

by Cleanth Brooks

WILLIAM FAULKNER
THE YOKNAPATAWPHA COUNTRY

*New Haven and London
Yale University Press*

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To Robert Penn Warren

Preface

THIS VOLUME attempts to deal with William Faulkner's characteristic world, the world of Yoknapatawpha County. How does one go about describing a world? Is there an inevitable way or even one best way? I think not, and the disposition of the chapters of this book represents no more than a possible—and I hope useful—way to explore Faulkner's world.

What I have rejected out of hand is any purely chronological arrangement. The order in which Faulkner wrote these novels and stories does not necessarily constitute the best order in which to discuss them. I have preferred to feel my way into the world of Yoknapatawpha and to let my book grow accordingly. But the arrangement of the chapters that follow is not haphazard.

The first three chapters are introductory. "Faulkner, the Provincial" attempts to connect Faulkner with the other provincial writers of our time and to suggest the relation of his special world to that of modern man. "The Plain People" provides some comment on the least understood stratum in Faulkner's social structure. (The relation to the whole society of the other strata—the older families of planter stock and even the Negroes—is less likely to be misunderstood.) This large intermediate category, with its various subsections, is so important to his novels that I believe it deserves some detailed consideration at the beginning.

Although the next chapter, "Faulkner as Nature Poet," deals with material derived from novels to be discussed later in the book, especially *The Hamlet* and *Go Down, Moses*, there is something to be said for examining that material in its own right, at

the start, for it has to do with elements that form the background of much of Faulkner's fiction and is closely related to his attitude toward ethics and religion.

The first novel to be considered as a work in itself is *Light in August*, which is not only one of Faulkner's masterpieces—and I have preferred to begin with a mature work—but a novel in which many of the characteristic topics and themes of his fiction appear. To mention only a few: there is the role of the community, the theme of isolation and alienation, Puritanism under the hot Southern sun, the tension between the masculine and feminine principles, and the relation of the characters to the past. There is a great advantage in dealing with such themes as they interrelate with one another in a concrete work, rather than as isolated and abstract topics.

"The Old Order" (*The Unvanquished*) grows out of some of the themes considered in the study of *Light in August*, and in turn points toward Chapters 6 (*Sartoris*) and 7 (*Sanctuary*). In these three novels one sees, among other things, the contrast between the old order and the new, and the pressures exerted upon various individuals by the crumbling of the old and the shift from the past to the present.

The theme of honor, as developed in *The Unvanquished*, *Sartoris*, and *Sanctuary*, is transposed into the world of the poor white in the discussion of *As I Lay Dying*, Chapter 8. The poor white also dominates the next series of novels—*The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion*—though with *The Town*, in particular, other elements come into play when both the poorer whites and the members of the old aristocracy move into town and adopt town ways.

With Chapter 12, "The Story of the McCaslins," we return to an older period, to the countryside, and especially to the world of the Negro, or at least a world in which the Negro occupies an important place. Next, "The Community in Action" brings the story of one of the McCaslins, a Negro McCaslin, up to the present, and provides still another modulation on the themes of honor and the community.

Chapter 14, "History and the Sense of the Tragic" (*Absalom*,

Absalom!), takes into account the special heritage of the South, with the presence of the Negro, the powerful pressure of family and community, and the past experienced not only as a precious heritage but as a crippling burden. The young man of the present, Quentin Compson, who is fascinated by the story of Thomas Sutpen and attempts to make some sense of it, has great difficulty in making sense of his own life and times. In *The Sound and the Fury*, discussed in the fifteenth chapter, we find Quentin involved with the disintegration of his own family and the apparent meaninglessness of the modern world, in which the old values are gone, and with them, the possibility of any heroic action.

Absalom, Absalom! and *The Sound and the Fury* are generally regarded as Faulkner's greatest works, and there is something to be said for ending with an account of these masterpieces. Yet since my book is essentially a study of Faulkner's world, an examination of *The Reivers* provides an appropriate conclusion to it; for though Faulkner's last novel does not give us his world in its tragic depth, it does exhibit its breadth and range. Here, more than in any other Faulkner novel I can think of, the inhabitants of country, town, and city, whether they are Negroes, plain people, or members of the old aristocracy, are presented in all their various gradations. The richness and variety of Faulkner's world has received no more complete expression.

In a subsequent book I plan to deal with many aspects of Faulkner's work that have had to be omitted here, including the novels and stories which lie outside of the Yoknapatawpha County cycle. There I shall concentrate on Faulkner's development as an artist—his beginnings, the forging of his style, and the working out of the special fictional techniques associated with his name. In this connection I mean to examine some of the earlier drafts of his novels and to discuss his process of revision with reference to style and structure.

There remains the pleasant task of acknowledging the encouragement and assistance given by various groups and individuals. I wish to speak my thanks to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for a grant which enabled me to undertake this study, and to Random House, Inc., for permission to quote from

PREFACE

the Faulkner texts. I owe thanks also to Malcolm Cowley, whose introduction to *The Portable Faulkner* gave powerful impetus and direction to the serious criticism of Faulkner; to Linton Massey, Faulkner scholar and collector, who has been particularly helpful in many matters; to John Cook Wyllie, librarian of the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia, for various favors; to Mrs. Ann Bowden, librarian of the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas; to the Committee on the Use of Literary and Historical Manuscripts for permission to quote from the manuscript of *Absalom, Absalom!* in the University of Texas Library; to Mrs. Paul D. Summers, Jr., for her kind permission to quote from the manuscript and typescript of *Sartoris*; to Hervey and Anna Lewis for special services, including the preparation of the genealogical charts; and to Albert Erskine of Random House, with whom my conversations about Faulkner began many years before he became Faulkner's editor—conversations which have continued to my benefit.

Some of the chapters of this book had the advantage of a reading and criticism by Andrew Lytle, editor of *The Sewanee Review*, who has been especially perceptive as to Faulkner's conception of the social structure of the South, and by Robert Penn Warren, whose early essay on Faulkner proved to be seminal and remains today one of the best pieces of Faulkner criticism ever written.

Northford, Connecticut
July 1963

CLEANTH BROOKS

Editions Cited

I HAVE GIVEN page references where possible to Modern Library editions of the novels including two Modern Library paperbounds (though I have avoided citing the flimsier paperbound reprints). I have, however, taken care to check the quotations from the Modern Library edition of *Sanctuary* against the 1962 edition of that work, which incorporates corrections of the text.

The Modern Library edition is cited for the following books, listed here with the dates of first publication and original publishers:

The Sound and the Fury, New York, Jonathan Cape, Harrison Smith, 1929

As I Lay Dying, New York, Jonathan Cape, Harrison Smith, 1930
(The ML edition includes *The Sound and the Fury* in the same volume.)

Sanctuary, New York, Jonathan Cape, Harrison Smith, 1931

Light in August, New York, Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, 1932

Absalom, Absalom!, New York, Random House, 1936

The Hamlet, New York, Random House, 1940

Go Down, Moses, New York, Random House, 1942

The Vintage paperbound edition, which includes some revisions by the author, is cited for *The Town* (first publication: New York, Random House, 1957).

Page references to the following books refer to the first editions:

Soldiers' Pay, New York, Boni and Liveright, 1926

Mosquitoes, New York, Boni and Liveright, 1927

Sartoris, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929
Pylon, New York, Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, 1935
The Unvanquished, New York, Random House, 1938
The Wild Palms, New York, Random House, 1939
Intruder in the Dust, New York, Random House, 1948
Knight's Gambit, New York, Random House, 1949
Requiem for a Nun, New York, Random House, 1951
A Fable, New York, Random House, 1954
The Mansion, New York, Random House, 1959
The Reivers, New York, Random House, 1962

"Smoke," "Monk," "Hand upon the Waters," "Tomorrow," "An Error in Chemistry," and "Knight's Gambit" are included in *Knight's Gambit*.

Page numbers after quotations from the stories refer to *The Collected Stories*, New York, Random House, 1950. "Was," "The Fire and the Hearth," "Pantaloons in Black," "The Old People," "The Bear," "Delta Autumn," and "Go Down, Moses" are sections of *Go Down, Moses*, which Faulkner regarded as a novel rather than a collection of stories. Page references to all other stories are to *The Collected Stories* except for "Race at Morning" (which is included in *Big Woods*, New York, Random House, 1955) and the three following stories, which have never been collected:

"Thrift," *The Saturday Evening Post*, 203, September 6, 1930
Idyll in the Desert, New York, Random House, 1931
Miss Zilphia Gant, Dallas, The Book Club of Dallas, 1932

The editions cited in the Index of Characters are those cited in the text. I have not given page references in the Index to stories which were later integrated into the novels or to materials reprinted in *Big Woods*.

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Faulkner the Provincial

MOST READERS associate William Faulkner with the South quite as automatically as they associate Thomas Hardy with Wessex, Robert Frost with northern New England, and William Butler Yeats with Ireland, and perhaps more naturally than they associate Dylan Thomas with Wales. The regions and cultures to which these writers are linked differ in character, but they all stand in sharp contrast to the culture of the great world cities of the twentieth century. They have in common a basically agricultural economy, a life of farms, villages, and small towns, an old-fashioned set of values, and a still vital religion with its cult, creed, and basic norms of conduct. Wessex is very different from Sligo; New Hampshire, from North Mississippi. But for all their differences, each provides its author with a vantage point from which to criticize, directly or perhaps merely by implication, the powerful metropolitan culture.

Thus Robert Frost has characteristically taken for his vantage point not the more populous, heavily urbanized southern half of New England but the gaunt, old-fashioned, and relatively poverty-stricken region of northern New England. It is a grave injustice to regard Frost as a local colorist, exploiting the attraction that the quaint and the folksy hold for a metropolitan audience. He can be, and has been, so misunderstood, but Frost is making a serious criticism of twentieth-century man, and his loving elaboration of the life of New Hampshire is no mere indulgence in pic-

turesque sentimentality or the comedy of the American rustic.

So it is also with Yeats, whose Ireland stands over against London much as Faulkner's South stands over against New York. The parallels between the cultural situations of these two very different men are so interesting that they deserve detailed illustration. Like Yeats, Faulkner benefited immeasurably from the fact that his own country has shown a long cultural lag behind great commercial and intellectual centers like London and New York. Like Yeats again, Faulkner's sense of history and his sense of participation in a living tradition have been of the utmost importance. Faulkner's work, like that of the great Irish poet, embodies a criticism of the prevailing commercial and urban culture, a criticism made from the standpoint of a provincial and traditional culture.

An Irishman like Sean O'Faolain senses at once the similarity between the two provincial cultures (even though O'Faolain manages to misunderstand the use that Faulkner makes of his). From "what little I have seen of Mississippi," O'Faolain writes,

and [from] all I have read about it, life there sounds very much like life in County Cork. There is the same passionate provincialism; the same local patriotism; the same southern nationalism—those long explicit speeches of Gavin Stevens in *Intruder in the Dust* might, *mutatis mutandis*, be uttered by a southern Irishman—the same feeling that whatever happens in Ballydehob or in Jefferson has never happened anywhere else before, and is more important than anything that happened in any period of history in any part of the cosmos; there is the same vanity of an old race; the same gnawing sense of old defeat; the same capacity for intense hatred; a good deal of the same harsh folk-humor; the same acidity; the same oscillation between unbounded self-confidence and total despair; the same escape through sport and drink.¹

Such general likenesses are also discernible from this side of the Atlantic. Any Southerner who reads Yeats' *Autobiographies*

1. *The Vanishing Hero* (New York, Universal Library, 1957), p. 75.

is bound to be startled, over and over again, by the analogies between Yeats' "literary situation" and that of the Southern author: the strength to be gained from the writer's sense of belonging to a living community and the special focus upon the world bestowed by one's having a precise location in time and in history. But as the *Autobiographies* show, Yeats learned to distrust the sentimental patriot whose notions of literature worked through all the obvious symbols—shamrocks, pepper pots made in the shape of Irish round towers, harps, and books with green covers.² (In the South, for shamrocks and round towers read magnolias and Greek-revival porticoes.) Yeats learned too the fact that one's worst literary enemies are sometimes to be found among one's own people. He once consoled an English friend whose book of poems had been soundly trounced in a Dublin newspaper by telling her that Dublin reviews were to be discounted; for years he had instructed his London publishers not to send his books to the Dublin papers for review. In London he could take his chance, for the reviewer, if sometimes uncomprehending, had no special cause to serve. But too often the Dublin journalist had to prove his cosmopolitanism by giving the back of his hand to an Irish book.³ In the last fifty years Southern authors also have discovered that their severest critics were to be found at home in the person of reviewers who meant to show themselves just as emancipated as the New York critics.

Through loyalty to his Irish provincialism—though it was never a blind loyalty—Yeats converted potential weakness into a position of strength. Faulkner has done something comparable, making the provincial society out of which he comes, and with which so much of his fiction deals, a positive resource—an instrument for developing and refining his meaning. But many readers evidently regard Faulkner's provincial subject matter as a sheer liability, or else they totally misconceive what he does with it. After all, what can a provincial have to say of any consequence to modern industrial man living in an age of electronics and nuclear power? Faulkner is preoccupied with the past and with a rural

2. *Autobiographies* (New York, 1927), pp. 250-54.

3. Allan Wade, ed., *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (New York, 1955), p. 860.

setting, and what possible value can these have except perhaps as negative object lessons? Faulkner's treatment of history is, then, a confirmation of our disowning the past, Faulkner's famous county (obviously a rural slum) a way of reminding us how far we have progressed.

If one trusts one's impression of the bulk of Faulkner criticism, these would seem to be typical ways in which Faulkner is now being read. Much of it takes his fiction to be sociology—an amateur and nonacademic sociology characterized by powerful moral overtones. There is in such criticism a surreptitious commerce between sociological-historical fact and fictional meaning. Particular insights and moral judgments that the critic has derived from fictional contexts are smuggled across the frontier into the realm of historical fact and become generalizations about Southern culture. They are then cited as historical "fact" to prove the accuracy of the sweeping judgments of the Southern scene that are attributed to Faulkner.

Such shady methodological transactions are usually prompted by the highest motives. Whether they know it or not, most authors of Faulkner criticism are serious moralists, and they recognize that Faulkner is, in his own way, a moralist too. They want to take him seriously and this means that they are very much concerned with the factual substratum of Faulkner's mythical county.

In view of the situation, it might be wise to take a look at Faulkner's facts—at Faulkner as the sociologist of north Mississippi. For this purpose, one of the most useful articles I have ever encountered is that published a few years ago by Dr. Winthrop Tilley in the *American Journal of Mental Deficiency*.⁴ In an article entitled "The Idiot Boy in Mississippi," he undertook to show that Benjy Compson of *The Sound and the Fury* is merely a "stuffed idiot," a "fabricated literary idiot," quite incredible on any literal level. Tilley maintains that on the basis of clinical evidence most idiots are "phlegmatic, indifferent, and comparatively unexcitable." Moreover, they are "low-gearred sexually." Tilley finds it most unlikely that Faulkner's Benjy would ever have displayed toward the schoolgirls passing by his house the sexual interest which prompted his brother Jason to have him gelded.

4. 59 (1955), 374-77.

Tilley finds that Faulkner is just as wide of the legal facts. He points out that there are cogent reasons for doubting that Benjy's gelding would ever have been permitted. He cites the Mississippi code which makes mayhem a penitentiary offence, and he adds a footnote pointing out that though Mississippi did in 1928 (fifteen years after Benjy's alleged gelding) legalize sterilization for "certain institutionalized individuals," "castration was specifically forbidden in the statute. Sec. 6957." Besides, Benjy would have had to be sent to the State School for the Feeble Minded at Ellisville, Mississippi, the state code (see Section 6907) specifically stipulating that "mere idiots" shall not be admitted to the institution at Jackson.

All of this is sufficiently devastating evidence of how little Faulkner's story of the life and times of Benjy Compson is to be taken as a sound medical and legal account of what can happen to idiots in Mississippi. Though the present case is extreme, anything calculated to shake the reader's confidence in the literal accuracy of Faulkner's "facts" is probably to be commended. Faulkner's novels have too often been read not as fiction but as factual accounts, with the notion that they represent only slightly distorted pictures of Southern rural and small-town life.

But Dr. Tilley wrote his article not so much in defense of the good name of the state of Mississippi as in derogation of Faulkner's art, for he argues that Faulkner's failure to get his facts straight has seriously injured his novel. He can allow to *The Sound and the Fury* no higher praise than "interesting failure." The character of Benjy, he says, is too implausible to carry the fictional weight placed upon him.

This judgment is the more interesting in that most admirers of Faulkner would put *The Sound and the Fury* among his three or four finest novels, and many would account it—as apparently Faulkner himself did—his masterpiece. Moreover, many readers have felt Benjy to be quite convincing—including a colleague of mine who is a psychoanalyst. One does not know, he says, what really goes on in an idiot's mind, but Faulkner's dramatization of what goes on in Benjy's seems to him a plausible guess and in any case constitutes a convincing imaginative account.

What is of basic concern here is what is always of concern in

literature: the relation of truth of fact to aesthetic value—"truth of reference" to "truth of coherence." The relationship between the two truths is rarely a simple one. It is not a simple one in Faulkner's novels. Faulkner critics are prone to confuse matters by saying that since the fiction is good, the "facts" must be correct, or that since the facts are incorrect, the fiction is bound to be poor. Faulkner's novels and stories, properly read, can doubtless tell us a great deal about the South, but Faulkner is primarily an artist. His reader will have to respect the mode of fiction and not transgress its limitations if he is to understand from it the facts about the South—that is, he must be able to sense what is typical and what is exceptional, what is normal and what is an aberration. He can scarcely make these discriminations unless he is prepared to see what Faulkner is doing with his "facts."

This misplaced stress upon realism might seem to find its proper corrective in a compensating stress upon symbolism—not facts but what they point to, not Faulkner as sociologist but Faulkner as symbolist poet. Surely, such a general emphasis is sound, for no great literature is to be taken just literally, and even the simplest literature is symbolic in the sense that it is universal, representative, and finally exhibits Man, not merely individual men. But a good deal of Faulkner criticism has to be described as little better than symbol-mongering—and I mean by the term something morbid, excessive, and obsessed, a grotesque parody of anything like an adequate, careful reading. It magnifies details irresponsibly; it feverishly prospects for possible symbols and then forces them beyond the needs of the story. It views the novel not as a responsible context with its own network of interrelations but as a sort of grab bag out of which particular symbols can be drawn.

The symbol-mongers have been busy with Benjy, the idiot of *The Sound and the Fury*. Mrs. Compson, his mother, is a vain and superficial woman who feels it necessary to assert from time to time that her family is as good as that into which she has married. When it becomes plain that her child is condemned to idiocy, she insists upon changing his name from Maury to Benjy,