



Following Faulkner

*The Critical
Response to
Yoknapatawpha's
Architect*

Taylor Hagood

Following Faulkner

*Studies in American Literature and Culture:
Literary Criticism in Perspective*

Brian Yothers, Series Editor
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Books in the series *Literary Criticism in Perspective* trace literary scholarship and criticism on major and neglected writers alike, or on a single major work, a group of writers, a literary school or movement. In so doing the authors—authorities on the topic in question who are also well-versed in the principles and history of literary criticism—address a readership consisting of scholars, students of literature at the graduate and undergraduate level, and the general reader. One of the primary purposes of the series is to illuminate the nature of literary criticism itself, to gauge the influence of social and historic currents on aesthetic judgments once thought objective and normative.

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Yoknapatawpha's Architect

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CAMDEN HOUSE

Rochester, New York

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for Jack, Olivia, and Emory Pence

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In this we can see perhaps why the Yoknapatawpha saga remains incomplete necessarily and not simply because of Faulkner's death. For each new reader, each new critic who takes up Faulkner's task of wondering, musing, and mulling, and each new interpretation that proves less than definitive is in some sense a contribution to the saga as well as a tribute to its founder.

—Olga W. Vickery

Introduction

THIS BOOK OFFERS A ROAD MAP to Faulkner criticism, and to that end it strives to accomplish two goals. First, it seeks to record the historical development of the critical conversation on Faulkner. It does so not only by presenting writing on Faulkner chronologically but also by contextualizing it in the larger field of literary criticism. Scholarly discourse advances with the progress of intellectual movements, so attention will be given to those movements and the ways they both illuminate and appropriate Faulkner's writing. The reader will notice a persistent reciprocal relationship between Faulkner and literary critical movements in that they mutually affirm and inform one another. Often when new modes of criticism arise critics look to test them on Faulkner's writing, which in turn bolsters his critical *caché*. It is partly because scholars so often test their theories on his work that it continues to be so prominent, while at the same time theories gain prominence by engaging Faulkner.

The second goal is to orient new scholars in ways that help them contribute to Faulkner studies in meaningful ways. As with any conversation, the Faulkner scholarly discussion demands not secret handshakes exactly but definitely an awareness of what to say and how to say it. Very often undergraduates and graduate students, and sometimes even professional scholars new to the field, have no way of evaluating the scholarship they encounter. Few things mark a fledgling as quickly as the lack of awareness of which arguments have already been made. While current and future scholars may revisit old arguments, they must be aware of and address their contexts; if a scholar quotes a New Critic such as Cleanth Brooks without showing an awareness of that quote's context vis-à-vis the current one, the scholar's credibility could be compromised. Thus, this book offers historicized descriptions of the critical approaches to Faulkner with comment on the ways scholars tend to view them in the current critical climate. Understanding these viewpoints can help a scholar forge new directions in Faulkner studies. Hopefully this book will also be useful in teaching, giving a ready reference for students writing papers on a much-discussed and difficult author. This book cannot substitute for reading the books and articles on Faulkner themselves. Rather, it provides a *narrative* that operates on three levels. The first level presents the historical development of the critical response to Faulkner, from criticism contemporary with the initial publications of his writing through the beginning of the twenty-first century. The second is a broad stroke one that outlines the

larger movements in the field and explains the ideological, political, and aesthetic forces that fueled them. The final level homes in on especially influential critical works, providing their arguments and their reception. With an understanding of these three aspects of the history of Faulkner criticism, the reader will know where to begin looking for scholarly works most relevant to his or her own projects and interests while also being able to contextualize works not mentioned in these pages as well as those yet to be written within the arc of that history.

Narrative takes precedence in this book: for differing narratives, organizational approaches to this material, and more granular detail on individual scholarly items the reader can look beyond this book to a handful of useful resources. Two essays that address the critical reception are Timothy P. Caron's chapter in Blackwell's *Companion to William Faulkner* (2007) and Theresa Towner's in her own *Cambridge Introduction to William Faulkner* (2008). There are also books that feature essays by multiple authors, most notably *A Companion to Faulkner Studies* (Greenwood Press, 2004), edited by Charles A. Peek and Robert W. Hamblin, and *The Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner* (1995), edited by Philip M. Weinstein. These essays and books do not attempt to present the narrative *Following Faulkner* does, but once the reader has digested the narrative herein these other books and essays can provide perspectives and details only possible in projects with narrower focus. A different kind of resource is the annual bibliographic essay on Faulkner criticism featured in *American Literary Scholarship*. Published by the American Literature Section of the Modern Language Association, *American Literary Scholarship* is a yearly volume of essays that reviews all the books and articles published in American literary criticism the foregoing year, and an essay on Faulkner is a mainstay. By its nature, the Faulkner essay cannot provide an overarching narrative of the unfolding of Faulkner scholarship, but with a sense of that narrative a researcher can delve into much greater detail. And the annual essay in *American Literary Scholarship* can do what this book cannot, which is to keep pace with future developments. At the end of this book I offer some brief thoughts on what might happen in the near future in the field, but this book's value lies in outlining the past, not the present, otherwise it would be obsolete upon publication. The Faulkner *American Literary Scholarship* essay provides up-to-the-moment information while this book can help make the annual *American Literary Scholarship* review essay intelligible.

The idea of tracing future developments in Faulkner studies that will appear after this book's publication relates strongly to the conceit of "following" that propels my narrative. Faulkner followed the precedent set by fiction writers before him, and many fiction writers have emulated Faulkner's own writing, a few of whom will be mentioned in this book. Meanwhile, scholars follow Faulkner, the writers who follow him, and also

other scholars. In using the word “following” I may seem to be ascribing a secondarity to scholarship, but I mean it as a fitting and complimentary concept not only for the dedicated and impassioned vocation of Faulkner scholars but also the flow of exchange between Faulkner’s work and those who elucidate it. If anything, I mean to celebrate literary criticism for the art it can be at its best. To follow Faulkner as a scholar amounts to meaning-making in which literature and criticism blend seamlessly, and this volume stands as an homage to the work of talented scholars for whom following Faulkner led to great scholarly and critical achievement. Often the vanishing point of Faulkner’s fictional vision seems just beyond the scholar’s grasp, and the pursuit of that elusive point pushes the critic farther still. The result is both a furtherance of criticism and of Faulkner’s writing forward in a mutual following of the future’s onward pace. It is the kind of following into and after being itself that Jacques Lacan so powerfully considers in the play of French (*je suis* as “I am” and “I follow”) in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, a trailing (Faulkner would appreciate the hunting implication) that unfolds both writerly and critical ontology. To follow, ultimately, in this book becomes to become, and is a solemn and vital business of, as Faulkner put it in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, “creating out of the materials of the human spirit something that did not exist before.”

This volume, then, begins with the earliest scholarly, critical, biographical, fictional, and even poetical responses to Faulkner. Certain landmark essays published during Faulkner’s lifetime require particular attention, including those by Robert Penn Warren and Malcolm Cowley. By the time of his death, writers such as Flannery O’Connor and Eudora Welty were following Faulkner at the same time that literary scholars were producing voluminous New Critical and structuralist/myth-based criticism. The last three decades of the twentieth century saw the anxiety of Faulkner’s influence increased for such writers as Barry Hannah and Richard Ford while biographers explored Faulkner’s life further and critics influenced by Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and other theorists found in him an author whose work glowed in new theoretical spotlights. The twenty-first century sees a Faulkner no less revered or intimidating but arguably more embraceable for both writers and scholars looking to see his weaknesses as well as his strengths while contextualizing him globally in both print and digital platforms.

Many themes and issues have occupied Faulkner scholars, and they have changed over time. The following chapters detail them, but I think it helpful first to offer an overview of some of the major ones in order to help the reader see the overall arc of the scholarship. Early Faulkner critics—those writing while he was still alive—were often interested in trying to reconcile the United States South (I refrain from using the term “American” South for the sake of precision and because many southern

studies scholars consider the modifier “American” to imply silently a nationalistic and imperialistic hegemony, as will be explained further at the beginning of chapter 4) as a place of value with Faulkner’s presentation of it as one of derangement, sickness, and violence. These critics also studied his style intensely. In a related vein, scholars have debated whether to read Faulkner’s body of work as a coherent vision or as a group of books and shorter pieces that stand alone and represent a constantly developing and changing vision: included in this topic is the problem of inconsistencies across texts that Faulkner himself either refused to or failed to fix. Equally of interest was history in his writing, with debates raging about whether his novels should be taken as historically accurate documents or studies of characters that may not always get the historical details right. Another often revisited question is whether or not Faulkner should be canonized in the so-called grand tradition of literary history, especially as ideas about canonicity have developed and changed. Many critics have written about the role of myth in Faulkner’s writing, whether his drawing on mythologies or his generating his own, particularly about the South. Critical interest in Faulkner’s depiction of race, meaning blackness, whiteness, and other racial configurations has been strong. Likewise, Faulkner’s ways of creating women characters and responding to women generally in both his life and work have fascinated scholars, with many worrying that Faulkner was an outright misogynist and others arguing that his creations transcend his problematic personal views. Such are the major debates, while plenty of smaller debates on such things as religion, narrative strategies, and the various echoes of preceding works may also be found in the history of Faulkner criticism.

I spend most of my efforts discussing books instead of articles. This decision is based partly on the fact that the sheer number of articles written on Faulkner is simply too great to offer any systematic presentation of them while still maintaining the narrative thread. Articles on Faulkner appear in journals around the world on a regular basis, ranging from notes on a possible source to slightly longer *explications de text* to full-length critical essays. The content of these pieces can take the form of anything from scholarship intimately tied to the progression of the main trends in Faulkner studies to discussions far removed from the mainstream of the field. Besides the fact that it would probably be impossible to track every single one of these essays down in any reasonable amount of time, it would be extremely difficult to handle them with anywhere near the depth as that found in previously mentioned yearly *American Literary Scholarship* Faulkner essays. More importantly, though, while there have been some very important short pieces, Faulkner criticism’s major moves have been marked by books. And when major essays *have* appeared, they often find their way into essay collections or have been revised as parts of books.

I close this introduction by begging forgiveness for omissions. Again, the aim of this book is to provide a narrative instead of an exhaustive list and account of everything ever written on Faulkner. The latter would require volumes. Anything missing is not an indication of its being of less value in my viewpoint but simply because it does not fit into the narrative I present. The exigencies (and at times hegemony) of narrative also have led me to proportion my discussions of texts in ways that established Faulkner scholars may not always agree with. Proportionality becomes most conspicuous a little over half-way into the book when the treatments of individual critical texts lengthen and continue so until the end, which may give the reader a sense of swimming from the beach into the deep water. As I explain there where the reef ends, in many cases both the complexity of the arguments and the number of their dimensions in play in the Faulkner scholarly discussion require more space to treat adequately. Not only will readers probably disagree with my decisions at certain points, but future shifts in the field could make some or even many texts that are now important less relevant—this book shows their positions, as I understand them, at the time of publication. I should say too that most of the work I discuss is written in English; if one were to write of Faulkner criticism across languages around the world, then the story of the development of the scholarly conversation on Faulkner would look different still. In keeping with the designs of the series of which this book is a part, my goal has been readability and orientation. More than ever I am humbled by the many incredibly talented scholars who have written on Faulkner, and I well realize how difficult it is to get one's own voice heard in the roaring chorus of published work. For that reason, I regret very much that certain things have had to be left out. That said, for a large field such as this one, reflecting on the shape of its history has much value, and disagreement and discussion about it is, I believe, healthy.

1: Genius in the Hinterland

FAULKNER APOCRYPHA HAS THE AUTHOR as a child following in the footsteps of the ancestor for whom he was named. Colonel William Clark Falkner was an adventurer, soldier, town and railroad builder, and would-be congressman who was shot and killed by a political enemy on the eve of his election to the state legislature. The romantic life of this ancestor would furnish fodder for his great-grandson's imagination, but one of the things the great-grandson latched onto about the Colonel was his writing. In between killing attackers in self-defense, fighting in the Mexican and Civil Wars, and building railroads, the Colonel found time to turn his hand to creative writing. As a young veteran of the Mexican War he wrote an epic poem entitled *The Siege of Monterey* (1851), and later he wrote a travel book entitled *Rapid Ramblings in Europe* (1882), which bore some resemblance to the more successful travel books of Mark Twain. He also wrote novels, including *The Little Brick Church* (1882) and *Lady Olivia* (1895). His most important literary creation was *The White Rose of Memphis* (1881); its narrative is a ponderous and sentimental one with orphans and ghosts, a forgettable tear-jerker, but it made an impact on north Mississippi (including providing the names of at least one stop along the Colonel's railroad that grew into a town named Ingomar) and on the future Nobel Laureate, who reportedly proclaimed at a young age that he wanted to be a writer like his great-granddaddy. Biographers have well pointed out that Faulkner looked to emulate his great-grandfather in many ways, from his attempts to fight in World War I to his later buying a farm in an effort to re-establish himself as landed gentry, and his writing was no exception.

By his teenage years, however, William Cuthbert Faulkner's knowledge of literature had grown far beyond just his great-grandfather's writing. Faulkner's mother had guided his reading in the classics throughout his youth, grounding him in great literature. By his teenage years he lost interest in formal schooling, dropping out in order to spend his time wandering the north Mississippi hills and reading and writing (mostly poetry) under the tutelage of his slightly older friend, Phil Stone, who knew of the avant-garde writers and who furnished Faulkner with the books and journals that held their work. The time would come when Faulkner would leave Stone behind, and then Stone became the follower. But for now, it was the older boy who was the leader, and when Faulkner temporarily lost his childhood sweetheart, Estelle, to another man, Stone