

# The Writer in Critical Perspective

MR. FAULKNER has come out at the further end of both Puritanism and anti-Puritanism, and in the dry light of complete objectivity weighs his subjects for their pound or ounce of life with no predilection for "ought," no interest in "why," and no concern for significance. He is cruel with a cool and interested cruelty; he hates his Mississippi and his Memphis and all their works, with a hatred that is neither passionate nor the result of thwarting, but calm, reasoned, and complete.

—Henry Seidel Canby (1932),  
in *The Saturday Review*.

WILLIAM FAULKNER is really a traditional moralist, in the best sense. One principle holds together his thirteen books of prose—including his new novel, "The Wild Palms"—giving his work unity and giving it, at times, the significance that belongs to great myth. That principle is the Southern social-economic-ethical tradition which Mr. Faulkner possesses naturally, as a part of his sensibility.

However, Mr. Faulkner is a traditional man in a modern South. All around him the antitraditional forces are at work; and he lives among evidences of their past activity. He could not fail to be aware of them. It is not strange, then, that his novels are, primarily, a series of related myths (or aspects of a single myth) built around the conflict between traditionalism and the antitraditional modern world in which it is immersed.

—George Marion O'Donnell (1939),  
in *"Three Decades of Criticism,"*  
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Olga W. Vickery. Excerpts re-  
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LIKE HAWTHORNE, Faulkner is a solitary worker by choice, and he has done great things not only with double the pains to himself that they might have cost if produced in more genial circumstances, but sometimes also with double the pains to the reader. Two or three of his books as a whole and many of them in part are awkward experiments. All

of them are full of overblown words like "imponderable," "immortal," "immutable," and "immemorial" that he would have used with more discretion, or not at all, if he had followed Hemingway's example and served an apprenticeship to an older writer. He is a most uncertain judge of his own work, and he has no reason to believe that the world's judgment of it is any more to be trusted; indeed, there is no American author who would be justified in feeling more suspicion of "a want in the public taste of a sense of the proportion of things." His early novels were overpraised, usually for the wrong reasons; his later and in many ways better novels have been obstinately condemned or simply neglected. . . .

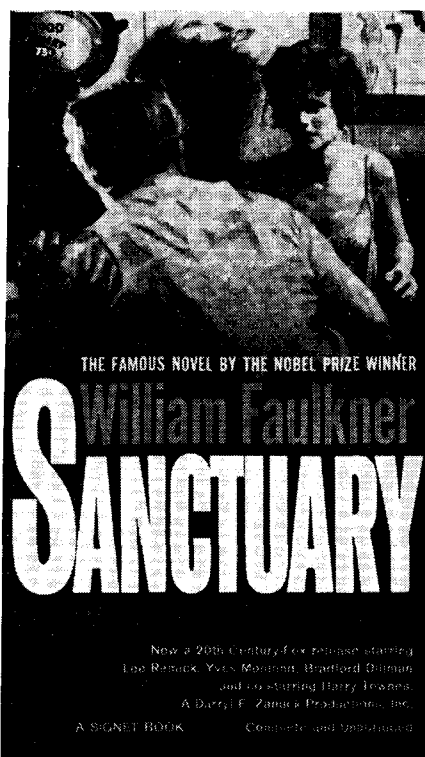
Even his warm admirers, of whom there are many—no author has a higher standing among his fellow novelists—have sometimes shown a rather vague idea of what he is trying to do; and Faulkner himself has never explained. He holds a curious attitude toward the

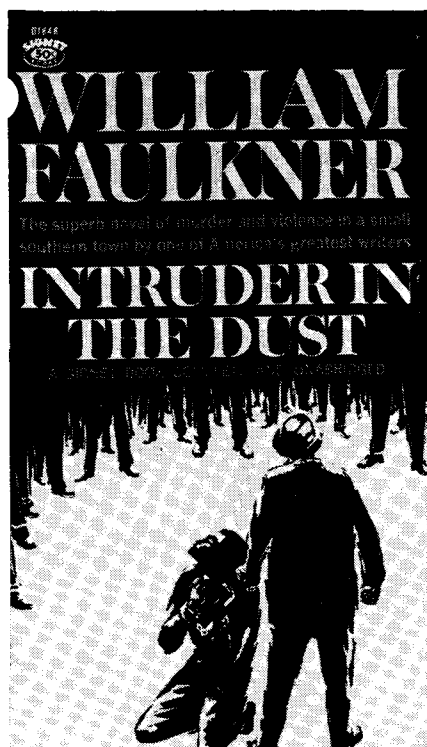
public that appears to be lofty indifference (as in the one preface he wrote, for the Modern Library edition of "Sanctuary"), but really comes closer to being a mixture of skittery distrust and pure unconsciousness that the public exists. He doesn't furnish information or correct misstatements about himself (most of the biographical sketches that deal with him are full of preposterous errors). He doesn't care which way his name is spelled in the records, with or without the "u"—"Either way suits me," he said. Once he has finished a book, he is apparently not concerned with the question how it will be presented, to what sort of audience; and sometimes he doesn't bother to keep a private copy of it. He said in a letter, "I think I have written a lot and sent it off to print before I actually realized strangers might read it."

—Malcolm Cowley (1946), in *"Three Decades of Criticism."*

IT IS TRUE that the most important strain of humor in Faulkner's work is derived from the tradition of frontier humor (though it is probable that he got it from the porches of country stores and the courthouse yards of county-seat towns and not from any book), and it is true that the most spectacular displays of Faulkner's humor are of this order—for example, the "Spotted Horses" episode from "The Hamlet" or the story "Was." But there are other strains which might be distinguished and investigated. For example, there is a kind of Dickensian humor. . . . There is a subdued humor, sometimes shading into pathos, in the treatment of some of the Negro characters and in their dialogue. And there is an irony ranging from that in the scene in "Sanctuary" where Miss Reba, the madam, in offended decency keeps telling Temple, "Lie down and cover up your nekkidness," while the girl talks with Benbow, to that in the magnificently sustained monologue of Jason at the end of "The Sound and the Fury."

In any case, humor in Faulkner's work is never exploited for its own sake. It is regularly used as an index, as a lead,





to other effects. The humor in itself may be striking, but Faulkner is not a humorist in the sense, say, that Mark Twain is. His humor is but one perspective on the material and it is never a final perspective. . . .

—Robert Penn Warren (1946), in *“Three Decades of Criticism.”*

MR. FAULKNER may be a great many things—he is seldom, if ever, dull. He can be clotted and confused, but his writing, at its best, has an hallucinative power which keeps one reading, like a man in the toils of a nightmare. . . .

—Stephen Vincent Benét (1940), in *The Saturday Review*.

OVERELABORATE they certainly are, baroque and involuted in the extreme, these sentences: trailing clauses, one after another, shadowily in apposition, or perhaps not even with so much connection as that; parenthesis after parenthesis, the parenthesis itself often containing one or more parentheses—they remind one of those brightly colored Chinese eggs of one’s childhood, which when opened disclosed egg after egg, each smaller and subtler than the last. It is as if Mr. Faulkner, in a sort of hurried despair, had decided to try to tell us everything, absolutely everything, every last origin or source or quality or qualification, and every possible future or permutation as well, in one terrifically concentrated effort: each sentence to be, as it were, a microcosm. And it must be admitted that the practice is annoying and distracting.

It is annoying, at the end of a sentence, to find that one does not know in the least what was the subject of the verb that dangles *in vacuo*—it is distracting to have to go back and sort out the meaning, track down the structure from clause to clause, then only to find that after all it doesn’t much matter, and that the obscurity was perhaps neither subtle nor important. And to the extent that one *is* annoyed and distracted, and *does* thus go back and work it out, it may be at once added that Mr. Faulkner has defeated his own ends. One has had, of course, to emerge from the stream, and to step away from it, in order properly to see it; and as Mr. Faulkner works precisely by a process of *immersion*, of hypnotizing his reader into *remaining immersed* in his stream, this occasional blunder produces irritation and failure.

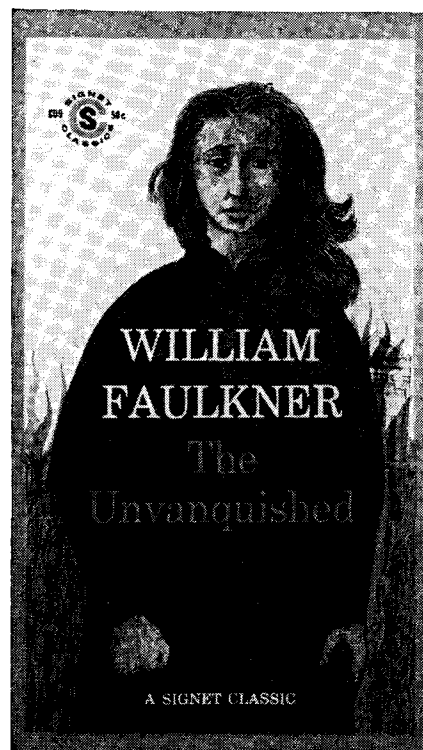
Nevertheless, despite the blunders, and despite the bad habits and the wilful bad writing (and wilful it obviously is), the style as a whole is extraordinarily effective; the reader *does* remain immersed, *wants* to remain immersed, and it is interesting to look into the reasons for this. And at once, if one considers these queer sentences not simply by themselves, as monsters of grammar or awkwardness, but in their relation to the book as a whole, one sees a functional reason and necessity for their being as they are. They parallel in a curious and perhaps inevitable way, and not without esthetic justification, the whole elaborate method of *deliberately withheld meaning*, of progressive and partial and delayed disclosure, which so often gives the characteristic shape to the novels themselves. It is a persistent offering of obstacles, a calculated system of screens and obtrusions, of confusions and ambiguous interpolations and delays, with one express purpose; and that purpose is simply to keep the form—and the idea—fluid and unfinished, still in motion, as it were, and unknown, until the dropping into place of the very last syllable.

What Mr. Faulkner is after, in a sense, is a *continuum*. He wants a medium without stops or pauses, a medium which is always *of the moment*, and of which the passage from moment to moment is as fluid and undetectable as in the life itself which he is purporting to give. It is all inside and underneath, or as seen from within and below; the reader must therefore be steadily *drawn in*; he must be powerfully and unremittingly hypnotized inward and downward to that image-stream; and this suggests, perhaps, a reason not only for the length and elaborateness of the sentence

structure, but for the repetitiveness as well. The repetitiveness, and the steady iterative emphasis—like a kind of chanting or invocation—on certain relatively abstract words (“sonorous, latin, *vaguely* eloquent”), have the effect at last of producing, for Mr. Faulkner, a special language, a conglomerate of his own, which he uses with an astonishing virtuosity, and which, although in detailed analysis it may look shoddy, is actually for his purpose a life stream of almost miraculous adaptability.

—Conrad Aiken (1939), in *“Three Decades of Criticism.”*

FAULKNER’S search for the most expressive way of representing his characters leads him to try all kinds of literary technique. Sometimes he finds models in the work of his contemporaries: a choral procedure, more or less *unanimeste*; interior monologues which are halfway individual and halfway collective (as in “Soldiers’ Pay”); a succession of personal angles of vision (as in “As I Lay Dying” and “The Sound and the Fury”); impressionist and expressionist techniques inspired by the cinema or Dos Passos, as in “Pylon.” In all of these manners he pursues his own proper object, the direct communication of a complex and sorrowful human reality, in respect to which he feels nothing like artistic detachment. . . . Faulkner is usually concerned with a scene of no more than three or four characters, though there is often a vague hint of epic themes in the background. When he cares to,





however, he shows extraordinary skill in his treatment of a multitude. In these scenes the rhythm of his symbolism changes: a sign here, a hint there, given in rapid succession, help both to bring individuals to life and vividly to present the group with its group ties and automatisms.

—Jean Jacques Mayoux, (1952), in *"Three Decades of Criticism."*

IT HAS BEEN generally recognized that the purpose of some of Faulkner's structural complexities is to keep his material in a state of flux or suspension. But it has also generally been thought and argued or assumed that these suspensions are finally resolved, that by the ends of the novels the jig-saw picture puzzle integers do fall into place. There is much evidence, I think, that Faulkner is willing and even anxious to leave most of them in a high degree of suspension, or at least a suspension that cannot be resolved in logical or rational terms. Nor has it been recognized how very much his moment to moment presentation of experience involves a juxtaposition of elements which do not seem to fit together and which to some degree resist synthesis or resolution. . . .

Particularly indicative of Faulkner's intentions, I think, is the fact that when he does present explicit interpretations of events or analytic commentaries on them he always takes pains to make them either suspect, inconclusive, or incoherent. On many occasions he will narrate or describe an action in perfectly conventional and logical sequence, but his interpretive or philosophic passages are almost invariably disordered. I think we can go so far as to say that the more explanatory or intellectual the content, the less the coherence. The dominant characteristic, in fact, of Faulkner's intellectuals—and it is they, of course, who offer most of the interpretations—is their tendency to be incoherent. . . .

Probably the most crucial indication of Faulkner's intentions is the fact that the endings of all his novels not only fail to resolve many of the tensions and meanings provided in the novels but also seem carefully designed to prevent such resolution. Above all, they leave unresolved the question of the meaningfulness of the human efforts and suffering we have witnessed, whether the sound and the fury is part of some larger design or whether it has signified nothing in an essentially meaningless universe.

—Walter J. Slatoff (1957), in *"Three Decades of Criticism."*

I AM AFRAID that the absurdity Faulk-

ner finds in human life was originally placed there by him. Not that life is not absurd, but that it has an absurdity different from what Faulkner ascribes to it.

Why have Faulkner and so many other writers chosen this particular absurdity, which is so far from the creative imagination and from truth? We must look for the reason in the social conditions of our present life. Faulkner's despair seems to me to be anterior to his metaphysic; for him, as for all of us, the future is barred. All that we see, all that we live through, incites us to say: "It can't last much longer"; we cannot, however, conceive of any change but a violent one. We live in a time of incredible revolutions, and Faulkner uses his extraordinary art to describe a world dying of old age, with us gasping and choking in it.

—Jean-Paul Sartre (1939), in *"Three Decades of Criticism."*

FAULKNER's world is grim—a world in which the past exerts an irresistible force, but against which there is no supernatural sanction, no redeeming belief. He believes in original sin, but not in divine love, and he is endlessly bemused by the human effort to read fate or to avoid it. The highest reach of his belief is the effort to become "a saint without God". . . .

—Alfred Kazin (1958), in *"Three Decades of Criticism."*

WHEN FAULKNER has a subject extreme enough in its horror and abnormality, his style is measured, under control, and directed at the specific description of specific things. His writing is genuinely poetic and exact, his delaying obscuring method of presentation is matched and required by the nature of the story, and he has no need of the hysterical passion and the rapturous denunciation of Life in his style because the subject is sufficient unto the evil. The reader is left to respond to the subject without the author's obsessive coaching.

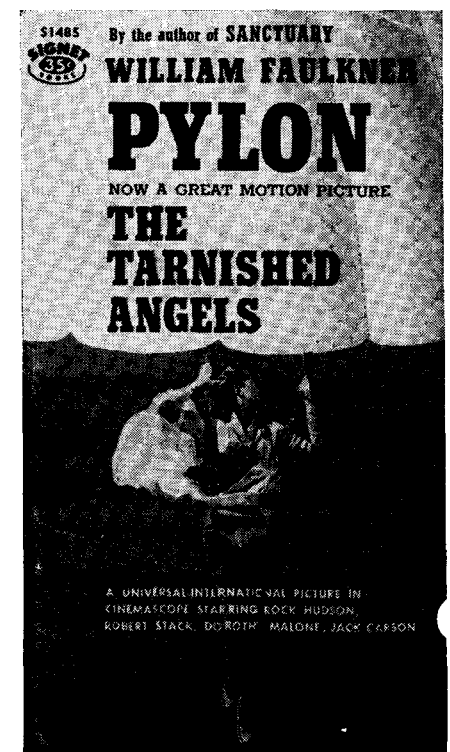
When the subject does not justify the author's horror, the devices of style become clumsiness and tricks, the writing is a stale version of the Swinburnian high poetic, and worst of all the style becomes purple, empty of specific objects, and sometimes insufferably periodic.

—Delmore Schwartz (1941), in *Southern Review.*

How SHALL the artist better show the universal debasement of modern times than to turn the pure Lady into the contemporary Female, now wanton, graceless and degraded? . . . How shall the artist more aptly convey his total

protest than to portray the Female source of life as itself inherently vicious? And as the last step in his sequence of discontent, Faulkner mates the Female with the Negro, the savage as Faulkner feels for whom the southern Lady was sacrificed, and spawns out of his modern union the colored degenerate who is to reign supreme, the moronic emperor of the future.

As against his discontent, we have now reached the complex of that double childhood in which apparently the positive emotions of Faulkner are caught: by contrast, all his affection, hope, and sense of human grandeur. . . . And beneath his personal emphasis on childhood values, and reinforcing it, there is Faulkner's involvement with a cultural past, with the birth and early growth of all those southern aristocratic values which the Civil War and the modern industrial age were to shatter—his involvement, as it were, with the youth of his southern society itself which never came to its destined maturity, which was cut off in its own early blossoming. . . . For the meaning of Faulkner's work comes directly out of that whole web of historical southern emotionalism which colors the thought even of so fine a traditionalist as Allen Tate and so extreme a rebel as Thomas Wolfe. . . . The symbolism in Faulkner comes, as it were, out of a cultural psychosis of which his work manifests the extreme hallucinations, but which still colors the dreams of those who seem most free of it. In his total rejection of the modern South,



portraying it only in terms of bestiality, Faulkner is held by the historical southern myth as surely as that great-grandfather of his, whose "White Rose of Memphis" would now find itself blooming from such strange soil. The great-grandson is perhaps the greater romanticist. For while his ancestor delineated the graces of an age which never quite existed, Faulkner is caught by one which now can never possibly exist. And we may now say that Faulkner's characters never grow up because there is no world for them to grow up into.

—Maxwell Geismar (1942), in *"Writers in Crisis"* (Houghton Mifflin).

IN HIS Nobel Prize address Faulkner drove home the lesson that just as he is more than a writer about vice and violence, so he is more than a Southern writer. He dares talk as few people do these days, of universal truths, proclaiming that it is universality he has fought for. And it is universality, or at any rate something of broad and enduring significance, that he has achieved. But he has achieved it by way of the South. What he knows of the human heart he learned in the South. And in rendering what he knows he has given a picture of the South. It is a picture, I suppose, that has caused more than one Southerner to flinch, but it contains much good as well as much evil, and we can begin to see now that the good predominates.

—Granville Hicks (1961), in *Georgia Review*.

WHEREIN his special gift is most brilliantly shown, what he can make come alive most vividly, is an experience—just that, an experience which the reader feels as if it were his own, independent of the person in the book it is attached to, who is there only to give it a locality. There is no feeling necessarily of sympathy with the character or even of understanding him, but only of being oneself put through that suspense, that terror, that remorse.

—Edith Hamilton (1952), in *The Saturday Review*.

LIKE DICKENS, Faulkner is primarily . . . a sentimental writer; not a writer with the occasional vice of sentimentality, but one whose basic mode of experience is sentimental, in an age when the serious "alienated" writer emblazons antisentimentality on his coat of arms. In a writer whose very method is self-indulgence, that sentimentality becomes sometimes downright embarrassing, as in the stories of World War II, . . . "Two Soldiers," etc., in which the soupiest clichés of self-sacrifice and endurance are shamelessly worked; he is not above

## National Book Award Address

NEW YORK CITY, January 25, 1955.

BY ARTIST I mean of course everyone who has tried to create something which was not here before him, with no other tools and material than the uncommerciable ones of the human spirit; who has tried to carve, no matter how crudely, on the wall of that final oblivion, in the tongue of the human spirit, "Kilroy was here."

That is primarily, and I think in its essence, all that we ever really tried to do. And I believe we will all agree that we failed. That what we made never quite matched and never will match the shape, the dream of perfection which we inherited and which drove us and will continue to drive us, even after each failure, until anguish frees us and the hand falls still at last.

Maybe it's just as well that we are doomed to fail, since, as long as we do fail and the hand continues to hold blood, we will try again; where, if we ever did attain the dream, match the shape, scale that ultimate peak of perfection, nothing would remain but to jump off the other side of it into suicide. Which would not only deprive us of our American right to existence, not only inalienable but harmless too, since by our standards, in our culture, the pursuit of art is a peaceful hobby like breeding Dalmations, it would leave refuse in the form of, at best indigence and at worst downright crime resulting from unexhausted energy, to be scavenged and removed and disposed of. While this way, constantly and steadily occupied by, obsessed with, immersed in trying to do the impossible, faced always with the failure which we decline to recognize and accept, we stay out of trouble, keep out of the way of the practical and busy people who carry the burden of America.

So all are happy—the giants of industry and commerce, the manipulators for profit or power of the mass emotions called government, who carry the tremendous load of geopolitical solvency, the two of which conjoined are America; and the harmless breeders of the spotted dogs (unharned too, protected, immune in the inalienable right to exhibit our dogs to one another for acclaim, and even to the public too; defended in our right to collect from them at the rate of five or ten dollars for the special signed editions, and even in the thousands to special fanciers named Picasso or Matisse).

Then something like this happens—like this, here, this afternoon; not just once and not even just once a year. Then that anguished breeder discovers that not only his fellow breeders, who must support their mutual vocation in a sort of mutual desperate defensive confederation, but other people, people whom he had considered outsiders, also hold that what he is doing is valid. And not only scattered individuals who hold his doings valid, but enough of them to confederate in their turn, for no mutual benefit of profit or defense but simply because they also believe it is not only valid but important that man should write on that wall "Man was here also A.D. 1953 or '54 or '55," and so go on record like this this afternoon.

To tell not the individual artist but the world, the time itself, that what he did is valid. That even failure is worthwhile and admirable, provided only that the failure is splendid enough, the dream splendid enough, unattainable enough yet forever valuable enough, since it was of perfection.

So when this happens to him (or to one of his fellows; it doesn't matter which one, since all share the validation of the mutual devotion) the thought occurs that perhaps one of the things wrong with our country is success. That there is too much success in it. Success is too easy. In our country a young man can gain it with no more than a little industry. He can gain it so quickly and easily that he has not had time to learn the humility to handle it with, or even to discover, realize that he will need humility.

—WILLIAM FAULKNER.

