Review Articles

William Faulkner and his Critics

If the wood-pulp lasts and the bombs do not fall, there may be a Variorum Faulkner—perhaps in the lifetime of some who read this. Faulkner himself, if we may trust what he says—an "if" as big as my first one—apparently believes that the insane roulette of bomb diplomacy and the organized extractive industry of the academic commentators are equally irrelevant to the travail of the creative spirit of man, of which his stories are no unworthy evidence. Yet I suspect he rather likes being scripture; he's an old-fashioned man who can take ironic pleasure in acting as resident-prophet at universities or peering quizzically over the palisades of commentary which bracket his text.

It is a proof of Faulkner's extraordinary powers that one may thus predict more and more criticism and at the same time be sure that no study of him can be, for those who have lived with his books, wholly satisfactory. This is not just a matter of difference of opinion or discrimination among modes of critical apprehension, but rather a recognition of the fact that, like all great writers, Faulkner becomes, finally, as much a private as a common possession. At the moments when this is felt even the uncommon reader is left with nothing to do but quote, quote from the long meditative lyrical descriptions (the opening of *Absalom, Absalom!,* for example) which, because they are self-consciously purple and include such words as "man" and "doom" and "outrage" and "love" and "dust", have been dismissed as banal by the petty tyrants of Freshman Composition, who have been brought up on Hemingway and the cult of significant silences.

I do not mean that we must pursue all criticism to an *O altitudo;* just that I would rather read a good book on Dreiser or Trollope or (to come home with a thud) Callaghan than dull my brain on their insensate fictions, while Faulkner always tells me something that no one else knows.

Above this horizon, where the critical categories operate, there is room for distinctions, as, for example, between the two books before me,* of which the first, by Olga

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**The Novels of William Faulkner.* By Olga W. Vickery. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959. Pp. 270. $5.00.

William Faulkner, from Jefferson to the World. By Hyatt H. Waggoner. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1959. Pp. 279. $5.00.

Vickery, is easily the best study of Faulkner in existence, and the second, by H. W. Waggoner, one of the worst. (He has more competition.)

The topography and history of Yoknapatawpha County have been charted by Malcolm Cowley and those who have refined on his introduction to the Portable Faulkner; such able critics as Irving Howe and William Van O'Connor have produced comprehensive studies of Faulkner, emphasizing the seriousness of his moral vision and the sophistication of his technique; the inquirers into myth, symbol, and "structural values" have had their say in the elegant quarterlies; the reviewers in the slicks have polished their platitudes with gossip; but all these have balked at what the historian of ideas would call Faulkner's "thought." When in trouble finding predicates for his subjects and sense in his symbols, they have murmured the sacred word "ambiguous" in hushed voices and turned away, or counted the "Christ-figures" in the novels as if that settled everything. (This is precisely what Mr. Waggoner does, and it marks him as a run-of-the-mill Faulkner critic.) But Mrs. Vickery assumes that there is a Faulkner doctrine, that he has a consistent view of the whole human condition which accounts for the architecture of his novels and the quality of his language. She has not imposed a grid of abstractions upon the body of his writing, but has meditated inductively upon each book, observing the relations among them but not forgetting how each works upon the reader by itself, nor how the novelist has grown with what he has made, until, at the end, she is able to announce, in effect, that this is what Faulkner has said about man and when you know this you know him (and yourself) better than before.

According to Mrs. Vickery, Faulkner perceives a profound opposition between social man, who lives by abstractions and speaks in formulas, and the morally responsible individual, who, "because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance" (so the Nobel Prize speech), translates time into legend, language into symbol, and reality into "truth." Faulkner's heroes (Isaac McCaslin, Chick Mallison, the Corporal of *A Fable*) reject history, formula, and fact and in so doing make their own "dooms," break out of the solitary jail, the isolation which society *organizes* but does not destroy. The method of multiple narration derives from Faulkner's imaginative insight into the difference between knowledge, what the senses perceive, and truth, which is manifest to the heart, believing "before knowing remembers" and hence finding revelation in mirrors rather than clock-faces, in the pool of Benjy's memories, in the epiphany of Dilsey's Sunday morning service. For our condition is that we are all prisoners, captives of history and empty formulas like the old South, captives of words like the word "nigger," captives of whole legions of "facts", too many, too much experience—hence those moments of "outrage" in which Faulkner's characters confront the unendurable which must be endured. The conflict between conscious and unconscious apprehension which underlies all these relations is manifested typically through the alternations, in the language of the novels, between the richly symbolic and "literary" passages and the sudden ironic declensions into

common "realistic" speech. The mocking-bird passage in *The Hamlet* is an obvious example, but there are hundreds of others.

Even such a bare (and distorting) summary as this suggests the scope of Mrs. Vickery's argument; observe how those elements in Faulkner which at once annoy and fascinate readers have been explained. Nowhere does she fall back upon accusations of incompetence or inconsistency in her author; unlike most critics, including Mr. Waggoner, she does not dismiss *A Fable* as a big mistake, but draws it firmly into the whole ideological pattern of the novels. She is, of course, too firm; the difficulty with her method is that she can hardly keep from saying that Faulkner is demonstrating her theses. Having observed intelligently that Flem Snopes is "a comic version of Thomas Sutpen," she continues:

> Both, to some extent, share the same innocence which consists of acting in terms of a design, the one social and the other economic, from which all vital instincts and feelings have been eliminated. Thus through Flem's exclusive preoccupation with business, the nature and limitations of the economic man and of the ethics of business are demonstrated.

But *The Hamlet* is not a demonstration but a poem. And to speak of Lucas Beauchamp's gold-hunting as a "profane ritual" which "destroys his relationship with Molly" hardly conveys the quality of that uproarious episode. Yet her analyses of the structure of the novels are often nothing less than brilliant: to see the pattern of the "ritual hunt" unifying *Go Down, Moses,* the images of circle, shadow, and mirror in *Light in August,* the comparable focussing functions of Caddie and Addie in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*—these are acts of genuine critical perception which pass from explication to illumination.

Like Mrs. Vickery, Mr. Waggoner sets out to demonstrate the "wholeness" of Faulkner, to find the seeds of genius in the weedbeds of *Soldier's Pay* and *Mosquitoes* and to contemplate the whole cycle of novels as an epic of time and judgment. He has the enthusiasm, all right; "great" is one of his favorite words, and I am sure that when he teaches Faulkner he must convey much of his enthusiasm and the seriousness of his search for meanings in the novels. Unhappily, though he is full of ideas, the ideas are not under control, and he attributes to his author his own incapacity for integration. *A Fable,* for him, is full of "theological muddle and ignorance"; he dismisses *Intruder in the Dust* as "the Novel with a Message" but he has not found the real message of that book because he has failed to consider it in relation to *Go Down, Moses;* he thinks that *Requiem for a Nun* is a work of "relaxation," easy to write, and so on. It is disturbing to find him making unnecessary mistakes, like putting *Flem* Snopes in *Sanctuary,* and committing real howlers, as when he decides that Nancy, whom the buzzards "undressed," was "presumably a cow"! Sometimes he tries too hard for insights, and the results are pathetic. Sam Fathers' advice to young Isaac to "shoot quick, and slow"—the best instruction I know on how to handle a rifle—is called "a mysterious paradox"; and the dog Lion "foreshadows the railroad" which is to destroy the wilderness. But he gets into his most serious trouble

with the "Christ-figures" in Faulkner. They are there, of course, but Mr. Waggoner pursues them recklessly like a mad prospector deceived by every flicker in the rock: Benjy, Addie Bundren, Vardaman's fish; *As I Lay Dying* "re-enacts the Eucharist"; Joe Christmas "epitomizes the human situation". He finds these occurrences full of "paradoxes," inevitably, and tries to define Faulkner's theology in the traditional terms, finding him "paradoxically, at once Deistic and orthodox." Having got himself into the problem of Faulkner's presumed theological affiliations, which is not a problem for criticism, he is forced into discoveries of "obscurity" everywhere.

Both these critics insist, rightly, upon Faulkner's universality, and upon his belief in the religious functions of literature, of the *word*, the word which symbolizes, evokes, rather than the word which distinguishes and defines, the word in the poem not the word in the proposition. All Faulkner's abstract nouns are proper nouns. As Mrs. Vickery observes, a preoccupation with the nature of language runs through all his work: words can bind, and create; formulations fail and explanations are soon exhausted, but memory is created out of words, as Quentin and Shreve "make up" the story of Sutpen, and all significant action speaks the language of the heart. The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. The sound and fury of the idiot's tale signify everything. It follows that Faulkner reads the history of his South as the medieval commentators read the Bible, allegorically; he is a literalist only of the imagination. This is why Mr. Waggoner finds it so hard to discover what kind of a Christian Faulkner is; the fiction stubbornly refuses to correlate with "orthodoxy" or "unorthodoxy." Here is Mr. Waggoner in serious trouble:

> The body of his fiction is built of Christian thought and feeling, shaped by Christian images and symbols, and deepened and enriched by constant Christian and Biblical allusions; but within all this is a core of what we may call religious humanism, or old-fashioned Protestant modernism—or simply deism tinctured with romantic nature mysticism.

No wonder he finds Faulkner difficult. Yet even out of this bunch of nettles we may pluck a flower: the term "religious humanism" is helpful, for Faulkner "believes" in man, in the divinity of the human imagination to create and of the human will to endure what has been created. (It may be added that neither the Bible-belting Christians who want to "save" us nor the pursy crew who want to "preserve Christian values" share this belief.) He images accordingly a final paradox, shows us a mystery: that man can do anything and is inevitably the prisoner of that power.

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The Unexplained Interior: A Study of E. W. Mandel's FUSELI POEMS

Des châteaux bâtis en os
sort la musique inconnue.
—Rimbaud

Henry Fuseli, caustic wit, respectable professor of the Royal Academy, sketcher of the obscene, and admirer of the heroic, was according to Blake "The only man that e'er I knew/Who did not make me almost spew". A famous series of his drawings depicts women so intently engaged in obscene activities that their faces have lost all but a trance-like composure of expression. Their elaborate and meticulously neat coiffures only heighten the dreamlike tension between act and feature. Another of his works, perhaps the most renowned painting of nightmare, shows a woman, her head thrown back over the bed's edge, a simian monster crouching on her breast, and a horse's head glaring with flaming eyes through the drapery. A similar gothic vision and peculiar tension between expression and action are distinguishing features of E. W. Mandel's new volume, *Fuseli Poems*.* "Fireplace" and "Fuseli: Girl Combing her Hair Watched by a Young Man" call actual Fuseli paintings to view, the latter of a young man clinging rigidly to a black stone castle wall, peering in despair through the girl's window. The voyeur's tense passion, crippling restraint, and subversive energy epitomize the volume, whether one wishes to regard it as an extended nightmare or as a subtle and sensitive projection of psychological tensions in our own society.

Reading these poems one may remember Jung's description of visionary art as "many sided, demonic and grotesque", recalling "dreams, night-time fears and the dark recesses of the mind that we sometimes sense with misgiving". Fuseli's paintings provide an objective correlative here similar to the coloured prints that Rimbaud imagines in *Les Illuminations*. A poem such as "Mail Order Catalogue", whose wildly cascading images swirl out of the homeliest of household books,

> (Logos of things in the outhouse
> paradigm of experience
> from beginning: abdominal belts
> to end: zippers, lightning
>
> the art of communication
> icons of the graffitic world)

affords an amusing example of the technique, though in other poems the effect is generally more sombre and nightmarish (like the Parade section of *Illuminations*). In "Palinode" the poet sees "A kind of Dali plain, empty of bush"; in another poem

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**Fuseli Poems*. By E. W. Mandel. Toronto: Contact Press, 1960. Pp. 68. $2.00.

The mirror of the town
fills with Greco shapes
like Calvary or Spain
or bull-necked Montreal.

In a poem called "In the Caves of my City" the picture becomes cinema:

My tongue flickers
like a newsreel, and with epileptic grace
I lurch through the twenties of my mind,
a celluloid hero, fabulous as a Basilisk
who pins me in the caves of my city.

And in "Two Part Exercise on a Single Image"

the paned mirror of the river
Gives up the restless image
Of a man walking down slanting streets
Like corridors in "Blood of a Poet."

"Death of a Poet" shows us dissolution as the falling apart of a child's hornbook, "an alphabetical skeleton,/Scattered in the grass", while in "Emblems (In Memory of my Mother)" forest, synagogue, and alphabet blend and grow through one another. In these Protean metamorphoses of image, where flesh, bone, and landscape interfuse, as well as in the savage violence of "Mr. Mandel's Sunday Service" or the seething, beetly horror of "Entomology", and in the language of sweat, glare, rape, blood, hanging, blight, mould, stench, heat, deformation, plague, decay, and anger, all presented with a tense minuteness of detail, one it put in mind not of Dali or El Greco but of the master of visionary horror, Hieronymus Bosch.

The poet's control of tone imparts a special quality and force to this demonic vision. For between the action and the reader, interposed and questioning, doubting and hypothetically conjecturing, is the poet's consciousness, a dramatically created consciousness like that, say, of a man condemned to a chamber of horrors, perhaps a mad cell, who in moments of calm reflects upon his vision and worries:

What bird had fouled that straw, what name
uttered a fire in my pallet where I lay.

or

Such images rise up in thought as out of dreams
Rose from the sea, still hung in weeds,
To haunt poor Shelley or to torment Yeats.

Though the content is sensational, his expression of it is restrained, reflective, at times even conversational. As in Kafka or in dreams, the surrealistic madness of events is at odds with a consciousness that sees and talks of it as in some way normal. To make the effect more complex still, ordinary conceptions of sanity and insanity, lies and truth, are inverted. The world of mayors, presidents, morality officers, wholesome ideals, and posi-

tive thoughts becomes demonic, inhabited as in "Ice Palace" by the blue men of Saskatchewan and the blue women of Quebec. The visitor-reader-confidant must be spoken to guardedly ("If I said that in the caves of our city . . ."), because he is an inquisitor from that right-thinking world:

> You will ask how I came here.
> . . . how the university could tolerate me,
> what night it was I hung from the rock
> and whether my father knew.

As for the poet, emitting his "Notes from the Underground", he gloats ironically "with cardboard Stevens in his honeycomb of lies". In one poem, "Two Part Exercise on a Single Image", the imprisoned poet confronts his Baconian reader or tired business man directly:

> You think it is easy? A matter of words?
> And wonder that I'm a poor speller?
> Let me tell you that this has nothing to do
> With teaching or even the love of poetry,
> It is the calamity of an eyesore, a stye,
> A social disaster. Look for once
> At the real, ridiculous humped self
> Crouched in the unexplained interior.
> See it looming in the light
> Of exploding volcanoes and dark fig trees
> Like the hunched white question mark
> Of a polar bear.
> Oh my friend, I too like company
> And have ambitions in business.

From what has been said, it will be evident that Mr. Mandel's volume has unity of vision, a consistent and meaningful outlook on and imaging of the world, that his manner is prophetic rather than discursive, and that his textures and designs, though they afford insight into everyday experience, are abstract and mythical. The distinctive way in which he employs mythical material is of some importance. Rather than refashioning or ironically echoing a deliberately borrowed structure, as, with their different purposes, Eliot and Joyce do in *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*, Mandel, it would seem, allows his material to assume its own pattern. No one can create an archetype, but there is, perhaps, a distinction to be made between deliberately importing and encrusting an archetype from famous literary sources, and permitting it to emerge spontaneously from one's own creative consciousness. At any rate the structures in these poems impress one as vigorously and deeply felt personal experience, as proceeding rather than superimposed, as vital rather than mechanical.

From an examination of recurrent images, the central design that emerges in the *Fuseli Poems* is that of a royal castle complete with moat and dungeon, Lear's or Arthur's or the Duke of Mantua's or, more especially, Minos'. Its main inhabitants are the king

and his advisers, the hunchback and the wizard. Their kinship with Lear, Rigoletto, and Merlin needs no comment, and one would prefer to avoid simple allegorizing or identifying them as something like will, passion, and reason. The castle, after all, is a mystery:

> It simply stands there, stands,
> Though how it stands no one explains,
> Nor how to go from room to room,
> Nor why the king had chosen it
> Upon a dreadful plane of space
> To live in, there to hold his court.

Sometimes the poet is king, like mad Lear watching his daughters turn to feathered predators in "Metamorphosis" and turning so himself; sometimes he is the hunchback as in "Two Part Exercise"; but mostly he is the dungeon's prisoner as in the Fuseli poem, "Notes from the Underground", "The Damp Pilgrim", and "Palinode". Observing these shifts of perspective, or perhaps put on the track by "The Counterfeiters" or by the fact that the castle is

> . . . like box on box
> Or like those Chinese puzzles
> That are whole outside but inside
> Piece in piece,

the wary reader will soon surmise that the poet is not simply in the castle nor the castle in the poet: they are the same. Those who have read the *Minotaur Poems* (in *Trio* by Turnbull, Webb, and Mandel; Contact Press, 1954) will have no trouble recognizing in this castle Theseus' labyrinth, where

> . . . dressed in a multitude of rooms
> like a Chinese box,

he "came upon a man with the face of a bull", but the characters have multiplied now, and Theseus is broken into fragments of hunchback lust, algebraic wizardry, and a majesty so faint it almost fades from view while the other two quarrel.

The *Fuseli Poems*, of course, are not a connected sequence. Many of the poems have little or no connection with the labyrinthine castle, though none, I think, are at odds with it. The recurrent city, for example, is an extension of the same image. Though the poems vary considerably in technique (there is even a grimly mysterious little poem in the style of "Jake and the Kid"—another experiment in unexpected tone and matter), they are almost without exception flawless aesthetic structures. Happily their excellence does not end there. The most unsophisticated reader could hardly fail to be moved by the compassion for wandering, crippled humanity that gives them richness and depth. One of the most moving poems, in fact, is a quite simple, early villanelle, "City Park Merry-Go-Round":

> Freedom is seldom what you now believe.
> Mostly you circle round and round the park:
> Night follows day, these horses never leave.

Or take this as an example, two stanzas from "Children of the Sun":

> I think about my past and try to change
> Into a singing metaphor a silent heart,
> A frail red parrot perched within its cage
> Repeating what it hears and cackling without change
> All that ear hears and tongue speaks. I form in thought
> The singing form that forms the silent heart.
>
> But parrots bring in sleep only the surly shape
> Of images of men turned into beasts
> Carrying their loads of shame upon their backs,
> That forest where the trees are shapes of girls
> And every stone an image of a face, and eyes
> Are in the flowers, and I could weep for all
> Those lost and stoned and silent faces.

One of these poems mentions Madman Smart, the eighteenth-century poet, author of "A Song to David" and "Jubilate Agno", who composed his most inspired poem in a madhouse, and of whom Dr. Johnson said: "Madness frequently discovers itself merely by unnecessary deviation from the usual modes of the world. . . . He insisted on people praying with him; and I'd as lief pray with Kit Smart as any one else. Another charge was, that he did not love clean linen; and I have no passion for it." I cannot answer for Mandel's linen.

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