

William Faulkner's Critical Reception

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After the hard work of producing a novel or short story, an author wants people not only to read the work but also to talk about it. If readers like the piece, the conversation that ensues can take multiple forms. A formal, published conversation carried on by professionally trained scholars and literary critics is referred to as the “critical reception.” No matter how complex people’s comments in this conversation can be, they are like any other conversation in that they talk about why the text is important, either to themselves as individuals or to the world in general, and they respond to what has been said by others.

The critical reception of the writing of William Faulkner has been long and complex. Faulkner is one of the most written-about authors in the English language, and this writing has taken many different forms, from biography to the most erudite criticism. Each year, multiple books and massive numbers of articles are published, making it difficult for even the most ardent and diligent Faulknerians to keep up. Given the daunting nature of this body of work to someone new to the field, the effort here will be to help orient the reader, not only in knowing what has been published, but also to acquaint him or her with the general movements that have developed during the six decades in which a recognizable community of Faulkner scholars emerged and during the eight decades since people have been commenting on Faulkner and his work.

This introductory essay is structured to accommodate—as much as is possible—both the chronological and thematic development of this critical reception. Like any field of scholarship, there is a recursive quality about it, a returning to topics: Just as families retell the same stories or sports fans debate controversial referee decisions years later, scholarly discussions often return to certain points even as new interests arise. Because of this cyclical aspect of critical discussion, the various topics of criticism and methods of critical approach will

be presented in the order in which they appear and some sense of their individual development presented at that point.

Limitations of space unfortunately prevent a detailed treatment of even a small selection of critical texts; explanation and evaluation of all of them (including literally thousands of articles) is impossible. This essay will confine itself primarily to scholarship originally written and published in English, although there is a tremendous body of material in other languages. In going to any library with significant scholarly holdings, the reader will undoubtedly encounter books and articles not mentioned in this essay, and the author apologizes to all scholars who must necessarily be left out and means it as no reflection on them or the quality or importance of their work. However, with a sense of the overall movements in the Faulkner scholarly conversation, the reader encountering scholarship not mentioned here can enjoy the lovely experience of both discovering something new for him or herself and understanding how it relates to the larger picture of the Faulkner critical conversation.

The Early Responses: Reviews, Catalogues, and Biography

The initial response to any writing appears in the form of book reviews written by professional critics who read and evaluate books and publish their comments in journals such as the *New York Times Book Review* or the *Times Literary Supplement*. The reviews of Faulkner's work offer important insights into what was on the minds of Faulkner's first readers and how they represented his works to the rest of the reading population. Many of these are buried in old journals that are often inaccessible to the general public, but happily a compendium of them is available in the form of *William Faulkner: The Contemporary Reviews*, edited by M. Thomas Inge. By reading Inge's book one can get a strong sense of which reviewers admired Faulkner's difficult writing and which found it more trouble than it was worth.

Concurrent with the reviews, and so also during Faulkner's lifetime and just after his death, there sprung up another type of scholarship that may be described as a cataloguing of the characters, places (including discussion of the connection between real-life Oxford, Mississippi, and fictional Jefferson), and perhaps most helpfully the often obscure and colloquial sayings, mannerisms, and other details that could well baffle a reader not from Mississippi or familiar with Faulkner's moment. G. T. Buckley, Robert W. Kirk, and Elmo Howell are a few of many scholars who provided this type of response, although their writing is generally in short form and requires some searching. This impulse has continued and can take on interesting aspects, an example being Robert Harrison's *Aviation Lore in Faulkner* (1985), which orients readers in everything from Faulkner's use of the history of flight to the details of aerodynamics. Also in this cataloguing vein is Bruce F. Kavin's *Faulkner and Film* (1977), which addresses Faulkner's own screenwriting along with adaptations of his work (including a very useful filmography). Two of the most important figures in this mode of criticism have been Robert W. Hamblin and Charles A. Peek, who have published both individually and together on such projects as *A William Faulkner Encyclopedia* (1999) and *A Companion to Faulkner Studies* (2004). The cataloguing strain of scholarship ultimately gave birth to the University Press of Mississippi's *Reading Faulkner* series, edited by Noel Polk. The books in this series offer literally page-by-page guidance on the difficult and at times otherwise inaccessible details of Faulkner's writing. Polk's name, incidentally, is an important one in Faulkner studies, not only because of this series and his own critical writing, but also because he edited the standard editions of Faulkner's writing.

There is an obvious biographical aspect to this cataloguing scholarship, and in fact outright biography was another important branch of the early response to Faulkner's writing. At times this work featured comment by Faulkner's friends, associates, and family, examples being *Old Times in the Faulkner Country* (1961), by John B. Cullen;

Talking about William Faulkner: Interviews with Jimmy Faulkner and Others (1996), edited by Sally Wolff with Floyd C. Watkins; and perhaps most notably *My Brother Bill* (1963), by Faulkner's writer-artist brother John. Proper biography began with Robert Coughlan's 1953 short biography, *The Private World of William Faulkner*. The most important biographical work is the massive two-volume *Faulkner: A Biography* (1974), by Joseph Blotner. The only major biographer who actually knew Faulkner, Blotner is profoundly significant to the world of Faulkner scholarship. Although largely available now only in the compressed and updated single volume edition, this biography nevertheless offers an ocean of information and is the source from which all subsequent biographers have drawn and with which all Faulkner scholars must be familiar. As for those subsequent biographers, a few of their names are Frederick Karl, Richard Gray, and Jay Parini. In their works and others can be found interesting new interpretations of Faulkner's life and its relation to his writing.

The First Wave: New Critical and Structuralist Responses

Although reviews are important, they are often not enough to lift a literary author above the pack to the point of justifying the kind of cataloguing and biographical work just described. Prizes such as the Pulitzer and the Nobel helped immensely in creating such visibility. But even their awarding arguably came with the help of promotion by critics. While a few efforts were made early in Faulkner's career, such as George Marion O'Donnell's 1939 essay "Faulkner's Mythology," the most influential of this kind of work was Malcolm Cowley's introduction to *The Portable Faulkner* (1946).

The importance of Cowley's essay and of *The Portable Faulkner* cannot be overestimated. Cowley saw Faulkner's body of work as a unified whole that developed a mythology about the fictional Yoknapatawpha County. While Faulkner's writing was actually a bit more expansive and not necessarily so unified, Cowley presented a compelling

argument, and he arranged stories and excerpts of longer works to create a volume that presented a consistent and chronological story of the history of Yoknapatawpha. The degree of artificiality in so doing was and is finally less important than the fact that the book and its introduction framed Faulkner and his work for later literary critics. *The Portable Faulkner* and Cowley's introduction played a major role in casting Faulkner as a major and important writer, and Lawrence Schwartz argues in *Creating Faulkner's Reputation* that Cowley's introduction portrayed Faulkner's work as being in line with conservative Cold War politics and so helped induce the decision to award him the 1949 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Cowley's work also ushered in the response of the mid-twentieth century figures involved in what is called "New Criticism" who minutely engaged with texts and searched for the kinds of unifying strains (often paradoxically achieved through contradictory elements in the text) that Cowley had sniffed out. Between 1952–54, there ran three volumes of a journal entitled *Faulkner Studies*, which is now available in a single reprinted volume and offers a glimpse at the Faulknerian scholarly climate of the moment. The fact is that there was a remarkably large body of work (several books and hundreds of articles) produced in the 1950s and 1960s. The most remembered are a handful of books that took on the bulk of Faulkner's work in elegant explication: Olga Vickery's *The Novels of William Faulkner* (1959), Edmund Volpe's *A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner* (1964), and Michael Millgate's *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (1966). The most important single critic of this period was Cleanth Brooks, who wrote three highly regarded volumes: *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963), *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (1978), and *William Faulkner: First Encounters* (1983).

Equally notable were structuralist approaches. A number of these examined the architecture of the texts, others focused on the spaces and places of Yoknapatawpha, and still others dealt with the role of myths and archetypes in Faulkner's writing. Many combined all three.

Examples of this work abound in the journals of the 1960s and 1970s, one memorable instance being Calvin S. Brown's "Faulkner's Geography and Topography." Standout books include Richard P. Adams's *Faulkner: Myth and Motion* (1968), Walter Brylowsky's *Faulkner's Olympian Laugh: Myth in the Novels* (1968), and Lynn Gatrell Levins's *Faulkner's Heroic Design: The Yoknapatawpha Novels* (1976).

Many of the viewpoints of New Criticism and structuralism have since been absorbed and some even discounted because they tend to proceed from a white-southern-aristocratic sympathetic viewpoint, typically rendering a vision of Faulkner that leaves race, gender, sexuality, and Confederate and neo-Confederate ideals and policies unproblematic. They and their underlying cultural assumptions therefore should not be taken as indicative of current critical opinion. On the other hand, even now these books, with their eloquent prose, can offer pleasurable reading for anyone new to Faulkner, providing orientation in what can at times seem an overwhelming fictional world.

Faulkner and Theory: The Great Flowering of Faulkner Scholarship

Cleanth Brooks's career extended into the 1980s, but by the time he had finished his final volume, the trends in the critical response to Faulkner had changed dramatically. The 1980s and 1990s saw the growth of theory-driven criticism, when the conservative and markedly antitheoretical values of New Criticism gave way to approaches to literature that took into account theories provided by psychoanalysis, structuralism, and ultimately poststructuralism, which questioned not only language but also the constructs of race, gender, class, and many other aspects of society.

The change began in the 1970s, when writers started to move away from the assumptions of New Criticism, opening up Faulkner's texts to multiple discourses rather than focusing exclusively on them as closed systems. A critic who undertook such an approach was André Bleikasten. French interest in Faulkner had long been strong, and Bleikasten

continued this work in *Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying"* (1973); *The Most Splendid Failure: Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury"* (1976); and, later, the immense work, *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner's Novels from "The Sound and the Fury" to "Light in August"* (1990). At first glance, these volumes might look like New Criticism in their patient spinning out of close readings, but Bleikasten's work is informed by the subtle textual engagements of his French contemporaries, perhaps most recognizably Roland Barthes, whose notions of intertextuality and the almost erotic "pleasures" of the text were influential in helping scholars navigate the nuances of creative writing. Textured by the realizations of reader-response criticism as well as structuralist and post-structuralist developments in critical theory, these works offered provocative readings much less concerned with boxing Faulkner's work into a Cowley-like totalizing vision but rather focused on parsing difficult questions about Faulkner's writing and even criticism itself and its own limitations and constructedness. These early volumes also marked a move toward book-length studies of single Faulkner texts, a practice that would continue throughout this period. Such single-text studies overwhelmingly favored certain canonized books that were considered "great"—*The Sound and the Fury* (1929); *As I Lay Dying* (1930); *Light in August* (1932); *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936); and *Go Down, Moses* (1942)—although there were scholars who continued to follow in the vein of Brooks and Vickery, engaging all of Faulkner's work. Examples of these would be Gary Lee Stonum in *Faulkner's Career: An Internal Literary History* (1979), which argued that in each novel lay the seeds of the next, and Doreen Fowler in *Faulkner's Changing Vision: From Outrage to Affirmation* (1983), which also focused on Faulkner's development by arguing that instead of his writing diminishing in power (as many scholars argue), it can be seen to strengthen over the course of his career in certain respects.

On the heels of Bleikasten's first book came one of the most unique and enthralling publications of Faulkner criticism ever written—John T. Irwin's *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge* (1975). Written

in a single extended essay, the book pushes the conventions of critical writing in both form and content. It is the first Faulkner book to take the approach of applying a theoretical framework to Faulkner's writing: Irwin employs Freudian psychoanalysis in a deep investigation of Quentin Compson and his motives. Moreover, Irwin's approach also nodded to Barthes in its intertextuality, as it considered Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche alongside Faulkner. The result is an innovative volume that continues to impress, and it stands as the conceptual prototype for the kinds of criticism to follow.

For not only Freud and Barthes but Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and many other theorists had by now become the pillars upon which literary criticism was being built. It was a time when scholars could be found who self-identified as Freudian or Lacanian or Derridean—scholars who were expert in the contributions of one of these theorists and were part of a school of critics that applied those theories to primary texts. William Shakespeare received perhaps the most attention, but Faulkner became one of the other figures upon whose work the latest theories were tried because the scope, detail, and philosophical depth of his oeuvre provided ample testing ground. This work poured out in hundreds of articles, including those in the main journal of the field, the *Faulkner Journal*. The University Press of Mississippi also began to publish the plenary lectures of the *Annual Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference* held in Oxford, Mississippi. For over twenty-five years, these volumes have served as a barometer for following developments in the field, with titles such as *Faulkner and Race*, *Faulkner and Ideology*, *Faulkner and Psychology*, and *Faulkner and Material Culture*—titles that signal not only theoretical underpinnings of these approaches but also highly politicized critical approaches that dealt with the positions of the traditionally unempowered in US society and hence in Faulkner's writing.

As for books using these new approaches, they appeared quickly and in great variety. Just a year after the appearance of Irwin's book, Myra Jehlen published *Class and Character in Faulkner's South*, a Marxist

reading sensitive to social hierarchies in ways previous scholarship was not. The end of the decade saw Donald M. Kartiganer's *The Fragile Thread: The Meaning of Form in Faulkner's Novels* (1979), which takes a subtle structuralist and psychoanalytic approach. In 1982, John T. Matthews published *The Play of Faulkner's Language*, an overtly Derridean approach to the "major novels" listed above that read the absence of conceptual and narrative "centers" in Faulkner as part of a general machinery of deferring of meaning as delineated by Derrida. Two books that both dealt with race were published the next year. The first, *Faulkner: The House Divided*, by Eric Sundquist, argued that miscegenation formed the central tension of Faulkner's works. The second book was *Faulkner's "Negro": Art and the Southern Context*, in which Thadious M. Davis explained that Faulkner spent most of his efforts grappling with the white southern construction of the "Negro" to the point that he was often unable to explore the characters of actual people of color. The end of the decade saw Karl Zender's distinctly materialist approach to Faulkner's work, *The Crossing of the Ways* (1989), which examined how everything from money to education shaped and affected Faulkner's career and vision, especially in his later novels. Joseph R. Urgo also broke with the trend of focusing on the "major works" by dealing with the later novels in his recuperative reading of the Snopeses, particularly *Flem*, as figures able to throw off the old yoke of aristocratic rule in *Faulkner's Apocrypha: "A Fable," Snopes, and the Spirit of Human Rebellion* (1989).

The next decade saw these theoretical and cultural approaches carried forward. One of the things that occupied the attention of critics as the decade turned was the way so many voices competed with one another for cultural attention in Faulkner's writing. Stephen M. Ross's *Fiction's Inexhaustible Voice: Speech and Writing in Faulkner* (1989) undertakes a Mikhail Bakhtin-informed consideration of the polyvocalic nature of Faulkner's writing, with sensitivity to Bakhtin's attention to the undertones and overtones of culturally embedded utterances. Robert Dale Parker, in "*Absalom, Absalom!*"

The Questioning of Fiction (1991) and Judith Lockyer, in *Ordered by Words: Language and Narration in the Novels of William Faulkner* (1991), also explore Faulkner's work according to Bakhtinian principles. John N. Duvall's *Faulkner's Marginal Couple: Invisible, Outlaw, and Unspeakable Communities* (1990) examines the ways cultural outsiders in Faulkner form couples who together maintain the strength to resist cultural norms. Doreen Fowler's *Faulkner: The Return of the Repressed* (1997) uses an openly Lacanian approach with its relentless furthering of Freud's principles to show the ways characters negotiate language and cultural status in the formation of identity. And Philip Weinstein, in *Faulkner's Subject: A Cosmos No One Owns* (1992), shows the ways minority voices threaten to crowd out and overpower Faulkner himself as the white empowered owner of his own cosmos. Certain books honed in specifically on women in Faulkner. Although an early work on Faulkner's women had appeared in David Williams's *Faulkner's Woman: The Myth and the Muse* (1977), it was in the 1990s that feminist criticism of Faulkner really took off. Minrose C. Gwin's *The Feminine and Faulkner* (1990) considers the ways women characters in Faulkner are agents of disruption and subversion, and Diane Roberts pressures female stereotypes in *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood* (1994). Deborah Clarke also focuses on the disruptive power of women, employing specifically Kristeva's challenge of Lacan's phallocentrism—or privileging as well as recognizing culture's tendency to gender power as masculine—to examine the function of mothers in *Robbing the Mother: Women in Faulkner* (1994).

The foregoing list is dizzying to say the least, making it appropriate to sum up the strands of criticism extant by the end of the 1990s. Essentially, the kinds of questions to be asked about Faulkner had been opened up to a much broader spectrum. Where most scholars before had been concerned with delving into the secrets of the text to address southern conventions, aspects of myth, or the functions of place, these new scholars prodded the role of women and people of color, the ways Faulkner's writing exemplified linguistic and psychoanalytic theory,

and so forth. Where most of the New Critical efforts were content to maintain a focus on the workings of the text, these scholarly treatments sought either to understand something about society through Faulkner's writing or to hold his writing up against society. There remained much admiring of Faulkner, but there could also be found mild and at times even severe criticism of his blind spots, although generally there was a sense, again, that his work was rich enough to warrant extensive and broad treatment.

The Twenty-First Century: Global Faulkner

From the mid-1990s into the twenty-first century, many of the theoretical trends continued—Karl Zender's second volume *Faulkner and the Politics of Reading* (2002) being an example—but there also began to spring up scholarly examinations of Faulkner that contextualized him in relation to literature and culture across the globe.

One new strain of Faulkner criticism that developed was the move of comparing him to other writers. Margaret Donovan Bauer's *William Faulkner's Legacy: "What Shadow, What Stain, What Mark"* (2005) is an interesting example of such work, finding the influence of Faulkner in the works of Larry McMurtry, Lee Smith, Pat Conroy, and others, while Joseph Fruscione's *Faulkner and Hemingway: Biography of a Literary Rivalry* (2012) examines the actual and intertextual relationship of the two famous contemporaries. The prime candidate for comparison, however, was Toni Morrison. Bauer discusses Morrison in relation to Faulkner, and three books on this topic particularly stand out: *What Else but Love? The Ordeal of Race in Faulkner and Morrison* (1996), by Philip Weinstein; *Subversive Voices: Eroticizing the Other in William Faulkner and Toni Morrison* (2001), by Evelyn Jaffe Schrieber; and *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-Envisioned* (1997), a collection of essays edited by Carol A. Kolmerten, Stephen M. Ross, and Judith Bryant Wittenberg.

The biggest change in critical focus, however, was that of considering Faulkner in the context of slave-plantation culture, which was part

of the larger New Southernist movement that sought to understand the US South hemispherically as part of the global south. Richard Godden's first book *Fictions of Labor: William Faulkner and the South's Long Revolution* (1997) anticipates this work by examining the real history of the Haitian Revolution alongside that in Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, but the global south approach to Faulkner was essentially a postcolonial one kick-started by the Martinican writer Edouard Glissant in his work entitled *Faulkner, Mississippi* (1999). In the book, Glissant shows that his home resembles Mississippi, and his vision, much like other Caribbean writers, echoes Faulkner's own. This work stimulated much scholarship, with articles by both new and established Faulkner scholars—a nice repository being *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies* (2004), edited by Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn. Other works include Charles Baker's *William Faulkner's Postcolonial South* (2000), Hosam Aboul-Ela's *Other South: Faulkner, Coloniality, and the Mariátegui Tradition* (2007), and Valérie Loichot's *Orphan Narratives: The Postplantation Literature of Faulkner, Glissant, Morrison, and Saint-John Perse* (2007). Significantly, the topic of the 2009 *Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference* was "Global Faulkner."

While the global Faulkner change dominated much of the first decade of the twenty-first century, there were other significant developments. One of these was a return to certain earlier concerns in Faulkner criticism, often done with the advantage of an awareness of contemporary theory-based criticism. Blair Labatt's *Faulkner the Storyteller* (2005) marks a semireturn to New Criticism and structuralism in its focus on the mechanics of plotting in Faulkner's writing, mostly in the Snopes novels. Charles Aiken's *William Faulkner and the Southern Landscape* (2009) reexamined the literal grounds of Faulkner's work from a geographer's perspective. Owen Robinson's *Creating Yoknapatawpha: Readers and Writers in Faulkner's Fiction* (2006) revisited reader-response criticism of a few decades earlier. Charles Hannon's *Faulkner and the Discourses of Culture* (2005) examined

the competing voices in culture in a manner reminiscent of Duvall and Weinstein. Taylor Hagood's *Faulkner's Imperialism: Space, Place, and the Materiality of Myth* (2008) also discussed competing voices by returning to a global-south and postcolonial-theory conditioned reading of the staples of myth and place. The biographical and cataloguing strains reemerged too, examples being Judith L. Sensibar's *Faulkner and Love: The Woman Who Shaped His Art* (2009), John Matthews's *William Faulkner: Seeing through the South* (2009), and one of the most sensational volumes to appear in a long time—*Ledgers of History: William Faulkner, an Almost Forgotten Friendship, and an Antebellum Diary* (2010), in which Sally Wolff discovered a diary from which Faulkner apparently drew many ideas for his writing.

Another interesting trend that developed in the past decade was that of a kind of Faulkner-informed scholarly/creative nonfiction hybrid essay in which scholars reflect on their own lives, experiences, and situations as they develop critical readings of Faulkner's work. The first of these was Houston A. Baker's, *I Don't Hate the South: Reflections on Faulkner, Family, and the South* (2007) in which he talks about growing up as an African American in Louisville, Kentucky, and the reciprocities of that place and experience with Faulkner's Mississippi. In 2010, Polk published his collection of essays, *Faulkner and Welty and the Southern Literary Tradition*, which achieves high essay form, and in the same year, Philip Weinstein's *Becoming Faulkner: The Art and Life of William Faulkner* undertakes a biography tinged by the author's personal experiences.

It should be added that during this time and throughout the history of the Faulkner critical discussion, certain fine books and articles appeared that did not necessarily follow the trends but nevertheless had an important impact on the field and are definitely ones for developing Faulkner scholars to know. Jay Watson's *Forensic Fictions: The Lawyer Figure in Faulkner* (1993) is such an example. In the 2000s, some of these efforts include Ted Atkinson's prodding of the proletariat side of Faulkner in *Faulkner and the Great Depression* (2006) and Peter

Lurie's brilliant investigation of the role of vision, including vision and film, in *Vision's Immanence: Faulkner, Film, and the Popular Imagination* (2004).

The latest thing to have happened to Faulkner studies is the Internet. The 2000s saw multiple websites dedicated to Faulkner, most notably the highly influential *William Faulkner on the Web*, published by University of Mississippi English professor John B. Padgett. The hypertext resource edition of *The Sound and the Fury*, edited by University of Saskatchewan professor Peter Stoicheff and others, is an important website that offers a plethora of ways into that difficult text, from graphic presentations of its timeline to a chronology of its events. At the time of this writing, the website *The Digital Yoknapatawpha Project*, initiated by University of Virginia professor Stephen Railton, is being developed by a team of scholars. As the second decade of the twenty-first century deepens, digital platforms will be ones to follow as Faulkner critics look forward to what new aspects will be discussed in the texts.

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