FAULKNER
in the University

Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958

Edited by

FREDERICK L. GWYNN
and
JOSEPH L. BLOTNER

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Oleh, Chief, Grandfather

The editors, colleagues of Mr. Faulkner in the Department of English during his tenure as Writer-in-Residence, are also co-authors of The Fiction of J. D. Salinger *(1958). Mr. Blotner has published* The Political Novel *(1955) and articles on modern literature, including one on Faulkner. An assistant professor at the University of Virginia, he recently completed a year as Fulbright Fellow at the University of Copenhagen. Mr. Gwynn is now Professor of English and Chairman of the Department of English at Trinity College, Connecticut. Co-editor of* The Case for Poetry: A New Anthology *(1954), he is the author of* Sturge Moore and the Life of Art *(1951) and of articles on Victorian and modern literature, two of which deal with Faulkner's works. He has been editor of* College English *magazine since 1955.*

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Preface

From February to June of 1957 and 1958, William Faulkner was Writer-in-Residence at the University of Virginia under a grant from the Emily Clark Balch Fund for American Literature. As Mr. Faulkner himself expressed it, the grant furnished him with a house to live in and someone to clean it, making his association with the University not that of a professor but rather "the mutually voluntary one of a guest accepting and returning the amenities of guesthood."

During these periods—except for short trips to Greece, to Princeton, and to Mississippi—Mr. Faulkner held thirty-seven group conferences and an uncounted number of individual office meetings with students and staff of the University. He encouraged groups to ask questions about his writing and indeed about anything, which resulted in his answering publicly over two thousand queries on everything from spelling to the nature of man. Almost every word spoken in the group conferences was recorded on tape, now deposited in the Alderman Library of the University. Because a complete transcript of this 40,000-foot record would have been prohibitively long, repetitive, and occasionally misleading, we have selected what seemed to us the most typical and significant questions and answers, indicating omissions by the ellipsis.

We first arranged the material by subject-matter for the convenience of readers, but we later agreed that the order most faithful to the fact and spirit of the sessions would be that in which the questions were actually asked and answered, and that an index would have to serve to link together comments on the same works and subjects. We have reproduced what Mr. Faulkner and his questioners said as accurately as possible, although the absence of studio recording conditions, the obscuring of parts of questions and answers by laughter or run-out tape, and the presence of natural human error in speaking and hearing have made a perfect transcription impossible. (After hiring persons to transcribe and check, we did the whole job over, and must therefore be held responsible for any imperfections.) We have restricted copy-editing chiefly to punctuation that attempts both to make meaning clear and to reproduce actual pauses in speech. We have consistently omitted the "Yes sir" and "Yes ma'am" with which Mr. Faulkner usually recognized

each of his questioners, and we have not attempted to render his striking regional dialect or individualized pronunciation, although it will linger long in our ears. We have of course omitted the author's preliminary readings from his works, as well as the many introductions, conclusions, and classroom rituals by teachers and officials.

Any reader familiar with Faulkner's work will find that many of his answers illuminate an understanding of particular novels and stories, while the total dialogue of course demonstrates the working of the writer's mind and the qualities of his character. On the other hand, a reader would be ill advised to treat these answers as consistently revealed truth. In Mr. Faulkner's own words, "Since his association with the University—and in fact with literature itself during this period—was not professorially appointive but instead was voluntary and invitational, the following is not the (at the moment of speaking) definite record of the ideas and opinions of a writer on life and literature, including his own work, but is rather the self-portrait of a man in motion who also happens to be a writer." No one man's view of an artist's work, least of all the writer's own, can comprehend all views. Furthermore, the writer's memory of words and purposes conceived many years ago must of simple human frailty be faulty and probably at times downright untrue, although Mr. Faulkner always made an effort to recall exactly the facts of his fiction and its design, and even took the trouble (in 1958) to re-read *Absalom, Absalom!* for this purpose. Then too, an artist who creates new life cannot always account for the process even if he wants to, and there are some secrets of creation that he is entitled to keep forever his own. Finally, any human being speaking in public finds himself unconsciously adapting his remarks to the comparative tone and intelligence of the questioners, the sequence of questions, the questions themselves and how many times he has previously been asked them, the weather, and the condition of his digestion. Mr. Faulkner's answers, in short, must be taken as a revelation of an artist's mind at a particular moment, in a particular place, operating as honestly and painstakingly as it can, to fulfill a particular purpose: "That these"—Mr. Faulkner again—"are questions answered without rehearsal or preparation, by a man old enough in the craft of the human heart to have learned that there are no definitive answers to anything, yet still young enough in spirit to believe that truth may still be found provided one seeks enough, tests and discards, and still tries again." At Mr. Faulkner's suggestion and in his phrasing, we warn the reader that any resemblance the ideas and opinions expressed here have to ideas and opinions Mr. Faulkner has held or expressed previously, and to the ideas and opinions which—since he intends to continue to live and to test and discard for some time

yet—he might hold or express in the future, is purely coincidental. Having made this admonition at length, we sum it up by simply urging readers to take the writer's comments for what they are worth.

The interested reader will note that the brief Session Three is re-created from our memory after a recording failure, but he should also know that another failure accounts for the omission of what would have been Session Thirty-Six (19 May 1958, First-Year English, on *As I Lay Dying*) and that the loss of one tape has prevented a final re-check of Session Fourteen. A version of Session Fifteen was printed in *The University of Virginia Magazine* for February 1957 and Spring 1958, and the address "A Word to Virginians" appeared in the Spring 1958 issue. A version of Session Eight was printed in *College English* for October 1957. The address "A Word to Young Writers" that begins Session Twenty-Seven appears here for the first time.

For funds to make the whole project possible, we are grateful to the University of Virginia's Research Committee, Professor C. Julian Bishko, Chairman; to the administrative officers President Colgate W. Darden, Jr. and Comptroller Vincent Shea; and to the Director of the University of Virginia Press, Mr. Charles E. Moran, Jr. For advice we are grateful to Mr. Faulkner's editor and friend, the late Saxe Commins. We are of course indebted to the dozens of here nameless students, teachers, and visitors who asked the questions that drew the answers. The greatest debt—the one to be repaid only by generations of present and future readers of his work—is finally to William Faulkner, whose special role we have tried to signify in our dedication.

Frederick L. Gwynn
Joseph L. Blotner

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unless, as I said, I could start over and write the book again and that can't be.

. . .

Q. Mr. Faulkner, I am interested in the symbolism in *The Sound and the Fury,* and I wasn't able to figure exactly the significance of the shadow symbol in Quentin. It's referred to over and over again: he steps in the shadow, shadow is before him, the shadow is often after him. Well then, what is the significance of this shadow?

A. That wasn't a deliberate symbolism. I would say that that shadow that stayed on his mind so much was foreknowledge of his own death, that he was—Death is here, shall I step into it, or shall I step away from it a little longer? I won't escape it, but shall I accept it now or shall I put it off until next Friday? I think that if it had any reason that must have been it.

. . .

Q. Sir, what sort of symbol was the snake? We discussed that in both *The Bear* and in "Red Leaves."

A. Oh, the snake is the old grandfather, the old fallen angel, the unregenerate immortal. The good and shining angel ain't very interesting . . . .

Q. Sir, what book would you advise a person to read first of yours?

A. Well, that's not a fair question to ask me because I would like anyone to try the one that I love the best, which is a poor one to start on. If you are asking me to give an objective answer I would say maybe *The Unvanquished.*

Q. Why would you select that one?

A. Because it's easy to read. Compared to the others, I mean . . . .

. . .

Q. Mr. Faulkner, I'd like to ask you about Quentin and his relationship with his father. I think many readers get the impression that Quentin is the way he is to a large extent because of his father's lack of values, or the fact that he doesn't seem to pass down to his son many values that will sustain him. Do you think that Quentin winds up the way

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he does primarily because of that, or are we meant to see, would you say, that the action that comes primarily from what he is, abetted by what he gets from his father?

A. The action as portrayed by Quentin was transmitted to him through his father. There was a basic failure before that. The grandfather had been a failed brigadier twice in the Civil War. It was the—the basic failure Quentin inherited through his father, or beyond his father. It was a—something had happened somewhere between the first Compson and Quentin. The first Compson was a bold ruthless man who came into Mississippi as a free forester to grasp where and when he could and wanted to, and established what should have been a princely line, and that princely line decayed.

Q. Sir, how do you feel about your books after they have gone to press? Do you reread them and puzzle over them . . .?

A. No, I don't because by that time I know the book was not as good as it should have been and so I'm usually busy on another one.

Q. As a general rule, you never re-read?

A. No, that's one book the writer don't have to read any more.

. . .

Q. Mr. Faulkner, you speak of writing the one great book but in your own works you keep returning to this fictitious county you've made. You don't consider that a pageant, the whole work, from the Indians through the early settlers—?

A. No, it was not my intention to write a pageant of a county, I simply was using the quickest tool to hand. I was using what I knew best, which was the locale where I was born and had lived most of my life. That was just like the carpenter building the fence—he uses the nearest hammer. Only I didn't realize myself that I was creating a pageantry of a particular part of the earth. That just simplified things to me.

. . .

Q. In *The Bear,* Mr. Faulkner, many readers come across Part Four and find it written in quite a different style than the other parts and the conclusion—well, it gets far ahead in years beyond Part Five. Was there any conscious plan in that?

A. Only this: *The Bear* was a part of a novel. That novel was—happened to be composed of more or less complete stories, but it was held together by one family, the Negro and the white phase of the same family, same people. *The Bear* was just a part of that—of a novel.

Q. *Go Down, Moses?*

A. Yes.

Q. So that it was all right for Ike to think ahead . . . to his thirty-fifth year.

A. Yes, that's right, because the rest of the book was a part of his past too. To have taken that story out to print it alone I have always removed that part, which I have done.

Q. Yes, some of the textbooks do that.

A. As a short story, a long short story, it has no part in it, but to me *The Bear* is part of the novel, just as a chapter in the novel.

. . .

Q. In what period of development did you write that book of poems, *A Green Bough?*

A. That was written at the time when you write poetry, which is seventeen, eighteen, nineteen—when you write poetry just for the pleasure of writing poetry and you don't think of printing it until later. It may be—I've often thought that I wrote the novels because I found I couldn't write the poetry, that maybe I wanted to be a poet, maybe I think of myself as a poet, and I failed at that, I couldn't write poetry, so I did the next best thing.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, in your speech at Stockholm you expressed great faith in mankind . . . not only to endure but prevail . . . . Do you think that's the impression the average reader would get after reading *The Sound and the Fury?*

A. I can't answer that because I don't know what the average reader gets from reading the book. I agree that what I tried to say I failed to say, and I never have had time to read reviews so I don't know what impression people might get from the book. But in my opinion, yes, that is what I was talking about in all the books, and I failed to say it. I agree

with you, I did fail. But that was what I was trying to say—that man will prevail, will endure because he is capable of compassion and honor and pride and endurance.

. . .

Q. Sir, Hawthorne seemed to have found trouble in creating good characters, whereas his more or less bad characters stand out as works of art. Do you think that is a problem with all writers, that it's harder to create a good character than an evil one?

A. It's possible that that's inherent in human nature, not so much in the character of writers but in human nature itself, that it's easier to conceive of evil than of good or to make—that evil is easier to make believable, credible, than good.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, when you say man has prevailed do you mean individual man has prevailed or group man?

A. Man as a part of life.

Q. In Quentin, for instance, [he] seemed to have the cards stacked against him . . . it seems to be inherently impossible, and I wondered . . . .

A. True, and his mother wasn't much good and he had an idiot brother, and yet in that whole family there was Dilsey that held the whole thing together and would continue to hold the whole thing together for no reward, that the will of man to prevail will even take the nether channel of the black man, black race, before it will relinquish, succumb, be defeated.

. . .

Q. Well, sir, you seem to have us believe in . . . the ultimate goodness of man, that he will come through in spite of all. How do you explain the sum of mass brutality, the things we practice on each other, the horrible things that take place in our life, including the lines of religion and our politics?

A. I didn't say in the ultimate goodness of man, I said only that man will prevail and will—and in order to prevail he has got to . . . [try to be good]. As to whether he will stay on the earth long enough to attain ultimate goodness, nobody knows. But he does improve, since the only alternative to progress is death. And we can see the little children don't have to work, a merchant can't sell you poisoned food. They are minor im-

provements but they are improvements. Nobody is hanged for stealing bread any more. People are not put in jail for debt. It's some improvement—it's not a great deal, I grant you, as matched against atomic bombs and things like that. But it's some improvement. Man is improved.

Q. You don't feel that mass manipulation by a fanatic along ideological and political lines will negate all this?

A. No, I don't. That to me is part of the ferment of man's immortality—that these people, the nuts, are necessary too.

Q. Do you think that man will prevail against destroying himself . . . ?

A. I think he will prevail against his own self-destruction, yes.

Q. What about the forces of nature . . . ?

A. Well, unless the earth gets sick and tired of him like an old dog and just scratches him off like the old dog does fleas.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, what do you think is man's most important tool—the mind or the heart . . . ?

A. I don't have much confidence in the mind. I think that here is where the shoe fits, that the mind lets you down sooner or later, but this doesn't.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, I've been very much interested in what it seems to me you did—maybe you didn't—in *The Sound and the Fury,* in the character of Caddy. To me she is a very sympathetic character, perhaps the most sympathetic white woman in the book, and yet we get pictures of her only through someone else's comments and most of these comments are quite [?] and wouldn't lead you to admire her on the surface, and yet I do. Did you mean for us to have this feeling for Caddy, and if so, how did you go about reducing her to the negative picture we get of her?

A. To me she was the beautiful one, she was my heart's darling. That's what I wrote the book about and I used the tools which seemed to me the proper tools to try to tell, try to draw the picture of Caddy.

Q. Mr. Faulkner, we've got a poker player over here, Mr. Jordan, who's holding back on a question I'm dying to hear the answer to.

A. Let's have it.

Q. Well, I was wondering in the short story "Was" why Mr. Hubert does not call Uncle Bud. It seems to me that must be the point of the story, and yet no one could understand why he did not call him.

A. I'll have to look at that page again. I don't remember exactly—

Q. He looks up and sees that Tomey's Turl is dealing the cards.

A. Oh, Tomey's Turl wants to be free, and so Tomey's Turl has dealt the right card to the right one, and Mr. Hubert knows that. As soon as he sees that Tomey's Turl was the one that dealt the cards, he knows that he's beat.

Q. But Tomey's Turl stood to win either way, didn't he? . . .

A. No, he was—I don't remember the story too well, but I don't think so. That Tomey's Turl had a stake in that game, too. As I remember it, Hubert Beauchamp would have taken his brother—no, what are the names? I can't even remember the names.

Q. Buck and Buddy.

A. Yes, Buck would have taken Buddy out of the clutches of Miss—what's her name?

Q. Sophonsiba.

A. —Sophonsiba if he had won. And if that had happened then he would have taken Tomey's Turl back with him away from Tomey's Turl's girl, so if Buck lost, then Miss Sophonsiba would take Tomey's Turl's girl home with her. Tomey's Turl was playing for his sweetheart. Yes, that's what the story was, I think.

. . .

Q. I have another question about *The Bear*. In the final scene of *The Bear*, Boon is sitting under the tree with the squirrels, doing something with his shotgun. It's not clear to

me whether he is destroying his shotgun or trying to put it back together.

A. It had jammed. He was trying to get a jammed shell out to make it fire, and he didn't want anybody else to shoot the squirrels. He was under the tree where the squirrels couldn't get out of it and he didn't want anybody else to shoot the squirrels until he could get his gun fixed.

. . .

Q. . . . *The Wild Palms* is so very interesting. I think the other, *Old Man,* is a bit of a struggle.

A. Well, you may be right. As I say, they all failed, and maybe it was a mistake to dovetail two of them together that way, but to me it seemed that it was necessary to counterpoint the story of Harry and Charlotte, which I did with the complete antithesis—a man that had a woman he didn't want and was going into infinite trouble even as far as going to jail to get rid of her.

Q. I have a couple of questions about the early Indian stories, about "Red Leaves." Did Doom in your mind, did he wreck the steamboat and maybe kill this man David Callicoat, whose name he took? Did he have some notion of getting that steamboat eventually which he finally picked up and transported twelve miles inland?

A. No, the steamboat simply got too far up the river and stayed too long and when the water fell in the late summer, it couldn't get out again, and so the owners of it just took the valuable machinery out and left the hulk there and Doom decided that would make a nice addition to his house and so he had his people drag it out of the river and across to the plantation.

Q. Did you ever hear of anyone's really ever doing that?

A. No.

Q. Were these Chickasaws ever known to be cannibals? There's some mention of how human flesh may have tasted between two of them once.

A. No, there's no record, but then it's—who's to say

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