William Faulkner's Short Stories

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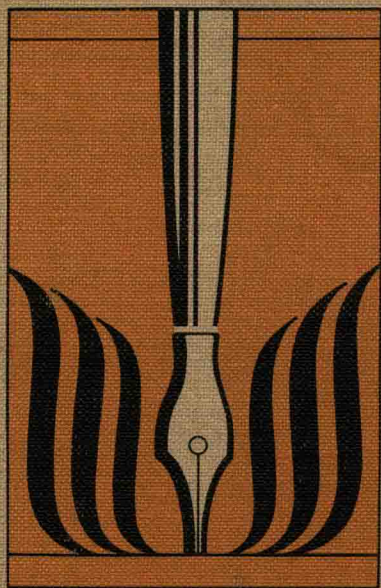
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by
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List of Abbreviations

References to Faulkner's texts, noted parenthetically, are to the following editions:

    AA   *Absalom, Absalom!* N.Y., Random House, 1936.

  AILD   *As I Lay Dying.* N.Y., Random House, 1964.

    BW   *Big Woods.* N.Y., Random House, 1955.

    CS   *Collected Stories of William Faulkner.* N.Y., Random House, 1950.

    DM   *Doctor Martino and Other Stories.* N.Y., Random House, 1934.

    EPP   *Early Prose and Poetry,* ed. Carvel Collins. Boston, Little, Brown, 1962.

  ESPL   *Essays, Speeches & Public Letters,* ed. James B. Meriwether. N.Y., Random House, 1966.

    FA   *Father Abraham.* N.Y., Random House, 1984.

   FAB   *A Fable.* N.Y., Random House, 1954.

   FIU   *Faulkner in the University,* eds. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner. N.Y., Vintage, 1965.

  GDM   *Go Down, Moses and Other Stories.* N.Y., Random House, 1942.

  HAM   *The Hamlet.* N.Y., Random House, 1964 (third edition).

    KG   *Knight's Gambit.* N.Y., Random House, 1949.

LIA   *Light in August*. N.Y., Harrison Smith & Robert Haas, 1932.

LIG   *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926-1962,* eds. James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate. N.Y., Random House, 1968.

MAN   *The Mansion*. N.Y., Random House, 1959.

NOS   *New Orleans Sketches,* ed. Carvel Collins. N.Y., Random House, 1968.

NOTES   *Notes on a Horsethief*. Greenville, Miss., Levee Press, 1950.

REQ   *Requiem for a Nun*. N.Y., Random House, 1951.

REV   *The Reivers*. N.Y., Random House, 1962.

S&F   *The Sound and the Fury*. N.Y., Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1929.

SAN   *Sanctuary*. N.Y., Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1931.

SAR   *Sartoris*. N.Y., Harcourt, Brace, 1929.

SLWF   *Selected Letters of William Faulkner,* ed. Joseph Blotner. N.Y., Random House, 1977.

SP   *Soldiers' Pay*. N.Y., Boni & Liveright, 1926.

TWN   *The Town*. N.Y., Random House, 1957.

UNV   *The Unvanquished*. N.Y., Random House, 1938.

USWF   *Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner,* ed. Joseph Blotner. N.Y., Random House, 1979.

WP   *The Wild Palms*. N.Y., Random House, 1939.

Preface

When I completed the first version of this study in 1970, relatively little scholarly or critical attention had been given to Faulkner's short fiction, many of the texts of his uncollected and unpublished stories were difficult to locate, important materials related to a developmental study were restricted or unavailable, and nobody seemed to be doing developmental studies of Faulkner anyway. With the publication of James B. Meriwether's checklist of Faulkner's short fiction in 1971, responsible description and classification began. Joseph Blotner's *Faulkner: A Biography* (1973, 1984), his edition of the *Selected Letters of William Faulkner* (1977), and his edition of the *Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner* (1979) each provided invaluable texts for continuing study. Hans H. Skei's *William Faulkner: The Short Story Career* (1981) offers explicit aid in sorting out the chronology of the many variants of particular stories and describes Faulkner's labors in the genre. Doreen Fowler, Gary L. Stonum, and Karl F. Zender, among others, have shown that developmental readings of Faulkner are illuminating. If we don't always see eye to eye, as Faulkner put it to Saxe Commins, we are, nevertheless, all looking at the same thing. None of us is, of William Faulkner, "Sole Owner and Proprietor."

In revising the original text of this study I have sought to eliminate unfounded speculations and downright errors, to cite appropriate editions of short story texts, and to note what seem to me to be the better recent readings of some stories and subjects.

Acknowledgments

Introduction

Most discussions of Faulkner's fiction deal primarily or exclusively with his novels, treating the short stories as though they did not exist, or, at most, allowing them cursory treatment. For the student of the short stories, it is tempting to reverse this procedure, though hardly convenient. Faulkner's short stories are considerably more than rough drafts or minor footnotes to his novels; they deserve serious study in their own right and are of sufficient merit to assure Faulkner's place in the first rank of twentieth-century writers, even had he never written novels.

Since he did write the novels, however, it is impossible to ignore them. Though my thesis is that the short stories are essentially independent of the novels, I have chosen to present that argument in large part by comparing the stories with the novels to which they are related, to show the differences which indicate that individual texts in the Faulkner canon, though demonstrably reflexive, are not as mutually dependent as they have sometimes been made out to be.

The first chapter includes a brief survey of past estimates of Faulkner's stories and of Faulkner's contributions to modern fiction. His development of the Yoknapatawpha chronicle has suggested to many that all of his fiction is part of one grand design, and the usual assumption is that the short stories are only incidental to that design. Faulkner's design, however, was a dynamic one, and in view of the many significant differences between the short stories and novels which supposedly treat the "same" characters and incidents, it is best first to read each of his texts as self-contained.

In the second chapter six different relations between single stories and novels are described, in an effort to support the contention that each text is essentially independent. Though there are many reflexive connections between Faulkner's texts, no single connection is binding, and no one short story or novel is absolutely dependent for its understanding on any of the others. The latter portion of this chapter is concerned with a description of Faulkner's gradual development from pessimism to optimism, a development which has

often been ignored or misunderstood, and which the short stories help to define.

The third chapter considers individual stories in themselves, and in relation to the collections or "cycles" in which they appeared. The text of any individual Faulkner story has an integrity and coherence quite apart from the volume in which it is included, but the context of such collections as *Collected Stories, Knight's Gambit*, and *Big Woods* often affects our response to the stories. A comparison of the magazine versions of the short stories with the corresponding episodes in *The Unvanquished* and *Go Down, Moses* leads to the conclusion that those two books are best read as unified novels rather than as collections of autonomous stories or as story-cycles. Removing separate chapters of these two books, such as "The Bear" and "An Odor of Verbena," from the context of the novel may present grave difficulties for the reader. Some stories which Faulkner did not collect or publish are discussed here, and some tentative explanations of their exclusion are offered.

The fourth chapter deals with the short stories about the Snopes family, from the first treatment in *Father Abraham* through the stories incorporated into the Snopes trilogy. The Snopes stories illustrate the related themes of this study: that Faulkner's short stories are autonomous texts, and that his outlook on the human condition altered considerably over the years.

The brief concluding chapter summarizes points made elsewhere in the study, and examines assumptions on which the current downgrading of Faulkner's short story work is based.

Faulkner's short stories, in addition to being entertaining in themselves, are important because they reflect his constant and developing themes and techniques. They can add measurably to our understanding of his novels, and they are of vital importance in assessing two of his distinctive contributions to twentieth-century literature: his creation of a related series of narratives, and his eventual development of an affirmative, comic view of man in his struggle. The lasting value of Faulkner's stories is that they are moving, often amusing, occasionally tragic. They are the products of the same passionate and deliberate craftsmanship which characterizes Faulkner's novels. They are a major part of the major work of a gifted artist.

Faulkner has suffered both early and late from the fraternal twins of criticism, reduction and amplification. His mythologizing, his technical innovations, his extension of the Gothic tradition, his humanism, and his style have all been singled out at one time or another as his primary virtue or primary defect. That each of these readings is now usually developed to Faulkner's credit does not mean that they are correct in their assessment. Faulkner's superiority as a writer of fiction comes not from any one attribute, but from his

repeated demonstration of their natural combination. If it is possible to isolate, for the purposes of discussion, one area of his achievement, it is more desirable to consider them in their mutual relations. The short stories are of signal importance in understanding and appreciating the rich and complex unity of Faulkner's fiction.

Contents

1

"With A Kindred Art":
Reading Faulkner's Short Stories

A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents — he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one preestablished design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction.   — Edgar Allan Poe

To read Faulkner's short stories "with a kindred art" requires us to accept the paradox that each of Faulkner's texts is at once autonomous and interdependent. Faulkner's short stories, though more multiple in their effects and less mechanically calculated than Poe's formula prescribes, are to be first approached as self-contained, unified works of prose fiction, possessing coherent structure and discoverable significance in themselves. At the same time, the short stories are indispensable segments of the continuum of Faulkner's *oeuvre,* considered as a whole, "the same story over and over," as Faulkner once described it, "which is myself and the world."[1] In reading Faulkner's short stories, as in reading his novels, we recreate Faulkner's changing conception of himself, of the world, and of the dynamic relations between them.

Faulkner often said that the short story was, after poetry, the most difficult of literary forms, and his comments on his own short stories were frequently self-deprecating, but his work in the short story was long and intense, beginning in his student days at the University of Mississippi, continuing through his period of literary apprenticeship in New Orleans, paralleling and counterpointing his greatest years of achievement as a novelist, diminishing after the early 1940s, and apparently ending in the mid-1950s. Faulkner wrote well over one hundred short stories, collected them in a number of carefully structured volumes, and drew frequently and extensively on them in construct-

ing his novels. Within and among his short stories are to be found all the elements of his peculiar narrative genius.

Whereas all of Faulkner's novels can now be assembled with no particular difficulty, it is considerably more difficult to bring together all his short stories. Faulkner's early work in short fiction is available through Carvel Collins' editions of the *Early Prose and Poetry* and of the *New Orleans Sketches,* usefully supplemented by Leland H. Cox's edition of *Sinbad in New Orleans.* Other early shorter works in prose — one would not want to call them short stories — are available in the editions of *Mayday* and *The Wishing Tree.* Of the volumes of short stories Faulkner published himself, *These 13, Doctor Martino and Other Stories, Knight's Gambit, Collected Stories,* and *Big Woods* are essential, and *The Faulkner Reader* is of interest. Since it includes all thirteen stories of *These 13,* and twelve of the fourteen stories of *Doctor Martino,* as well as twenty-seven other stories published between 1930 and 1948, and since he gave extended careful attention to its arrangement, *Collected Stories* is the single most important volume in all of Faulkner's work in short fiction. Joseph Blotner's 1979 edition of the *Uncollected Stories* gathers forty-five more stories, including most of those Faulkner apparently chose not to collect because he had revised them for later books, a number that had been published under a variety of circumstances but never collected, and a number previously unpublished. While a few stories remain unpublished or uncollected, and while several pieces published in *Uncollected Stories* are not, strictly speaking, short stories, it is nevertheless true that a reader in possession of the volumes listed above has available the vast preponderance of Faulkner's work in short fiction.[2]

It is now relatively clear just when Faulkner wrote each novel, although some of the chronology of composition remains problematic. But we know, for example, that he wrote the original version of *Sanctuary* before beginning *As I Lay Dying,* even though the latter precedes the former in publication; we know that he wrote *Pylon* after he had begun work on the novel that became *Absalom, Absalom!;* we know that both *Intruder in the Dust* and *Requiem for a Nun* were written during the period in which he was also working on *A Fable.* Just when he wrote each of his short stories, however, is considerably less clear, for Faulkner did not often date his short story manuscripts as he dated the manuscripts and typescripts of his novels, and also because so many of the short stories exist in more than one manuscript or typescript version. Faulkner's correspondence with his agents and editors is often useful in determining the approximate completion date of a story, though it tells us little about when stories may have been conceived and drafted. Hans H. Skei has made an ambitious attempt to gather facts, inferences, and speculations regarding the chronology of composition of Faulkner's short stories,[3] but the exact dates and stages of composition for many must remain conjectural.

We assume that a writer of Faulkner's stature is essentially self-consistent, that his writings are all of a piece, and we assume that the reader's art is to discover the principles of this self-consistency in the repeated subjects, themes, rhetorical strategies, or styles of the successive texts. In thus reading Faulkner it is common to select a passage from a public or private statement, or a characteristic rhetorical device, or a philosophical position and to employ it as the "key" to all of his texts. In such readings Faulkner's early work in poetry, prose, and criticism is seen to manifest his struggle toward realization of the "key" principles and techniques, which are then seen to be embodied in his great novels of 1929-1942, though his subsequent "lesser" texts are seen to compromise or misapply these principles and techniques, as though Faulkner had, in his last twenty years of writing, lost his key, or, like Leopold Bloom, left it in his other pants.[4]

Faulkner's most important achievement, according to the readings that have dominated Faulkner studies since the time of George Marion O'Donnell and Malcolm Cowley, is his creation of a body of fiction in which each individual text is less significant than the whole, and is dependent on its place in the design of the whole. This whole — whether called a legend, a saga, a series, a chronicle, a history, or a myth — centers in Faulkner's novels and stories set in Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, and in individual characters, entire fictional families, and corresponding incidents and events which figure in more than one text. This whole, so goes the argument, is of primary importance for the Faulkner reader, for only within the larger design can particular texts be fully understood and appreciated. It is within this larger context, often denominated by the approbative term "myth," that Faulkner's contributions to twentieth-century fiction are now understood.

His short stories, however, are not often numbered among his major contributions, and they have received, as a group, substantially less attention than other aspects of his work. Recent studies have gone some distance toward describing how Faulkner reworked short stories into novels, close attention has been given to Faulkner's organization of his short story volumes, and the predictable few of his stories have found their way into the anthologies and have been studied with care.[5] But Faulkner is considered primarily as a novelist, a mythmaker, an innovator in fictional technique, or a moralist, before he is considered as a short story writer. His short stories, when they are treated at all, are considered incidental to his larger design. The short stories, read as individual texts, and read in relation to each other and to the texts of the novels, not only substantiate but also significantly modify some of the continuing assessments of Faulkner's development and overall achievement, and they help to identify and resolve some of the apparent paradoxes and contradictions in those readings.

The argument from design has a sound basis in Faulkner's own description of his work, most memorably expressed in his 1956 interview with Jean

Stein: "With *Soldiers' Pay* I found out writing was fun. But I found out after that not only each book had to have a design but the whole output or sum of an artist's work had to have a design."⁶ His invention of Yoknapatawpha County was crucial in this development: "Beginning with *Sartoris* I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it, and by sublimating the actual into apocryphal I would have complete liberty to use whatever talent I might have to its absolute top." This discovery, Faulkner continues, "opened up a gold mine of other peoples, so I created a cosmos of my own." As though anticipating or responding to those who would call attention to the apparent discrepancies and contradictions among his texts, Faulkner asserts: "I can move these people around like God, not only in space but in time too. The fact that I have moved my characters around in time successfully, at least in my own estimation, proves to me my own theory that time is a fluid condition which has no existence except in the momentary avatars of individual people." Faulkner then rings changes on a theme that sounds at intervals throughout his novels, from *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* through *The Wild Palms* to *The Reivers:* "There is no such thing as *was* — only *is*. If *was* existed there would be no grief or sorrow." "I like to think," he concludes, "of the world I created as being a kind of keystone in the universe, that, as small as that keystone is, if it were ever taken away, the universe itself would collapse. My last book will be the Doomsday Book, the Golden Book, of Yoknapatawpha County. Then I shall break the pencil and I'll have to stop" (*LIG*, 255).

If individual phrases and sentences are isolated from this famous statement, there is some justification for the inference that Faulkner had in mind a hard core of narrative "fact" upon which his Yoknapatawpha cosmos rests, and many readers have sought to trace an outline of Faulknerian history. But Faulkner repeatedly declined to be bound by the "facts" he had posited in one text when he was creating another. The problem for the reader is to determine how far, if at all, to allow the knowledge of one Faulkner text to shape the reading of another. Even the notion of "autonomy" can be a misleading and debilitating preconception, as Mark Spilka pointed out early on, and as a host of present-day "intertextual" readers would insist.⁷ If it is wrong to ignore the many reflexive connections among Faulkner's works, and if it is equally wrong to deny that there is, in several senses, a "design" within the Faulkner canon, it must nevertheless be argued that the connections among Faulkner's texts are problematical rather than absolute, that there are several different kinds of connections, that it is useful to discriminate among them, and that, above all, Faulkner's "design" was dynamic. Reading *a* Faulkner short story, then, is one thing, reading "Faulkner's short stories" is another, and "reading Faulkner" is still another. The art of reading Faulkner's short stories requires the reader to focus, as Faulkner did, on the immediate text, and to read among and between the texts for a sense of the developing design.

Faulkner's attitude toward the variety of his texts appears to have changed, for he originally mentioned the possibility of a collected edition of his works, in which factual discrepancies and contradictions would be eliminated.[8] When Malcolm Cowley pointed out the differences between the Compson Appendix to *The Sound and the Fury* and the 1929 text of the novel, however, Faulkner defended his changes:

> The inconsistencies in the appendix prove that to me the book is still alive after 15 years, and being still alive is growing, changing; the appendix was done at the same heat as the book, even though 15 years later, and so it is the book itself which is inconsistent not the appendix. That is, at the age of 30 I did not know these people as at the age of 45 I now do: that I was even wrong now and then in the very conclusions I drew from watching them, and the information in which I once believed.[9]

Much the same note is sounded in the headnote to *The Mansion,* in which Faulkner informs the reader that the discrepancies and contradictions in the thirty-four-year progress of the Snopes chronicle are an indication of his own vitality, "contradictions and discrepancies due to the fact that the author has learned, he believes, more about the human heart and its dilemma than he knew thirty-four years ago, and is sure that, having lived with them that long time, he knows the characters in this chronicle better than he did then " (*MAN,* unnumbered page). Both observations, it may be noted, are based on the same theory of "life as motion" which is central to Faulkner's concept of his own design. The problem with much Faulkner criticism, the desire to bring a semblance of order from apparent chaos, is a too-narrow, too-rigid conception of Faulkner's design. It is consistent with my argument for the autonomy of individual stories, then, that I will here be as much concerned with the uniqueness of single stories, and with significant differences between stories and novels, as with Faulkner's supposedly constant themes and techniques. Approaching the design through the short stories rather than approaching the short stories through some extrinsic conception of the design implies a radically inductive method, based on the assumption that useful generalizations about Faulkner's work must derive from responses to particular stories and novels.

The materials relevant to this study are extensive and various. Faulkner's stories are extant in several forms, including manuscript, typescript, magazine, and collected versions. The most important single volume is *Collected Stories* (1950), which contains verbatim reprintings or slightly altered versions of all the stories which appeared in *These 13* (1931), all but two of the stories which appeared in *Dr. Martino and Other Stories* (1934), and seventeen stories which had been previously published but not collected. Those forty-two stories in *Collected Stories* represent less than half of Faulkner's production. Other collections were *Knight's Gambit* (1949) and *Big Woods* (1955). *The Unvanquished* (1938) and *Go Down, Moses* (1942) have been treated as story-cycles.[10]

The magazine versions of the stories in these five volumes are worthy of more attention than they have thus far received, for changes between magazine and collected versions often suggest shifts in Faulkner's attitudes and intentions, both in single stories and in whole volumes. Magazine versions of stories such as "Thrift," which Faulkner did not choose to collect, are instructive, as are the separately published stories *Idyll in the Desert* and *Miss Zilphia Gant.* Joseph Blotner's edition of *The Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner* (1979) provides convenient texts and groupings of such stories. Many of the stories, published or unpublished, collected or uncollected, were subsequently worked into novels, so each of Faulkner's novels, from *Soldiers' Pay* to *The Reivers,* is germane to a reading of the short stories.

A second body of useful materials consists of Faulkner's comments on his own work. Especially important collections of these observations are found in the interviews Faulkner granted at the University of Virginia, at West Point, in Japan and elsewhere. *Faulkner in the University, Faulkner at West Point,* and *Lion in the Garden* each present difficulties resulting from Faulkner's sometimes perverse attitude towards interviewers, and from the circumstances of transcription.[11] Malcolm Cowley's *The Faulkner–Cowley File* and James B. Meriwether's edition of Faulkner's *Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters* are important sources, as is Joseph Blotner's edition of Faulkner's *Selected Letters.*[12]

The third body of relevant material consists of the published scholarship, criticism, and journalism directly concerned with Faulkner. Since he has been the subject of several dozen books and hundreds of articles, a comprehensive review of scholarship and criticism is beyond the scope of the present study. Nor do I propose to treat the history of critical reaction to Faulkner's works, assuming that the main outlines of this aspect of his career are well-known or readily available elsewhere. On the other hand, I will refer to a number and variety of scholarly and critical works sufficient, I hope, to indicate the kinds of treatment the short stories have so far received.[13] Though a few of Faulkner's short stories have been singled out for explication and praise, and though few anthologists of the modern short story fail to include a sample of Faulkner's work in the genre, Faulkner's stories have most often been treated as mere adjuncts to the novels. The reasons behind this relative lack of attention are not hard to find. Faulkner is, after all, a novelist of the first rank, and the earliest critical priority was given to a discussion of his achievement in that form. His habit of retelling his stories in the novels and his stated preference for some of the novel versions have suggested to some that the stories are less important than the novels.[14] Similarly, Faulkner's neglect of the short story during the last years of his life might be interpreted as a rejection of the form.

Faulkner's habit of referring to himself as a "failed poet" provides a convenient introduction to his notion of the short story, for he often compared the two forms and contrasted them with the novel. "I think that every novelist