

## Toward a Definition of the Hemingwayesque and the Faulknerian

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Reviewing Cormac McCarthy's 2005 novel *No Country for Old Men* for *The New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani observes: "Mr. McCarthy has always vacillated between clean, Hemingwayesque prose and pseudo-Faulknerian eloquence." The terms "Hemingwayesque" and "Faulknerian" serve as a remarkable sort of shorthand for talking about prose, evoking not merely each respective author's recurring themes and preoccupations but also his distinctive and instantly recognizable style. It would be hard to find two American novelists whose names so immediately speak to a particular way of constructing a sentence than Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, and it would be even harder to find two whose styles can be so readily placed at opposite ends of a spectrum, such that any subsequent writer might be measured as tending more toward the concentration of the former or the expansiveness of the latter. As Norman Mailer said of Hemingway's "restraint" and Faulkner's "excess": "Between the two, it's almost as if you've now been given your parameters. This is the best of one extreme and this is the best of another. And somewhere between the two you may be able to find your style in time to come." Mailer and McCarthy belong to two of several generations of men and women to find their styles by steering a course between Hemingway's and Faulkner's respective poles. One of the best ways to understand Hemingway, therefore, is to read Faulkner, and vice versa. In comparing the two authors' styles, one will inevitably begin to touch on their larger themes and preoccupations, for how each author constructs a line or a paragraph is predicated on how he sees the world and man's place in it.

Yet the paradox of reading Hemingway and Faulkner against each other is that the more familiar one becomes with the obvious differences between their respective styles and materials, the greater is the capacity of each man's work to surprise us with passages written in a

mode we tend to associate with the other. The terms “Hemingwayesque” and “Faulknerian” have come to stand for a broad set of cultural assumptions and generalities—some more accurate than others—about how and what each man wrote. The more portable and widely applicable these terms become, the less accurately they reflect the two novelists’ work itself. For reducing two shelves of novels and short stories into the abstract terms “Hemingwayesque” and “Faulknerian” is a quasi-parodic act; it involves selecting and exaggerating certain characteristics of each author’s distinctive voice and subject matter while ignoring or eliding others. The frequency with which these authors are imitated and with which their styles are invoked speaks less to the inciviness of their readers than to the distinctiveness of their voices. We recognize their styles viscerally and immediately, just as it takes only a word or two for us to recognize the timbre of an old friend’s voice on the telephone or across a room. It is because of this familiarity that we recognize echoes of Hemingway and Faulkner’s prose styles in other authors, whether those authors are writing in a parodic vein—like the participants in the annual Bad Hemingway and Faux Faulkner contests—or in earnest.

As a point of comparison, consider F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby* was published, to great acclaim, within two years of *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Sound and the Fury*. Yet while one might use the term “Fitzgeraldesque” to speak of a certain mood (perhaps, the elegiac) or of a set of themes (say, the unacknowledged sacrifice of the innocent, or the dark underbelly of the American dream, or the tragic nature of memory), it would not speak of a particular way of constructing sentences and using adjectives to anyone other than a Fitzgerald scholar. This is not to say that the language of *The Great Gatsby* is less powerful or beautiful than that of *The Sun Also Rises* or *The Sound and the Fury*. It is, however, less idiosyncratic and therefore less identifiable and less “imitate-able.” A Fitzgerald parody contest would not generate the response that the Hemingway and Faulkner contests do. To parody Fitzgerald, one would have to do so thematically, writing a