

WILLIAM FAULKNER

by

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Now that Faulkner is dead his reputation may well go into decline, as Hemingway's has done, but there is a chance that for some time yet it will continue to rise. Hemingway's manner and matter had become all too familiar long before his death, but in England, at least, we have scarcely begun to take the measure of Faulkner's achievement. It is possible, of course, that we never shall. Many readers are repelled by what they consider the perversity, obscurity and unnecessary violence of his fiction, and this seems all too often to serve as an excuse for avoiding any close engagement with the work itself in all its difficulty and splendour. The enthusiastic reviews of The Reivers, here as in the United States, together with the obituary notices of last July, have provided direct and indirect evidence of this tendency even among the professional critics and they must, in sum, have provoked many admirers of Faulkner's work to mingled pleasure, pain and embarrassment.

President Kennedy's prompt judgement - 'Since Henry James, no writer has left behind such a vast and enduring monument to the strength of American literature' - has received the authoritative endorsement of Allen Tate, who recently spoke of Faulkner as 'the greatest American novelist after Henry James: a novelist of an originality and power not equalled by his contemporaries, Hemingway and Fitzgerald.' Most of the English tributes, too, were suitably encomiastic, but it was disturbing to find, a few weeks later, that The Reivers was being received here with praise quite as generous as that which had earlier been paid to Faulkner's work as a whole. It was described as 'this superlative book'; another reviewer spoke of it as 'a delight... from beginning to end' and went on: 'Some, because it is genial, not terrible, may think it a minor Faulkner. They will be wrong.' This is surely to exaggerate the merits and importance of The Reivers almost beyond recognition. It is a pleasant book and a funny one, with a few scenes approaching the wild comedy of pieces like "Mule in the Yard", "Spotted Horses" and "Was", the first chapter of Go Down, Moses. But it is not unmistakably the work of a great novelist, and it is scarcely to be compared

with the outstanding achievements of Faulkner's great period, with The Sound and the Fury, As I Lay Dying, Light in August, Absalom, Absalom!, The Hamlet, Go Down, Moses, or even Sanctuary, to which it often harks back.

Several of the reviewers, of course, kept their sense of proportion: 'the novel is very far from being one of his best,' wrote the anonymous reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement, while Leslie Fiedler, imported by The Guardian, argued in typically provocative manner that Faulkner, who had earlier divided women 'into the viable (to him) categories of mothers and whores', had succeeded in his last book 'in proving to his own satisfaction that the whores are mothers too.' It seems possible to wonder, however, whether the generally enthusiastic reception given to The Reivers on both sides of the Atlantic was not in some measure a reflection of the reviewers' relief at finding a Faulkner novel which they could read, understand and enjoy in a fairly straightforward and effortless manner. Sir Charles Snow, interviewed by the New York Times on the occasion of Faulkner's death, said: 'Mr. Faulkner was enormously admired all over the world. Possibly he was admired more than read.' This was a shrewd observation, for it is undoubtedly true both that Faulkner's reputation at the time of his death was largely the creation of literary opinion outside America and that many of those who subscribed to the general estimate of Faulkner's greatness did so without enthusiasm and often without any very intimate acquaintance with his books. The continued hostility towards Faulkner as a wilfully difficult writer, deliberately obscure and arrogantly careless, was fully apparent in some of the obituary notices, notably in the one by Orville Prescott in the New York Times. Prescott echoed all the familiar criticisms of Faulkner's style which were first made by Wyndham Lewis - and with some force - as long ago as the early 'thirties and which have been repeated again and again in the succeeding years, despite the growing body of criticism which has shown clearly the remarkable extent to which Faulkner was a deliberate and conscientious artist, one who carefully structured his novels and calculated his effects, and who, though not always successful, was always fully aware of what he was doing and always in absolute control both of his material and of his style.

If we feel pleasure at the thought that Faulkner lived to see the enthusiastic American reviews of The Reivers - though he seems to have cared singularly little about such matters - we may also find faint, sad grounds for satisfaction in the thought that he died too soon for his views on Southern autonomy to be put to the test by federal intervention not merely in Mississippi but in Oxford itself. 'Do you love the South?' someone asked Faulkner when he was in Japan, and Faulkner's reply virtually paraphrased the famous last paragraph of Absalom, Absalom!: 'Well, I love it and hate it. Some of the things there I don't like at all, but I was born there, and

that's my home, and I will still defend it even if I hate it.' This love-hate relationship with the South was central to Faulkner's personality, insofar as we can yet come to grips with that enigma, and to his work. In Go Down, Moses Ike McCaslin sees the South almost as a kind of Eden: 'this land this South for which He had done so much with woods for game and streams for fish and deep rich soil for seed and lush springs to sprout it and long summers to mature it and serene falls to harvest it and short mild winters for men and animals'. But we must set against this another voice, that of Doc Peabody in As I Lay Dying: 'That's the one trouble with this country: everything, weather, all, hangs on too long. Like our rivers, our land: opaque, slow, violent; shaping and creating the life of man in its implacable and brooding image.' A feeling similar to this seems to have prompted Faulkner to give to one of the sections of The Hamlet the title, 'The Long Summer'.

Faulkner's great and almost exclusive subject is the South. He did not choose his subject, it chose itself; it might almost be said that the South chose Faulkner. Born where he was, when he was, the South confronted him from the beginning, thrusting itself irresistibly upon him both as his material and as his theme. Faulkner throughout his work uses, explores, even celebrates the Southern legend, but he never treats it uncritically. He is rarely concerned, except in such lesser works as Sartoris and The Unvanquished, with fighting over the old battles of the South with the North. Rather he is engaged in the continuing battle of the South with itself, or of himself with the South. This, of course, is one of the reasons why Faulkner's political and social pronouncements tended so often to seem vague and inconsistent, and why it is important, in this respect, not to assume too readily that he is to be associated with the opinions and attitudes of any character or group of characters in his novels.

It is typical of Faulkner that it should be almost impossible to define categorically his attitude to the Negro. Clearly he does not see the Negro simply as a scapegoat for the ills of the South, as some early critics suggested. In Go Down, Moses Ike McCaslin declares to his cousin that the Negroes are better than white men, although it transpires that they are better mainly in the sense of being free from the guilt of slavery. In The Sound and the Fury it is Dilsey, the old Negro cook, who provides the one consistent centre of faith, love and trust in the disintegrating Compson household, and in the appendix Faulkner later wrote he appended to Dilsey's name the simple, moving words, 'They endured'. But when all is said, the general presentation of Negroes in Faulkner's work - including The Reivers - forces us to conclude that his attitude does not differ significantly from that of other intelligent Southerners. Acknowledging the virtues of the Negro, agreeing that his lot must be improved and that he must be allowed his full dignity as a human being, even loving, in an exasperated kind of way, one or two Negroes who have been family servants of long standing, Faulkner seems nevertheless to write

as one assumes he must have acted, on the almost unconscious assumption of Negro inferiority, reacting always according to the established and familiar patterns of the Southern white man he was born and brought up to be.

As much as anything else, it is probably this severe limitation in Faulkner's political and social outlook which has led many Northern critics, and especially those writing within the American liberal tradition, to underestimate him as a novelist. 'Of our novelists today,' wrote Lionel Trilling, 'perhaps only William Faulkner deals with society as the field of tragic reality and he has the disadvantage of being limited to a provincial scene.' But was this limitation a disadvantage for Faulkner, any more than the Wessex setting was a disadvantage for Hardy or, to mention the other English novelist of whom Faulkner most often reminds us, any more than the Yorkshire moors were a handicap to Emily Bronte? To a greater extent than any other modern American novelist, Faulkner creates his own world, and one of the outstanding qualities of his best work is the astonishing richness of social presentation – the detailed precision of description, as in the sheer evocative listing of the goods in Jason Campson's shop or of the items in the commissary book in the fourth section of 'The Bear' in *Go Down, Moses* – and the marvellous sense of place, whether it be the heart of the wilderness or the inside of Miss Reba's brothel. Faulkner turns his limitation of scene into a positive source of strength, and if – as Trilling rightly suggests – he is one of the few modern figures to have achieved the true tragic dimension, there can be no doubt that the intensity of his tragic power, in novels such as *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Light in August*, and *The Sound and the Fury*, derives both from his deeply localised sense of social reality and from his sense of history, which is for him so powerfully and poignantly a sense of the proud and shameful history of the courageous, careless, gallant and oppressive South.