Book Review

Wheel of the Rimless Spokes

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Part I*

FAULKNER'S LONGSTANDING ideological quarrel with himself has as counterpart the struggle for decision within that other Southern movement, the early Fugitives. Louise Cowan (authorized by research so thorough that, during their 1956 reunion at Vanderbilt, Fugitives deferred to her knowledge of exact dates and sequences) speaks of the "unity of feeling" shared throughout the twenties, rather than of any group esthetic or social prescriptions. Sometimes Fugitive antagonisms were not only logically irreconcilable but so intensely personal that they required apology. Ransom and Tate bitterly divided over the admissibility of *The Waste Land's* counterpoint as poetry. Similarly, Tate and others felt that Donald Davidson should be recognized sole editor of *The Fugitive* whose burdens, in fact, had already fallen on him, although Ransom preferred to pretend that the magazine was a communal effort. Davidson constantly urged the folk epic on men inclined to lyric irony; and later he alone refused to go into self-exile from the South which all felt did not deserve them.

Such differences were the calculated risk taken by men of private imagination who abhorred being programmed. Each honed his intellectual edge on the other, to the limit of nervous endurance. Beyond that limit there still was mutual charity (when Tate complained about others' contributions, he was reminded that some of his poems had also been published under protest). In some cases kinship helped, or their common training in classic humanism. The temper of such uneasy discussions—an admittedly special "unity of feeling"—encouraged the formulation of Ransom's extended dualism, Brooks' theory of paradox, and Warren's drama-

* Louise Cowan, *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History* (LSU Press: Baton Rouge, 1959); Hyatt H. Waggoner, *William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World* (University of Kentucky Press: Lexington, 1959)

tization of the dialectic negotiation of identity. They were essentially united also to the extent that their awareness of controlled violence as a principle of evolution reflected the South's often submerged "torture of equilibrium," as Ransom called it.

Perhaps because Faulkner has withheld himself so long from such conversations, he has had to act as his own adversary. Unfortunately, divisions which in a group can be respected as mutual provocations may seem in a single writer unwarranted indecisions. The clutch of critical books that first ran analogical surveys on Faulkner's work nearly ten years ago were satisfied to trace the socio-mythological coordinates of his macrocosmic county. Now Hyatt Waggoner has considered it due time to calculate the horizons themselves, Faulkner's metaphysical over-plat. The result is a near-parody of pietistic Scriptural name-dropping and close misreading. Christ-images abound (only Jason Compson is spared, though his initials are as suggestive as Joe Christmas!). Benjy becomes the "Word swaddled in darkness, 'unable to speak a word'." Because Vardaman in *As I Lay Dying* confuses a fish with his mother, Addie Bundren is designated Redeemer first-class (although she loves only one of her own children).

Midway, after Waggoner realizes that Popeye, in *Sanctuary*, was born on Christmas Day, he begins to see the possibility that many of these religious parallels so strenuously pursued might be questionable. Although intermittently he continues to confuse God with Gavin Stevens; calls Lena Grove a "natural saint"; and, paraphrasing Sherwood Anderson's self-pity, intimates that every man undergoes crucifixion, gradually he defines Faulkner more credibly as a humanist exploiting Christian legend for its dramatic value. (In "Mirrors of Chartres Street" Faulkner referred to the Christian "fairy tale"; more recently, overseas, he undefined Christianity as generalized humanitarianism, uncommitted to creed.) No longer trying to justify what Faulkner apparently never intended, Waggoner has confirmed the suspicions of those earlier critics who thought that Faulkner's theological implications were pagan or neo-romantically Promethean.

Part II**

ADMITTEDLY, certain kinds of critical judgment are difficult to pass on a writer who has declared his personal dissociation

** Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (eds.), *Faulkner in the University* (University of Virginia Press: Charlottesville, 1959); Olga Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation* (LSU Press: Baton Rouge, 1959); William Faulkner, *The Mansion* (Random House: New York, 1959).

of art and belief longer and more stubbornly than any Fugitive, as New Critic, has. But the solution surely is not to multiply the ambivalence already in Faulkner by assigning him an organon of meaning whose occasions of absence are thereafter derided. Throughout his term as Writer-in-Residence in Virginia and before a dozen different audiences, Faulkner has disavowed doctrinaire commitments of any kind, claiming he is not even a novelist but a failed poet, driven by his lyric demon, not by ideas. His convictions, he would insist, are intuitive and gratuitous, not rationally derived. The Old Testament has been available to him as tall tales of heroes and blackguards; the Passion Week, "a ready-made axe to use, but it was just one of several tools." Furthermore, the "ancient virtues" are offered as ethical imperatives not because of their possibly divine origin and sanction but, pragmatically, because without them men might feed on one another and neither prevail nor even endure.

The formlessness of *Faulkner in the University* is accidental but appropriate. (Originally Gwynn and Blotner had arranged their 40,000-foot taped transcript according to subject matter—likely, a pocketsize work—but later decided to recapture the incoherent, repetitious, often inconsequential spirit of the sessions, almost a parody of plots in Faulkner's lesser novels.) While trying sincerely to compensate for years of reticence, Faulkner's answers are still evasive to the degree that they describe what was *not* his intention, rather than what *was*. They are the words of a man as unwilling as any Fugitive to be programmed.

All the more remarkable, therefore, is the patterning of insights prepared by Olga Vickery who would have been disbelieved had she discovered a canonic consistency in *The Novels of William Faulkner*. Each of the major works is presented as its own experiential trial-truth. None is an illustration of received ideas, but each a totally unique and unprepared exploration, a multpile perspective of face in time's transit, its changes therefore best apprehended intuitively through the indirect heart and perhaps never comprehended. Certainly language is the most inarticulate means of its expression, as Olga Vickery demonstrates admirably in *Mosquitoes* and *Pylon*, usually ignored or patronized. As a consequence, no dogma is true; and ritual erodes into convention when it is regularized or imposed on, rather than evoked from, the individual; often the law is the adversary of justice; morality is self-righteousness clutched by any congregation, since every church to some degree is destructive of pure faith. (Her brilliant explication

of *The Fable* is particular proof of Faulkner's neo-romantic revolt against mass action or dicta.) Consummately, Faulkner has unsystematized his world; and this is what Olga Vickery's equal skill sees, a rhetorical unpatterning far more indicative than the simplistic Yoknapatawpha "grand design" offered by Malcolm Cowley. Understanding this, one can explain the necessary deviousness of Faulkner's successes—the frenetic disorder of reverberators, the surprise ricochet structures, the interbedded textures—as well as the flaw inherent in such relative failures as *The Mansion*, an entertainment for the unquestioning.

This latest novel's difficulties are due not so much to the thirty-odd years between its inception and execution, nor to its narrative complexities (these are superficial: Gavin, Ratliff and Chick's nearly interchangeable points of view constitute a sanctioning Over-voice). The difficulties derive from Faulkner's indecision about Flem Snopes' supposedly deserved death for crimes against the supposedly uncorrupt and uncontributing Eula (as well as her daughter Linda) and Mink. Flem is kept gagged so well, despite the babble of other voices allowed, and so many peripheral issues intervene, that his murder seems more contrived than doomed, and less than justified, dramatically or morally. Faulkner has admitted a grudging admiration for Flem during his early machiavellian rise from Frenchman's Bend to Jefferson; respectable now, he is useful only as scapegoat. But by victimizing Flem, Faulkner betrays again his old ambivalence, here expressed by Ratliff's declaration that no man is evil, they just lack sense. Hyatt Waggoner might argue that this is the ultimate Christian act: to regard even Flem as crucified man. Or is it mere token that in the blur of motion all cats are streaks of gray?

—From *Southwest Review.*

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Editorially Speaking

AN ARTICLE in a medical digest, discussing why doctors refer to themselves as "we," attributed this statement to Benjamin Frankin: "The editorial 'we' traditionally and historically is reserved for the exclusive use of heads of state, editors and people with tapeworms."

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