story I try to tell—of deep reciprocities, of relations and revisions, between Faulkner's flawed life and his great art. [Faulkner could be cold and careless as well as charming, cruel and ruthless as well as sensitive; there were profoundly destructive as well as profoundly creative forces at work within him.] But his is not merely the story of a flawed life that yielded great art; it is the story of flaws and achievements

that had reciprocal causes and reciprocal effects. I try, therefore, to present his life as a life of writing and his art as a writing or reconstituting of his life.

By now we know that Faulkner's artistic achievement was great and that his life was more varied than we had long supposed. In addition, we know that the relations between his life and his work were unusually complex, not only because he was never in any ordinary sense an autobiographical novelist, but also because his own judgment on the issue was divided. Early in his career, at about the time he discovered the imaginative kingdom that he named Yoknapatawpha and made his signature, Faulkner decided to make his art "a touchstone." Nothing would suffice, he felt, except the effort "to recreate between the covers of a book the world" he was already preparing to lose and mourn. So, hoping to capture his "world and the feeling of it," he began to write, only to discover that to be truly evocative, art "must be personal."² Near the end of his career, however, as he looked back, hoping to gain some perspective on his achievement, he seemed to see some strange figure performing incredible feats. He was amazed, he reported, not by the relations he saw, but by "what little connection" there seemed to be between the work he had done and the life he had lived.³

In an effort to disclose the ways in which Faulkner's evocations were personal, I work simultaneously with his art and his life, bringing the two into many different juxtapositions and conjunctions. Throughout I assume one thing that is obvious and one that is at least plausible: first, that Faulkner explored a historical space to which he brought talent, even as he created an imaginative space to which he brought genius; and second, that his talent provides ways of getting at his genius, just as his genius provides ways of getting at his talent. By examining the space he explored and the life he lived, I try to illuminate the world he imagined and the selves he created; by examining the world he imagined and the selves he created, I try to illuminate the space he explored and the life he lived. In the process, I recount some things that are familiar and emphasize some that are not. Among many moments, I try to locate initiatory and shaping experiences; among many guises, I try to discern deeper faces. Even if we believe, as Faulkner probably did, that a book is in some sense a "writer's secret life, the dark twin of a man," we know that all relations between a life lived and words written are problematic.⁴ In Faulkner's case, they are particularly complicated—in part because his writings are diverse and uneven as well as frequently magnificent, and in part because he was never an easy person to know. All of his life, at least all of it that is recoverable, Faulkner was driven by conflicting urges: the urge to avoid life and the urge to explore it; the urge to disguise his thoughts and feelings in a thousand ways and the urge to disclose them in a single sentence. Out of this conflict, he fashioned a life of more than usual interest and an art of the rarest power.

Before he began to write and long before he became famous, Faulkner learned to protect his privacy. He often sought adventures, and he persistently forced himself to take great chances: he wanted to be "man in his sorry clay braving chance and circumstance." But he remained divided and elusive. In some moods he simply enjoyed being outrageous; in others he tended to be evasive and deceptive; in still others he became deliberately misleading. Almost as deep as the shyness he felt toward strangers lay an aristocratic distaste for public exposure except on his own terms. Although he had committed no major crimes, nor even many acts he thought shameful, he still did not like people prying into his life. But he was cautious not only with rivals and strangers but also with members of his own family and with people he thought of as friends—which suggests that the sources of his wariness go back to the beginning. Our earliest accounts of him vary remarkably, and what they imply, later recollections confirm: that he developed early both a need and a capacity for establishing a wide variety of carefully delimited relationships with the people around him.⁵

Since the implications of Faulkner's kind of cautious variety are subtle and diverse, we must come to them slowly, but both his need and his capacity for such variety can be located. During his earliest years he experienced an unusually strong sense of holistic unity with his family, and especially with his mother. From these years, he gathered a sense of his world as blessed and of himself as virtually omnipotent. Although he suffered no great trauma, he lost this double sense of well-being at an early age, and he found the experience painful. Troubled in part by the loss itself and in part by the feeling that those who had bequeathed blessedness had also destroyed it, he emerged from childhood determined to control his relations to his world. In the small, seemingly limited towns in which he grew up, he met a variety of people both within and beyond his prominent, extended family, and he had easy access to all of them. Moving among them as a sensitive, curious boy, he tended to approach them on their own terms, and as he did, different sides of his character began to emerge. But since he was wary and determined as well as curious, he kept himself to himself, not so much by pulling back as by cultivating highly stylized relationships with acquaintances, friends, and relatives alike—a habit that lasted a lifetime.

In the stories he was reading as well as in the manners he was acquiring, he discovered a variety of guises, roles, and masks that enabled him to keep people at a distance. Eventually a sense of urgency reinforced his sense of caution. From the twenties into the forties, he was driven by the feeling that he had great work to do; and even after his powers had begun to fade, he was dogged by the feeling that he had to remain a "man working." Yet the work he did, he did alone. When he was with other people, he tended to play—sometimes for the purpose of resting and sometimes

for the purpose of putting "things over on people," but always for the purpose of protecting himself.⁶ Spurred by wariness and urgency, then by wariness and weariness, he insisted upon delimiting and stylizing his associations with people. As a result, many who saw him regularly, or at least repeatedly, saw him partially and yet took the discernible part for the evasive whole. The reports we have, then, are confused as well as confusing, not only because some people have inevitably claimed to know him better than they did, nor merely because some friends and relatives have tried to settle old grievances, but also because he was a shy and troubled boy who became a shy and troubled man. Throughout his life—from the years of apprenticeship through the years of great innovation and achievement to the years of painful decline—his manners tended to be formal, his statements formulaic, and his life ceremonial.⁷

Like his life, Faulkner's art serves the double purpose of deception and expression. Unlike his life, which shows much change and little development, his art shows great development as well as great change. The same man who insisted on establishing fixed, stylized relations with other people insisted on cultivating fluid and intimate relations with his fictions and his characters. During his career as a poet, when his voice remained rather directly his own, his art tended to reiterate his manners: it was primarily a way of controlling and delimiting his interaction with his world.⁸ As he began writing prose, however, he began mastering techniques and strategies that permitted greater displacement and disguise. His art not only became more supple and subtle as it became more indirect; it also became more personal. Though it remained his way of insisting on unity and harmony, it became his way of confronting the radical variety, fluidity, and power both of his world and of his own consciousness. The separations and losses that enter his poetry primarily as borrowed emotions and borrowed phrases soon began to shape his fiction. In the years of his greatness, he permitted even the most familiar and essential demarcations—clear beginnings and endings—to become ghostly. Although he continued to seek a formal, ceremonial life, he experimented in art with the dissolution of everything: one part of the radically venturesome quality of his writing derives from his willingness to brave the loss of all familiar procedures and the disintegration of all familiar forms. His fictions are replete with false starts, hesitations, and regressions; and they insist upon giving us, not beginnings, harmonies, and endings, but the sense of beginnings, the sense of harmonies, the sense of endings. In his novels and stories, forms flow, alter, disintegrate, displacing and replacing one another without end. Yet, if one part of the richness of his art comes from all the things it resists, withholds, and disguises, another part comes from all the things it explores, discloses, and bequeathes.

In trying to deal with this large tangle, I have made use of all of the information I could find, including Faulkner's interviews, essays, and letters as well as his poems, stories, and novels. Yet even in my more speculative moments, I have tried to wonder in a disciplined, responsible way, without exaggerating the bases of my speculations; and I have tried throughout to enhance as well as illuminate the reciprocities between Faulkner's great art and his flawed life. Although Faulkner's flaws were many, they lay heavy upon him, and he did wonderful things with them. I hope, therefore, that the reader will feel in reading, as I have in writing, not only respect and gratitude but tenderness too.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I AM INDEBTED to the American Council of Learned Societies and the National Endowment for the Humanities for research grants that helped me to begin this study, and to Rice University for research grants that helped me to complete it. I am also indebted to the following institutions for permitting me to examine their Faulkner collections: the Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville; the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin; the Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, New Orleans; the New York Public Library; and the University of Mississippi Library. Members of the staff of Fondren Library, Rice University, as well as members of the staffs of each of the institutions named above, helped me on many occasions, and I am grateful to them.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Jill Faulkner Summers, executrix of the William Faulkner Estate, for permission to quote from unpublished manuscripts, manuscript fragments, and letters of her father.

To Max Apple, Roy Bird, Jane Butler, Sue Davis, Terry Doody, Rose

Graham, Alan Grob, Karen Hanson, Dennis Huston, Walter Isle, Valerie Lussenhop, Wesley Morris, Robert Patten, Monroe Spears, Pamela Thompson, V. W. Topazio, and Katharine Wallingford I am grateful for help, advice, and encouragement.

Jerome Charyn, Charles Feidelson, John Irwin, and R. W. B. Lewis were kind enough to read different versions of this work. I am grateful for the encouragement they offered and the suggestions they made. Both the students in my graduate and undergraduate courses and the members of Baker College, where I was Master, 1973-1979, showed interest in this book for what must have seemed to them a long time. I remember them with fondness as well as gratitude. A part of chapter 5 appeared in slightly different form as "Faulkner, Childhood, and the Making of *The Sound and the Fury*" in the November 1979 issue of *American Literature*. I am grateful to the editors of that journal for their receptiveness.

Two children, Christopher and Frances, gave up much pleasure to my unsteady progress in writing this book. "I'll tell you one thing," Christopher said, watching in frustration as I worked to improve my ragged prose: "You'll never get through if you keep changing words on every page." I am glad now to share with him and Frances the completion of my work, and I do so with gratitude for the wonder as well as the patience and understanding of their lives.

Every page in this book has benefited from the care and intelligence of my wife, Caroline, who has also shared its ups and downs with gallantry and love. In dedicating this book to her, I have been reminded again that our largest debts are those we can least hope to repay.

**WILLIAM
FAULKNER**

ONE 1897-1918

The life of every man is a diary in which he means to write one story, and writes another. . . .

J. M. Barrie,
The Little Minister

A book is the writer's secret life, the dark twin of a man. . . .

William Faulkner,
Mosquitoes

There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night.

Albert Camus,
The Myth of Sisyphus

A Small Boy and a Giant in the Earth

William Faulkner was born in New Albany, Mississippi, on 25 September 1897, the first child of Maud and Murry Falkner.¹ Shortly after his first birthday, he and his parents moved to Ripley. A few days before he turned five, they moved to Oxford, where he spent the rest of his childhood, all of his youth, and most of his adult life. Near Oxford, in a sanatorium on a hill outside Byhalia, another small Mississippi town, he died in 1962, on July 6, the birthday of the first of the Mississippi Falkners—his great-grandfather, the Old Colonel, William Clark Falkner.

In addition to possessing a suggestive symmetry, these simple facts hold several pertinences. More than any other major American writer of our time, including Robert Frost, Faulkner is associated with a region. He is our great provincial. And although his life was considerably more expansive than the facts of its beginning and ending suggest—although he lived in Canada, New Orleans, Hollywood, and Virginia; although he

lived briefly and visited frequently in New York; although he traveled through Europe in the twenties and around the world in the fifties—it was with a sense of place that he began.

The Falkners lived east of the Delta, amid the hills of north Mississippi. The flat, black land of the Delta was the richest in the state. But the soil of the hill country was also strong, and since floods seldom threatened it, its crops were more predictable. The glory of the region, Faulkner later remarked, was that God had done more for it than man had yet done to it. In 1842, when the Old Colonel first saw it, it was still frontier. In the early 1900s, when William was a boy, the last of its Indians moved to Oklahoma. Not far from New Albany, Ripley, and Oxford there were still places where the hills, trees, and rivers, the coon, fox, and deer, even large cats and bear seemed undisturbed.² Through most of his life, Faulkner studied his region with care. In books by Francis Parkman, he read about the broader conquest of a continent. But in addition to ten volumes of Parkman, his library contained scores of books on the exploration and history, the geography, vegetation, and wildlife of the land crossed by the Natchez Trace.³ Long before he was grown, he was a skilled woodsman and hunter. The land he walked as a boy and studied as a man he also came to love in an inclusive, unequivocal way. To its beauties and perils, even to its dust and heat, he extended the process of naming that became his art.

In addition to being strongly regional, the consciousness that dominates Faulkner's fiction is strongly historical. In 1900, less than a century separated Mississippi from its prehistory. Yet history, particularly the immediate past, was already a major preoccupation there, in part because the southern dream of transplanting the life of the English squire and landed gentleman possessed a historical bias, and in part because much "blood hot and strong for living, pleasuring" had already soaked back into Mississippi's soil,⁴ but primarily because the Civil War had inflicted a double burden. In the North and West, people had emerged from battle ready to pursue progress and prosperity with redoubled vigor: what the power they had displayed made plausible, the righteousness they had served made appropriate. In the South, on the other hand, recovery came slowly—not only because the war had inflicted great damage and division, but also because recovery called for adjustments that betrayed the Old South's agrarian dream, giving rise to guilt even as it promised deliverance. Together the memory of failure and the sense of guilt undermined both confidence and hope. For what they implied was not large-scale progress and prosperity, but more failure and more punishment.⁵

Since William Faulkner grew up in small villages as a member of an extended and prominent family, personal and familial experiences intensified the lessons his region inculcated. "In a city," Ezra Pound

once remarked, "visual impressions succeed each other, overlap, overcross, they are 'cinematographic'"; in a village, he continued, people possess a sense of sequence and shared knowledge. Because they know who did what before, during, and after the Revolution, their life "is narrative"⁶—which is what Faulkner's early life was. The small villages in which his family lived encouraged excursions: it was easy to get out of them into the big woods. But they also encouraged a feeling of involvement, even of intimacy. For Faulkner as for Nathaniel Hawthorne, the story of region was inseparable from the story of family. The sense of being entangled in a great web of persons and events, centering on family but extending beyond it, is everywhere present in Faulkner's fiction, from the Sartorises to the Compsons to the McCaslins.

If most modern Americans feel related to no specific place, group, or time, but "to everywhere, to everybody, and to always"; if as a result, finding "in environment no confirmation of their identity," they feel abstracted and disconnected; and if in this we see the perils of newness, freedom, and mobility, we also see the opposite of what William Faulkner experienced as a boy.⁷ With the sense of place and family pressing on him from all sides, it was other perils that he learned. Deeply exposed to the play of associations with creatures living and dead, he became acutely aware of the force of human heredity and the flow of human generations. Some of his characters are so full of names and places, the dates of births, deaths, victories, and defeats of relatives and neighbors, that they feel themselves less individuals than commonwealths: almost without knowing it they come to view their lives as one perpetual instant in which the life of self, family, and region mingle. Others of his characters, feeling both responsible and helpless, are doubly discomforted. In some moments their ancestors appear as gigantic heroes, larger and more admirable than they have any hope of becoming; in others they appear as sinister shadows associated with injustice, violence, and lust, even with inhumanity, fratricide, and incest.

Named by his grandfather, J. W. T. Falkner, for his great-grandfather, William Clark, and for his father, Murry Cuthbert, William Cuthbert Faulkner came early to feel himself branded. He was not only "a Falkner of Mississippi," nor merely the firstborn son of the firstborn son of the firstborn son of the founder, himself a firstborn son; he was also the chosen namesake of the founder, which is to say, of a giant. In his extended family were several people who had lived large lives, including a great-uncle named John Wesley Thompson. A forceful and violent as well as successful man, Thompson helped the Old Colonel make his start and partly reared the Old Colonel's first son, J. W. T. Falkner. But it was William Clark Falkner who dominated the family's imagination. Telling stories about him was more than a pastime; presided over by the unvanquished aunts whom Faulkner later immortalized, it was

a ritual in which everyone participated. For surviving members of the Partisan Rangers, the second of the Old Colonel's two Civil War regiments, the family still sponsored reunions where tales of his exploits were told and retold. Several family servants regularly recounted his adventures. At least one, "Uncle Ned" Barnett, wore frock coats, broadcloth suits, and high-crowned hats, as though to evoke the Old Colonel's sartorial splendor. To the servants who had known him, W. C. Falkner remained "Old Master" long after he was dead. Like the family and their neighbors, the servants called J. W. T. Falkner "the Young Colonel," or even "the Colonel," but they knew that he had fought in no wars, that his glory, like his title, was inherited.⁸

Planter, lawyer, soldier, writer, politician, and railroad entrepreneur, William Clark Falkner was in fact a man of many parts.⁹ His life seems not so much to have touched as to have embraced the three major legends of the South: the Cavalier Legend, about family origins and personal style; the Plantation Legend, about "the golden age" before the war; and the Redeemers Legend, about the glorious unseating of the carpetbaggers. There was more than enough in his adventures to keep inventive descendants busy for years. Like the Sartorises of *Flags in the Dust*, the novel in which Faulkner first drew directly on the Old Colonel's exploits, the Falkners told and retold the story of their founder, letting it grow "richer and richer."¹⁰

That story began with a boy of seventeen arriving in Mississippi in 1842, following a solitary journey from Missouri through Tennessee. Accounts of the motives behind the journey vary. In one family story, the pattern comes from the Bible—having seriously injured a younger brother in a fight, the boy flees as an outcast. In another, the pattern comes from the nineteenth century—young, ambitious, and fatherless, the boy fearlessly sets out to make his fortune.¹¹ Given the man the boy became, the life he lived, both patterns are useful. For the Old Colonel was a violent man; and though he seems genuinely to have tired of it, violence pursued him as persistently and successfully as he pursued fame and fortune. Sooner or later, everything he touched—law and politics, railroads and land, pamphlets and novels—brought him fame, made him money, and surrounded him in controversy.

From the Civil War he emerged a decorated hero. Dubbed "The Knight of the Black Plume," he won praise from several of the most famed southern Cavaliers, including General P. G. T. Beauregard, General J. E. Johnston, and Colonel J. E. B. Stuart. But even in heroism he was controversial. After he led them to glory at Manassas, the men of his first regiment, the Magnolia Rifles, turned on him by choosing John M. Stone their commander. The Old Colonel, it seems, was too harsh, too ruthless, too reckless. Recouping, he formed a second regiment, the

Partisan Rangers, and continued to fight. Though frustrated in his efforts to regain his early glory, he managed during the last years of the war to make money, apparently as a blockade runner. Emerging from the war fairly prosperous as well as controversial, he built a railroad, wrote novels, enlarged his fame, and won election to the legislature, only to be shot down in the streets of Ripley by a former business partner named Richard Thurmond.¹²

With their move to Ripley in 1898, the Murry Falkners returned to the family's first Mississippi center. Before the Old Colonel's death in 1889, J. W. T. Falkner had moved his family to Oxford. But the family's founder had lived in Ripley from the 1840s until his death, and it still bore his mark. There his ornate mansion still stood; there an eight-foot likeness sculpted in Carrara marble towered above his grave; there his railroad was still *the* railroad. For several decades Ripley had provided him a nearly perfect scene; for several years, it did almost as much for his grandson, primarily because of the railroad. Of the family's several business interests, only the Gulf & Chicago appealed to Murry. Although most buildings, particularly schools and churches, seemed to him confining, he liked railroad stations, where women came and went while men sat and talked. As a boy, he had enjoyed watching trains and listening to their whistles; as a man, he enjoyed swapping tales about hunting and fishing or about the distant places that trains brought to mind.¹³ After two unhappy years at the University of Mississippi, he left school to become a fireman on the railroad; later he worked as an engineer and conductor. Moving to New Albany, he supervised the line's passenger service; with the move to Ripley, he became its treasurer.

A large, active man, Murry found both self-expression and close relationships difficult. So long as conversation remained casual, staying within familiar bounds, he remained composed and polite. But disputes, even free-flowing discussions, made him feel awkward and inadequate. At home he established a rule against conversing during meals.¹⁴ With his father, too, he was uncomfortable, perhaps because he sensed, as others did, that his talents and ambitions fell short of his father's expectations—that he was at once too restless and too easily satisfied. At least one reminder, his younger brother, was close at hand. A successful student all the way through the University of Mississippi, J. W. T. Falkner, Jr., would soon follow his father into law, banking, and politics. Hoping to outdo his brother and please his father, Murry tried to curb his restlessness and to show more ambition. After his marriage in 1896, he began accepting larger responsibilities and planning for the future. With the railroad showing a good profit, he began investing his money. Soon he was able to buy part of a drugstore in Ripley and all of a farm west of it. Both his father and his wife, who also harbored large ambitions, seemed pleased with his

performance. For himself, he retained the habit of getting away—out to the farm or off into the woods. Pinned down and crowded, he became violent; in one fight, he very nearly lost his life. Free to roam familiar woods or unexplored river bottoms, his energies found tasks of their own. Riding horses and training dogs, fishing and hunting were things he felt easy doing. For a time he thought that he had found in Ripley a happy ground where he could meet the expectations shared by his father and his wife without giving up the excursions he needed.

For Murry and his family, then, the years in Ripley seemed almost ideal. A small, gifted woman, Maud Butler Falkner preferred reading, painting, and going to church to hiking, riding, and hunting. And since she was opinionated and outspoken as well as pious, she tended to be blunt. Murry knew that she had agreed to marry him only a month after his first big promotion with the Gulf & Chicago; and he knew that she expected large success. Her refinement, her talk of books, art, and prayer, might vex him, just as his crudity, particularly the profanity and whiskey that went with hunting, might offend her. But the tension between them was not severe, and it was too familiar in the life around them to be disturbing. During the early years of their marriage, when his name was making them prominent and his position was making them prosperous, they accepted life together with ease. Following their marriage in November 1896, their first son, William, was born in September 1897; their second, Murry, Jr., called Jack, in June 1899; their third, J. W. T. III, called Johncy, in September 1901. After Murry's appointment as treasurer, they began to share the expectation that he would soon replace his father as president of the railroad.

As it turned out, J. W. T. Falkner, the family's patriarch, had plans of his own, and they did not call for being replaced by anyone, particularly his eldest son. After his own father's death, he had moved the family's center to Oxford and turned its attention toward banks, land, and politics. For him the railroad was more a bother than a passion. Tired of running it himself, he had no intention of turning it over to Murry, in part because he had limited confidence in Murry's abilities, and in part because he wanted capital to support other ventures. In 1902, four years after Murry's move to Ripley, J. W. T. Falkner announced his intention to sell the Gulf & Chicago Railroad Company for \$75,000. He had given Murry his start, and he would continue sponsoring him; in many ways, he was a generous father. But he kept his own counsel, and he assumed that a son should do what his father's interests required. Regarding those interests as shared, he seems scarcely to have noticed the privileges he claimed for himself. All of his life, Murry had been dutiful, subordinate, uncomplaining. For as long as his father lived (until 1922), he remained just that, making imposition easy. At home, where Murry

decried his loss, his sons learned early that the railroad had been his "first and lasting love." But to his father, Murry did not complain.¹⁵

Finding their life disrupted, Murry and Maud prepared to make a new start. Murry's father thought they should move to Oxford, where he had a law practice, several businesses, and a bank, and where he and his wife, Sallie Murry, had just built a fine home called "The Big Place." Murry and his family were welcome to the house his parents had vacated, and in Oxford he was sure to find work. At first, resisting his father's suggestion, Murry played with the idea of borrowing money and buying the railroad himself, a plan Maud may have favored.¹⁶ As difficulties arose, however, Murry's resolve began to waver. Soon his thoughts turned toward Texas. Preceding the Old Colonel lay a string of restless men who had moved on to make new starts—one had journeyed from Scotland to South Carolina; another from South Carolina to North Carolina; another from North Carolina across Tennessee to Missouri. The Old Colonel himself had come to Mississippi hungry and penniless. Recalling novels about cowboys, the only books he had ever enjoyed reading, Murry decided to move to Texas and become a rancher.¹⁷

Dreading the move and doubting its outcome, Maud Falkner vetoed Murry's plan. Her early life had become a struggle when her father deserted her and her mother, leaving them penniless to make their own start. Working hard, Maud had managed to graduate from a small state college and make a promising marriage. She had no intention of moving hundreds of miles to begin again among strangers. If she and Murry stayed where the Falkners were prominent, he could get plenty of help. Despite her small size—she was barely five feet tall—and her fine features, Maud possessed more energy and far more determination than her large husband. Outliving him by twenty years, she retained to the end her erect posture and her sharp opinions. On her deathbed she spoke to her eldest son of a heaven where she would not have to talk to the husband she said she had never much liked. In 1902 she was only a little less blunt.¹⁸

Feeling betrayed by his father and his wife, Murry Falkner toyed with the idea of forcing a crisis, only to have his will fail. Sending his family by train, he loaded their possessions in a wagon and drove alone toward Oxford. Both his wife and his father had now assumed major roles in the great disappointment of his life. As time passed without his finding any way to redirect his life or avenge his losses, his bitterness deepened. In the scattered rages of which his father knew little, his wife and sons much, he recalled not only the railroad he had lost but the ranch he had never possessed. He and Maud had had three children between September 1897 and September 1901, but their fourth and last son, Dean, was not born until 1907, by which time their mutual resentment and mistrust were deep, frozen, and familiar.

To the rest of the family, the move to Oxford seemed all gain. Arriving after dark, on a September evening in 1902, near William's fifth birthday, they moved into a comfortable house near "The Big Place," the center of family activities. A town of nearly two thousand, Oxford was several times larger and considerably more varied than Ripley. It was the county seat of Lafayette County and the home of the University of Mississippi. Race and class influenced one's language, manners, food, and clothing, as well as one's freedom and opportunity. Yet, despite the lines that separated and defined them, the people of Oxford found interaction easy. All of the Falkners thought themselves aristocrats; they could be stiff, proud, overbearing. But they were not snobs, and they enjoyed much casual intercourse with every segment of Mississippi society. A few blocks north of the family home, the courthouse stood in the middle of the town square, surrounded by stores that sported new boardwalks. On Saturdays the square was the scene of horse auctions and other free-wheeling transactions. A few blocks south and west of the house, there were woods where the Falkner boys liked to play. Ten or fifteen miles north, at a point where the Tippah River joined the Tallahatchie, the Falkners owned a large two-room cabin, called the "Club House," where they hunted coons, squirrels, fox, and deer. Thirty miles east was the storied and game-rich Delta where another prominent family, the Stones, had a hunting cabin. A few miles south was a river called Yocona in Oxford and named Yoconapatafa on older maps.¹⁹

For William and his brothers, Oxford was an almost perfect world: it provided adventures yet permitted easy mastery and easy escape. To their father, on the other hand, it brought hardship and bitterness. With help, Murry always managed to find work and so was saved the indignity of failing to support his family. But the relative independence he had known in Ripley, and the hope, died quickly. At first he directed the grading of North Street. Later he ran several businesses, including a hardware store and a livery stable. But few of his jobs held any intrinsic interest for him; even the best of them, the livery stable, failed to match the magic of the railroad. Although his family's status guaranteed him work and so helped to make his life more bearable, it also made his failure conspicuous. As he moved from job to job, finding no place of his own, he became widely regarded as the failed descendant of a legendary grandfather and a successful father. Soon even his younger brother was outshining him. After fifteen years of shifting around, trying one thing and then another, Murry accepted appointment as secretary and business manager of the University of Mississippi. In this, the last of several positions arranged by his father, he served dutifully for ten years, only to be dismissed in a political shuffle. By then, even the hills and woods had lost most of their shimmer. Much of his time he spent alone, sitting in

silence, as though he had simply "got tired of living." In 1932 he "just gave up" and died.²⁰

Occasional eruptions excepted, Murry Falkner kept most of his bitterness to himself, even when he was still young. Although it was quick to sour him, his reversal of fortune was slow to diminish his love of horses, dogs, and excursions. He enjoyed taking his sons down to the livery stable and out into the woods. Before entrusting them to the public schools, he taught each of them the things he knew best—how to ride, track, hunt, and fish. At night at the Club House, away from his wife and his father, with whiskey to drink, some of his wariness faded. Surrounded by his sons, he told tales of the wolves and panthers he had hunted and the railroad he had loved. Yet even on these occasions, his sons remained uncertain of his affection. More than his bitterness, it was his need and capacity for love that he kept to himself. None of his sons remembered him as "an easy man to know" or an easy man to love. With them, as with others, he remained distant and cautious. Looking back, they thought of him as a cold man whose "capacity for affection was limited."²¹

Since he knew the woods best, Murry Falkner talked of them most. But he liked sports, which he also thought of as manly; and he took pride in his sons' exploits. In his second attempt at the eleventh grade, then the final year of high school, William started as quarterback on the football team. In the summers, baseball was his game, pitcher or shortstop his position. According to one of his playmates, he was "by far the best player among the boys who played together those summers."²² Later he turned to tennis, golf, and sailing. Yet he began early to feel disadvantaged, particularly in his father's eyes, and primarily because of his size. He was always small for his age. Soon even his younger brothers, who were built more like their father, were taller and heavier than he. William's height and small frame, the shape of his head, the color of his eyes, all owed more to his mother than to his father, a fact clear to his family even when he was still young. As tension between his father and mother increased, his father came more and more to regard him as his mother's son. Sometimes in rough teasing, his father called him "Snake-Lips."²³

More than fine features, however, it was lack of size and strength, and specifically lack of ability to fight, that preoccupied William, early and late. In 1953 he suggested that Sherwood Anderson had always wished that he was "more imposing-looking." It was, he suggested, because Anderson was "a short man that probably all of his boyhood had wished he were bigger so he could fight better, defend himself," that he made his characters tall.²⁴ In the early 1930s, when one of his brothers complimented him on his recent success in writing books and in rebuilding Rowan Oak, he tied his large achievements to his small size: "Well," he

replied, "as big as you are, you can march anywhere you want, but when you're little you have to push."²⁵ Unable simply to march, yet feeling tested and driven, William pushed, even when he was very young. Brothers and friends alike remember him as instigating, directing, leading. It was characteristic of him that he wanted to be the quarterback in football, the pitcher or shortstop in baseball.

In several notable respects, however, all of the Falkner boys were children of their mother. Phil Stone, who knew the family well, particularly William, thought that all of the boys felt their mother's strong domination and that all of them feared and resented it.²⁶ Maud was a pretty woman with fine, distinct features. In contrast to the light blue of the Falkners', her eyes were so dark that their pupils and irises seemed to merge. As it came down from her forehead and up from her small chin and mouth, her face seemed to converge on her eyes, stressing their beauty. Sometimes laughing, always penetrating, they were clear, bright, intense, determined. Despite the difficult years following her father's desertion of her mother, she had persisted in her ambition to graduate from college. From that experience she emerged valuing education and admiring the determination that had got her what she wanted.

An avid reader as well as a gifted painter, Maud taught all of her sons to read before sending them to the public schools. Systematic in her approach, she moved them from early primers through *Grimm's Fairy Tales* to the classics, including Dickens, keeping them well ahead of their classmates. In the process she conveyed, as one of them later put it, "an abiding love for literature" and a sense of its power to move readers to tears or "unabashed delight." In addition, she conveyed a clear set of expectations: that they learn quickly and well; that they absorb the conventional pieties; they live with stoic resolve; and that they give her their devotion. Although warmer and more affectionate than her taciturn husband, she practiced restraint, and she was capable of severe sternness. As the years passed and her husband began to make less money and drink more whiskey, she held fast to her convictions. "Don't Complain—Don't Explain" was the message she hung in red above the kitchen stove.²⁷

Although he learned games quickly, William took greater pleasure in activities that rewarded imagination more than size and strength. In nearby woods, such as those behind the old Shegog Place, which he later bought, he devised new versions of old games by revising rules and redefining boundaries. Together he, his brothers, his cousins, and their playmates tracked small animals or each other; searched for the rare blue egg of the China bird; or played some variety of war or hide-and-seek.²⁸ Other pleasures he associated with attics, porches, and rainy days, and with his maternal grandmother, Leila Butler, whom he called Damuddy. Never more than marginally interested in the Old Colonel,

Damuddy shared her daughter's hatred of the foul language and the drinking that went with hunting and fishing. Deeply pietistic, she seems in fact to have had little use for men in general, perhaps in part because one of them deserted her, forcing her to relinquish a scholarship for studying sculpture in Rome. But she knew how to draw and paint as well as sculpt, and what she knew, she loved.

A frequent visitor in her daughter's home, she moved in to stay in 1902, bringing her easel with her. Although her presence probably did nothing to ease tension between Murry and Maud, it did much to enrich the experience of their children. In William, the small boy who resembled his mother, she took special interest. For him she carved a nine-inch doll that she dressed in a policeman's uniform, complete with brass buttons. Giving it an Irish name, Patrick O'Leary, William took it to the family attic, where he spent rainy days creating stories about it. Aided by Damuddy's instruction and his own quickness, he soon learned to draw well. Sometimes in the years just before her death on 1 June 1907, Damuddy helped him direct his friends in building miniature villages in the family's front yard. One participant reports that, using sticks, grass, stones, and glass, "they built walks, streets, churches, and stores. Both William and his grandmother were good at improvising and using materials at hand. . . . William was the leader in these little projects. He had his grandmother's artistic talents for making things, and his imagination was obvious even then."²⁹

If, in the small boy who liked to draw pictures and build villages, we see the figure of much that was to be, in the boy who was becoming restless in school, we see signs of things more immediate. William began the first grade in 1905, on his eighth birthday, skipped the second, and remained an excellent student through the third and fourth grades. Although he showed special interest in drawing, painting, and reading, he received good marks in all subjects, including deportment. At home, he performed his assigned chores with no more than ordinary prompting. In the fourth grade, however, when he was ten, his manner began to change. He did what he had to do to make the honor roll at school and to avoid trouble at home, but he became more recalcitrant and more silent.³⁰

Never challenged or in any real sense educated by Oxford's public schools, William appears, even during his early, exemplary years, to have been the willing victim of a situation that left him free to learn from his father and mother, or from Damuddy and other tellers of tales. What changed slightly in the fourth grade and emphatically in the fifth was not so much the scenes and sources of his education as his desire to please his parents. He ceased to care. Sometimes he simply played hooky; even when he attended school, he was quiet, withdrawn, inattentive. Sitting at his desk, ignoring what was going on around him, he read, drew, or wrote

what he pleased. Standing on the playground, he seemed to live wholly within himself. He was "a little fellow," one classmate remarked. "On the school ground he stood around a great deal," listening rather than talking, watching rather than playing.³¹

William's move from compliance and participation toward silence and stillness was partial. Even later, when he began dramatizing the role of the observer, he continued to move back and forth between participation and withdrawal. Sometimes he was active and forthcoming, playing several sports and engaging in varied experiments. Three of his projects—one involving wings made of corn shucks and two involving gun powder, which he used to produce a flash for a picture and to fire an old Confederate pistol found in the woods—very nearly cost him and his brothers dearly. Still, the change in him was definite and, as it turned out, lasting. The decline that began during his third year in school persisted through two rounds with the eleventh grade. He never graduated. Toward the end he continued only in order to play football in the fall and baseball in the spring.³²

Given his father's indifference to education, the burden of William's truancy and inattention fell largely on his mother. She did what she could, encouraging, cajoling, threatening. William, a brother reports, stood quietly, seeming to listen, then went his own way without trying to explain or defend his behavior. About the time his truancy began to distress his mother, his mounting aversion to work began to disturb his father. A few of his schemes for avoiding chores must have seemed amusing even at the time and even to his father. During the winter of 1910 he enticed Fritz McElroy to carry coal for him by concocting a continuing story, released serially, as it were—which he terminated each day at a point calculated to bring his larger, stronger friend back for more. Not all his schemes were clever, however, and several were annoying, particularly when he put his inventiveness to concocting lies rather than fanciful tales. "It got so when Billy told you something," a cousin recalls, "you never knew if it was the truth or just something he'd made up."³³

In other senses, as well, stories began filling his days. At home he spent much of his time reading. By age ten, when his resistance to school commenced, he was reading Shakespeare, Dickens, Balzac, and Conrad. At the stove in his father's office he watched and listened as his father's friends drank whiskey and swapped tales. At the courthouse he listened to old men tell stories about the War. At the fireplace in Mammy Caroline Barr's cabin he found another place to listen. Born into slavery in 1840, Mammy Callie, as the Falkner boys called her, was more than sixty years old when the Murry Falkners moved to Oxford. Small like Maud Falkner, Mammy Callie could be stern and formidable. But her capacity for feeling and expressing love lasted her a century, surviving great hardship, and it

enabled her to give William tenderness and affection as well as entertainment. Unable to read or write, she remembered scores of stories about the old days and the old people: about slavery, the War, the Klan, and the Falkners. Years later, amid the malaise of Hollywood, Faulkner repeated some of her stories about the lives and habits of small animals, and so shared with others the wonder and delight she had shared with him.³⁴ Earlier, secure in her presence, he crossed from listening to speaking, and so began telling tales of his own—versions, one judges, of those he was hearing at his father's livery stable, at the courthouse, or on the porch of "The Big Place," his other regular stop. There he played with Sallie Murry, a cousin who seemed almost like a sister to him, and there he listened, while his grandfather told stories about the Old Colonel. Now and then, having listened quietly, he was permitted to handle the Old Colonel's cane, books, and watch, even the broken pipe that had fallen from his lips on the day he was shot. As mementoes of these occasions, which clearly meant much to both of them, his grandfather gave him replicas of one of his handsome vests and of his watch fob, making him, William said later, "the proudest boy that ever breathed." Soon he began smoking a pipe of his own, a habit that lasted a lifetime.³⁵

William may at times have felt, as Quentin Compson does in *Absalom, Absalom!*, that "his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous" names, that he was "a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts." Perhaps no boy could have heard so much so often without occasionally asking, "Why tell me about it? What is it to me?" But in fact he seems to have sought more than to have endured the stories. An acquaintance who knew him for many years once remarked that he had obviously heard every version of every story and had obviously remembered all of them. This remarkable retentiveness, for scenes, events, characters, even words and nuances, became one of his defining qualities.³⁶ In the seventh grade he began studying Mississippi history, particularly that part pertaining to the Civil War. Years later his library included the works of Douglas Southall Freeman and Bruce Catton on the Civil War, Calvin Brown on the *Archeology of Mississippi*, even the *Mississippi Provincial Archives*. In 1932, following the death of his father, he became the head of his clan and so inherited the massive family Bible, in which having made all the obligatory entries, he also recorded as much of his family's genealogy as he could discover. But most of what he knew about his region and its past, certainly about his family and its past, he learned from "old tales and talking"³⁷—a fact that helps to account not only for the conversational form of a novel like *Absalom, Absalom!*, but also for the remarkable fluidity, the fundamental seamlessness, of time as we experience it in his fiction, where history always includes present and future as well as past.³⁸