

CLEANTH BROOKS

WILLIAM  
FAULKNER

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Toward Yoknapatawpha  
and Beyond



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*Cleanth Brooks*

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AND BEYOND

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## Contents

Preface	ix
Editions Cited	xvi
1. Faulkner's Poetry	1
2. Early Romantic Prose	32
3. A Payment Deferred ( <i>Soldiers' Pay</i> )	67
4. Sketches, Early Stories, and an Abortive Novel	100
5. A Fine Volley of Words ( <i>Mosquitoes</i> )	129
6. First Forays into Yoknapatawpha County	152
7. People Without a Past ( <i>Pylon</i> )	178
8. A Tale of Two Innocents ( <i>The Wild Palms</i> )	205
9. Man's Fate and Man's Hope ( <i>A Fable</i> )	230
10. Faulkner on Time and History	251
<i>Appendixes</i>	
A. Thomas Sutpen: A Representative Southern Planter?	283
B. The Narrative Structure of <i>Absalom, Absalom!</i>	301
C. Faulkner and W. B. Yeats	329
Notes	345
Index	431



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## Preface

THE EARLY CAREER of William Faulkner is essentially the story of a young romantic, whose imagination was filled with tales of derring-do, of knights errant and their lovely ladies; with landscapes in which fauns and nymphs danced to the music of the pipes of Pan; and with the search for an infinite beauty and a love too ethereal for this earth.

There should be nothing surprising about this. As a Southern boy, growing up some fifty miles north of Faulkner's home town early in the century, I had my own head filled with such matters. Though perhaps the romantic dream had a special hold on that part of our country, I do not mean to imply that such romantic reading was necessarily confined to the South. John E. Mack in his recently published book on T. E. Lawrence remarks that "the imaginations of the educated [of the time in England as well as America] were filled with Chaucer, Malory, William Morris, Tennyson's *Idylls*, Jean Froissart, the *Chansons de geste*, and the ethic of courtly love." Not every one of the texts Mack mentions was necessarily known to Faulkner; yet to the end of his career references to Guinevere, Lancelot, Tristan, Iseult, Camelot, and Carcassonne attest the thoroughness with which a romantic medievalism had tintured his imagination. That he had also absorbed the ethic of courtly love is easily verified.

As might be expected, the young Faulkner was also well ac-

## PREFACE

quainted with the English poets of the 'nineties such as Oscar Wilde, A. E. Housman, and the early Yeats. What is rather surprising is his interest in the French writers of the middle and late nineteenth century—Gautier, Rostand, Baudelaire, Balzac, Verlaine, and Mallarmé.

One would expect, of course, that he would also be reading the British and American poets and novelists of the second and third decades of this century, and indeed he was. He reviewed several of them and mentioned several others in articles published in the University of Mississippi college newspaper. The pedestrian realism of some of the American authors obviously grated on his romantic sensibility. On one occasion he referred to "Mr. Vachel Lindsay with his tin pan and iron spoon" and to "Mr. Carl Sandburg with his sentimental Chicago propaganda." Yet by the early 1920s Faulkner was expressing in his own work certain anti-romantic attitudes. He had read James Branch Cabell's cynical re-handlings of medieval romance and had absorbed something of Cabell's style and attitude. One finds clear echoes of *Jurgen* in *Mayday* (1926), and borrowings from *Jurgen* recur until almost the end of Faulkner's literary career.

Another twentieth-century anti-romantic, of a very different caliber, exercised an even more significant influence on Faulkner. I refer to T. S. Eliot, whose work Faulkner seems to have discovered even earlier than Cabell's. "Anti-romantic" may seem too absolute a label to affix to Eliot, but one might grant the contention that Eliot has his own strain of romanticism and still maintain the argument I am making here. For Eliot represented an attitude and a method that was almost wholly at odds with what Faulkner had found in the early Yeats or in Oscar Wilde, and though Eliot could and did adopt certain modes from a writer like Gautier, what he borrowed was something other than what Faulkner borrowed from Gautier in *Mosquitoes*.

Faulkner also quite early discovered the work of James Joyce, and Joyce's influence, like Eliot's, ran counter to the old-fashioned romanticism in which Faulkner had been nurtured. If for Faulkner these modernist writers did not obliterate his romantic sensibility, and they did not, nevertheless their work suggested ways

in which John Keats's notion of what art should be, an ideal that Faulkner never gave up, could be made to survive even in the modern world. Eliot and Joyce, we may say, provided Faulkner with the proper alloy wherewith to give tensile strength and a cutting edge to what might have proved in its purer state too soft a metal for Faulkner's purposes.

Mention of Eliot and Joyce brings up another and more important aspect of Faulkner's literary apprenticeship. The issue soon became not simply, or even primarily, youthful romanticism versus realism, but localism versus a universal (perhaps in this context best called an "international") literature. Faulkner's invention of Yoknapatawpha County—whether we translate invention as *discovery* or *creation*—was crucial to his career as a writer. His mythical county provided him with a social context in which what was healthiest in his romanticism could live in fruitful tension with his realistic and detailed knowledge of the men and manners of his own land. In Yoknapatawpha, the nymphs and fauns of his early imagination take on flesh and blood. That is one side of the equation. But the other side is indeed of equal consequence: the realistic, earthy life of Yoknapatawpha could be invested with an aura of the imagination, a mythic quality that could give vital import to what otherwise would have proved merely drab and pedestrian.

So much for the importance of Yoknapatawpha County in preventing the young writer's losing himself in a baseless dream world. Yoknapatawpha, however, offered a risk of its own: the risk of turning him into a mere local colorist, exploiting the oddities of a provincial scene for the titillation and amusement of a condescending "outside" world. From this danger the young writer's early and intelligent interest in writers like Joyce and Eliot probably saved him. Faulkner wrote some wonderful comedy and he meant for his reader to enjoy the antics of his more grotesque characters. But he takes his Yoknapatawpha world with entire seriousness. He does not condescend to it, nor does he allow his readers to condescend. The issues dealt with in his Yoknapatawpha novels ultimately concern universal human nature and they have reference to the world of the present. Faulkner uses Yoknapataw-

## PREFACE

pha as a special lens that allows us to view with illuminating magnification and emphasis our own modernity. Thus, the monstrous Flem Snopes is not merely a comic sketch to be laughed at and then dismissed, as a joke once heard is dismissed. Flem is funny, but he is no mere joke; he is a sinister deformation of universal human nature and a terrifying version of appetitive man, modern style.

The first six chapters of this book attempt to take the reader from Faulkner's earlier beginnings up to his formal entry into his now famous county. But though most of Faulkner work thenceforward was to have its setting in Yoknapatawpha County, three of his later novels (*Pylon*, *The Wild Palms*, and *A Fable*) do not, and they are worth discussing on several counts. In the first place, they reward thoughtful consideration because nothing that the mature Faulkner ever wrote is without interest, and because all three novels contain many passages of brilliant writing. In the second place, these novels, just because they do represent excursions beyond the bounds of Yoknapatawpha County, can tell us a great deal about its importance to Faulkner's art. It may be illuminating to see what he lost thereby as well as what he may have gained.

In the third place, the most explicit expositions of Faulkner's ideas about man, religion, love, the nature of the modern world, modern war, and the pressure of the machine on man's well-being occur in the novels discussed in chapters 7, 8, and 9. Accordingly, in the non-Yoknapatawpha novels the structural ideas can be made out in their very nakedness. Though we ought to be cautious in assuming that they represent Faulkner's personal beliefs, the very prominence that, wittingly or unwittingly, he has given them is a measure of the importance they held for him. Though it may be a fault in his art not to have accommodated them more fully to the drama of the narrative, the reader hot for certainties about what Faulkner "really believed" may welcome the fault. But if so, such readers ought to be cautioned: Faulkner, like most other artists, speaks his deepest truths when he speaks as an artist fully caught up in his art.

My concluding chapter (chapter 10) makes no claim to providing

a summary of Faulkner's philosophy. It does, however, deal with two of his major concepts, his special notion of time and of history. In discussing them, it draws upon the totality of Faulkner's work, and not merely on the non-Yoknapatawpha novels. Moreover, it interprets *history* in the most literal terms: it touches not merely upon Faulkner's interpretation of Southern history or of American history in general, but that of Man himself.

Such is the general plan of this volume. Though some years have elapsed since the publication of my first volume on Faulkner, I trust that this second volume will not seem too sharply inconsistent with the first. My hope is that, taken together, the two will provide, except for the short stories, a comprehensive account of Faulkner's verse, miscellaneous prose, and fiction. Readers who would like to follow the discussions in something like the order in which his books were written are referred to pages 429-30, where the contents of the two volumes are listed in chronological order.

During the last thirty years, so many books and articles on Faulkner have been published that few people can honestly claim that they have read and assimilated them all. I certainly can make no such claim. I have done no more than cope with the flood as best I could. A vigorous sampling indicates, however, that much of this vast output of scholarship and criticism is repetitious, that much is peripheral, that some of it is positively wrong-headed and perverse, but that a considerable amount is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand Faulkner's literary work. I trust that I have not overlooked too much of this truly valuable scholarship and criticism.

In the text and the notes in this volume I have acknowledged my indebtedness to specific articles and to more general studies, though I am aware that I have not taken cognizance of studies of the various Yoknapatawpha novels, especially those that were published subsequent to the appearance of *The Yoknapatawpha Country*.

Yet my references to some of their specific articles and books does not do justice to my indebtedness to a number of Faulkner scholars. In particular I would name Michael Millgate, whose *The*

## PREFACE

*Achievement of William Faulkner* was a pioneer work that possesses lasting value; Joseph Blotner, whose monumental *Faulkner* is a storehouse of facts to which I have obviously again and again had recourse; Carvel Collins, who has provided us with so many excellent editions of Faulkner's early work; and James B. Meriwether, who has for some years edited the annual Faulkner number of *The Mississippi Quarterly*, in which much newly discovered Faulkner material has been discussed and in which some of it was printed for the first time.

I wish also to express my thanks for two grants that have very materially helped me to complete this study. The first is a National Endowment for the Humanities Senior Fellowship; the second is a visiting research professorship at the University of South Carolina provided by the Southern Studies Program and the Lucy Hampton Bostick Foundation.

I wish also to express my thanks to those who manage the Faulkner collections located in several of our universities: Joan St. C. Crane, Curator of the American Literature Collections at the University of Virginia, for help in using the great collection of Faulkner MSS there; the late William B. Wisdom, for permission to make use of the unique Faulkner items in the Howard-Tilton Memorial Library at Tulane University, and Mrs. Ann S. Gwyn, who has charge of the Special Collections housed there; and Donald Gallup, Curator of American Literature at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, who has helped me especially with dating relevant Eliot and Pound items. With regard to all of the Faulkner manuscript materials, I owe special thanks to Mrs. Jill Faulkner Summers for her permission to quote from her father's manuscripts.

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XXII from *Last Poems* (1922) has been kindly granted by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

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C. B.

*Northford, Connecticut*

*11 August 1977*



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WITH REGARD TO the novels, the page references are to the first edition unless otherwise specified. In every case, however, the place, publisher, and date of the *first* edition is cited below.

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