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The Big Thing on His Mind

Thomas Powers

William Faulkner: A Life Through Novels

by André Bleikasten, translated from the French by Miriam Watchorn with the collaboration of Roger Little, Indiana University Press, 473 pp., \$50.00



Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

William Faulkner in front of his house in Oxford, Mississippi, 1947

It would be a grave mistake for anyone trying to understand race in American history to overlook the novels of William Faulkner. Beneath their literary complexity can be found the clearest statement by anyone of the core abuse that has driven black–white conflict since slavery times, but first you have to pass a test. Faulkner’s French biographer, André Bleikasten, who devoted his life to understanding Faulkner, obviously passed the test himself, but it cannot have been easy for him. Bleikasten presents his readers with many examples of the test, but the one that seemed bluntest to me, impossible to mistake or ignore, emerges from an evening at Princeton in 1958 when Faulkner met J. Robert Oppenheimer. Both men were celebrated, Oppenheimer for building the first atomic bomb and Faulkner for writing the novels that won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1949.

Oppenheimer, when in the mood, could talk to just about anybody about anything, but Faulkner found conversation difficult with strangers; a bare *yes* or *no* was often all he could manage. Oppenheimer said he had recently seen a television play based on a Faulkner story and asked what Faulkner thought of television as a medium for the artist.

“Television is for niggers,” said Faulkner.

This is the test: Are you prepared to believe that the Faulkner who said that might also have something important to say about black–white conflict in American history? The test was probably easier for Bleikasten because he was French, because he studied the books before he studied the man, because he was interested in literature, not history or sociology, and because at the beginning of his life Bleikasten did not yet understand that for many white southerners nothing changed with the end of slavery except slavery.

Bleikasten’s long devotion to Faulkner began with a happy accident. In July 1962 he was nearing thirty and needed a safely dead writer of important novels in English for his doctoral thesis. He was close to committing himself to D.H. Lawrence when Faulkner died after falling from a hard-to-control horse in Virginia. Bleikasten devoted most of the next forty-five years to Faulkner, beginning with the novels, which he treated exhaustively in a book called *The Ink of Melancholy*, first published in 1990 and now reissued. Friends asked, why not follow the novels with a biography? Bleikasten resisted. “There are five already,” he thought. “Why a sixth?” But then an editor at a small French publishing house “harried me gently for months until finally I gave in.”

Bleikasten’s book on the novels took decades, the life about three years. It was published in France in 2007 and won three big prizes. By that time he was already mortally ill with cancer, and he died in 2009 before talk of an English translation had gone anywhere. His wife Aimee took on the task, which was completed by Miriam Watchorn with the help of Roger Little. The result in English is heavy in the hand but the book marches with narrative vigor, the result principally of Bleikasten’s clarity of thought. His points are never softened or simplified. Photographs capture Faulkner’s wary reticence, and Bleikasten gets the rest. In 1949, Faulkner told the critic Malcolm Cowley that he thought a bare-bones epitaph would be enough: “He made the books and he died.” Bleikasten puts the books first, too, but he sees things in them that the life helps make visible.

The big facts of Faulkner's life were place and time; he was born in Mississippi in 1897, when the eleven states of the old Confederacy were enacting anti-black Jim Crow laws to exclude African-Americans from public life. The intent of the laws was reinforced by white mobs that brutally lynched blacks for real and imaginary crimes. They weren't just hanged but were often tortured as well.

Bleikasten notes that during one five-year period of Faulkner's childhood, 1903–1908, more than eighty African-Americans were lynched in Mississippi, including one in Faulkner's hometown of Oxford. The victim was Nelse Patton, charged with murdering a white woman with a straight razor. A mob broke into the Oxford jail with the help of local boys, including Faulkner's friend John Cullen, who were boosted through a window so they could unlock the door from inside. Patton was shot dead, castrated, attached to a car that dragged him through the streets of Oxford, and finally burned. Faulkner, who was eleven at the time and lived barely a hundred yards from the jail, wrote about the Patton lynching in two of his books, *Light in August* and *Intruder in the Dust*.

The world of Faulkner's childhood was obsessed with race. Faulkner was born lucky, since he was white, but his family held no great place in Oxford. A feckless farmer in Faulkner's short story "Two Soldiers" is described as always behind; "He can't get no further behind," a son remarks. Faulkner's father was like that. He failed in business repeatedly and was fired from his last job as comptroller at the University of Mississippi when he refused to contribute to local politicians. Faulkner's grandfather had been a bigger man locally but was disgraced at the end of his life after he ran off with some Oxford town funds and "a beautiful octoroon." The pride of the family was Faulkner's great-grandfather, who had fought in the Civil War, built a railroad, and was shot dead in the streets of Oxford by a former partner. Just as remarkable was the great-grandfather's huge popular success with a Civil War novel called *The White Rose of Memphis*, which prompted Faulkner at nine to say, "I want to be a writer like my great-grand-daddy."

The young Faulkner was a compulsive reader in childhood and did well in school but drifted out of college before getting a degree or knowing how to take the next step. He was short—five feet four by Bleikasten's account—and awkward with girls. His two early loves, Estelle Oldham in Oxford and Helen Baird in New Orleans, both abandoned him for men who were better bets. But Estelle's first marriage foundered, and she married Faulkner when he asked again. Faulkner told a friend, "They don't think we're gonna stick, but it is gonna stick." Why he wanted to marry her is a mystery. Both were alcoholics and had nothing else in common. When a daughter was born in 1933 (after the death in infancy of a premature baby girl named Alabama), they quit having sex and tormented each other for the next thirty years.

Bleikasten stresses the fact that Faulkner was a storyteller in both senses of the term. He loved writing complex stories of “the human heart in conflict with itself” (a phrase he used in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in Stockholm in 1950), and he compulsively embroidered the bare facts of his own prosaic life. Writing later about the months he lived in New Orleans in 1925, Faulkner claimed that he supported himself by working for a bootlegger. He had a launch that I would take down [Lake] Ponchartrain into the Gulf to an island where the rum, the green rum, would be brought up from Cuba and buried, and we would dig it up and bring it back to New Orleans.... And I would get a hundred dollars a trip for that.

Nothing about this story was true, but just as remarkable is where he told it—in an American lit class at West Point in April 1962, about two months before he died.

Yet bigger lies were told about his eventless months with the Canadian Royal Air Force; after the war he limped from imaginary machine gun wounds suffered, he claimed, in aerial duels over the fields of France. Faulkner was still in flight school when the war ended, was never sent to France, was never wounded in combat as he claimed, and never even took up a plane alone until years later. Whether he lied to woo girls, or because he was desperate for distinction, or for the simple fun of it is hard to say. But Bleikasten is blunt about Faulkner’s fabrications and writes that “he lied to his parents, his brothers, his friends, and later his son-in-law, his mistresses, his editors, his colleagues in Hollywood, and his doctors.”

In time Faulkner told fewer tall tales and had the deeper pleasure of constructing elaborate fictions in prose. He seems to have been following the example of his friend Sherwood Anderson in New Orleans, whose mornings-only writing schedule in 1925 appealed to Faulkner. “You’ve got too much talent,” Anderson warned him. “You can do it too easy, in too many different ways. If you’re not careful, you’ll never write anything.”

Faulkner set to work but was slow to find his subject. Two novels—*Soldiers’ Pay* (1926) and *Mosquitoes* (1927)—came and went. With his third he followed Anderson’s advice to stick to “that little patch up there in Mississippi where you started from.” Faulkner loved the sprawling complex novel that followed, but one publisher after another rejected the book, *Flags in the Dust*, until it was radically cut and retitled *Sartoris* (1929). But that novel, loosely centered on Faulkner’s own struggle to fit into civilian life after the war, showed him the way. “Beginning with *Sartoris* I discovered that my own little postage stamp of soil was worth writing about...so I created a cosmos of my own.”

Faulkner’s cosmos was Yoknapatawpha County in northern Mississippi, with a courthouse and the town of Jefferson at its center, a thinly fictionalized version of Oxford, Mississippi, where he had spent the largest part of his childhood, knew everybody, and heard many of the stories that emerged in somewhat altered but generally transparent form in fifteen of his twenty novels. Many of the characters in the books come from the same half-dozen families, both white and black, spanning a century beginning in the 1830s, when the first cotton farms were established on land ceded by the Chickasaw nation of Native Americans.

Few of the books sold well, especially in the beginning. Faulkner got by in the early years with frequent stints writing for the movies in Hollywood, where he met the great love of his life, in Bleikasten's view, Meta Carpenter, a script girl working for Howard Hawks, director of *The Big Sleep* on which Faulkner worked. Faulkner had other girlfriends as well, developed a reputation as a man hard to interview, answered contumaciously when pestered about politics, spent too much money renovating a house in Oxford, was churlish at the outset about accepting the Nobel Prize in person ("Everybody from the Swedish ambassador to my damn nigger houseboy has been telling me to do right!"), and stubbornly refused to admit that some horses were too much for him.

Bleikasten scants none of the life but is interested above all in the books. One or two might be called entertainments, using the term in Graham Greene's sense. Many can be as hard to read as the begats in the Bible or Heidegger on history. They are awash in detail, knotted, inexact, disturbing, and obscure in their fierce pursuit of elusive insights. It is hard to be sure what Faulkner is trying to understand, and hard to decide if he has understood it. Few Americans ever tackle Faulkner. Those forced to read him in high school or college remember little, perhaps Benjy looking at Caddy's drawers in *The Sound and the Fury* or Temple Drake's rape with a cornucob in *Sanctuary*.

But there is a logic to Faulkner's dependence on difficulty. It serves two purposes. In some of the novels, and especially in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the difficulty ensured that Faulkner's neighbors would not know what he was talking about lest they burn his barn, if not worse. The second purpose was to force readers to struggle to get the story straight. A poem or a short story in Faulkner's view was too small, too soon over, to encompass the big thing on his mind—the great submerged obsessive guilty burden of slave times, when all whites knew but few said that slaves were not only unpaid laborers but unpaid sexual servants.

To say it flat out, as that does, is a way to get past the fact in a hurry. Faulkner was not in a hurry. The narrator of his story "Uncle Willy" notes that "Papa told me once that someone said if you know it you can say it." Faulkner knew it and somehow won permission—drinking may have helped here—to say it, "all of hit," as Mollie Beauchamp stresses at the end of *Go Down, Moses*. She is speaking of the life and death of her black grandson and also of the century of slavery and its aftermath that determined his fate. "Is you gonter put hit in de paper? I wants hit all in de paper. All of hit.

"Five books address and wrestle with Faulkner's central obsession, which in one mood he called "the past" and in another "the South." These novels embody the second thing Faulkner learned from writing *Sartoris*—"that not only each book had to have a design but the whole output or sum of an artist's work had to have a design." About the past he famously wrote in a late novel,

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” He meant that the meaning and the burden of the past are inextricably laced within the present. “There is no such thing as *was*—only *is*,” he told his last girlfriend, Jean Stein, when she interviewed him for *The Paris Review*. About the South Faulkner was ambivalent, especially with strangers. “Well, I love it and hate it,” he told reporters in Japan in 1955. “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.”

Faulkner’s love and his hate are knotted together most tightly in the five novels that are primarily about race, but it would be perverse to describe them as a defense of the South. Indictment is more like it. As the books appeared, Bleikasten writes, southerners, generally, starting in Faulkner’s home town of Oxford, detested them all after a page or two. A partial exception was eventually made for the last of the five, *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), which they forgave and indulged when it was made into a popular film. The other four are *Sanctuary* (1931), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and *Go Down, Moses* (1942).

To understand how these books fit into Faulkner’s grand design on the subject of the South, it helps to examine the chosen word in the South for the woman Faulkner’s grandfather ran off with in 1887, ten years before Faulkner was born. The word is “octoroon.” It means a person who is one-eighth African-American, or in polite usage in the nineteenth century, one-eighth Negro. A quadroon would have one Negro grandparent, and a mulatto would have one Negro parent. The three terms were coined in slave times and refer only to African-Americans; a person with one Chinese or one Pacific Islander or one Inuit great-grandparent would not be an octoroon.

The final point to understand is that “octoroon” neither says nor implies anything much about actual genetic makeup. The African-American great-grandparent is any person who was identified, accepted, and treated at the time as an African-American, whatever their actual genetic mix. Nothing about the physical appearance of an octoroon says “octoroon.” In the South of Faulkner’s childhood, somebody had to tell you who was or wasn’t an octoroon. To find out you were one changed everything.

This point is crucial to *Absalom, Absalom!*, which some critics think Faulkner’s greatest novel. The central character is Thomas Sutpen, owner of a huge plantation called “Sutpen’s Hundred,” who had once been married in the West Indies to a planter’s daughter, with whom he had a son. He abandoned both when he learned that his wife was not “Spanish,” as her father claimed, but part African-American. Mixed race is a factor in all of Faulkner’s core novels. Joe Christmas in *Light in August* agonizes over his “black blood.” “Is it certain, proved, that he has negro blood?” a character asks. Faulkner never says, but Christmas is tortured equally by the taint and its uncertainty. He murders a white lover, is hunted down, castrated, and killed by townspeople infuriated by his refusal to act “like either a nigger or a white man.... That was what made the folks so mad.... It was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too.”

Sexual connection between master and slave is a principal driver of Faulkner's core novels, but it is never simple, never clearly told, and never without tragic consequence. In *Go Down, Moses*, the planter Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin has a daughter named Tomasina with Eunice, one of his slaves, who later walks into a creek and drowns herself on Christmas Day, 1832. The daughter is called Tomey and is of course McCaslin's slave as well; she dies giving birth to McCaslin's son, whose given name is Terrell but is called Turl and known by all as Tomey's Turl. He in turn fathers a son with Tennie Beauchamp named Lucas, who is the main character in *Intruder in the Dust*, threatened with lynching for a murder he did not commit. He refuses to defend himself, claiming "I belongs to the old lot. I'm a McCaslin," connected through his father (Turl) and his grandmother (Tomey) to L.Q.C. McCaslin. Popeye and Goodwin in *Sanctuary* are never clearly identified by race but are frequently described as dark or black, and suffer what might be called black fates—Goodwin lynched and burned, Popeye convicted and executed, both for murders they did not commit.

I have barely touched here on the driving force of gradations of race in Faulkner's work, where it is "black blood" that determines fate. Each horror is the consequence, often long delayed, of real crimes in the past that generate fatal confusions, push characters to madness and suicide, and fix everyone, permanently and without appeal, on one side or the other of the great social divide marked by the word "nigger." On one side of the color line in Faulkner's world people can call others "nigger" with impunity; on the other they must submit to it in silence.

What Faulkner contributes to this knotted history is the understanding that slavery's grip on white masters was sexual, and that the coping mechanism of the white South was denial. One of the few southerners to name the problem frankly was Mary Chesnut, daughter of one large slave owner and wife of another, who recorded the great fact in her diary before the Civil War:

I wonder if it be a sin to think slavery a curse to any land. Sumner said not one word of this hated institution which is not true.... Like the patriarchs of old our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines, and the mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children—and every lady tells you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household, but those in her own she seems to think drop from the clouds.

The Sumner she credits with speaking the truth was Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, who said as plainly as he dared that it was the lure of sexual license that explained the furious defense of slavery by slave owners. Everybody understood what Sumner meant when he attacked Senator Andrew Butler of South Carolina by name in 1856, saying, "Of course he has chosen a mistress to whom he has made his vows, and who, though ugly to others, is always lovely to him; though polluted in the sight of the world, is chaste in his sight—I mean the harlot, Slavery." Butler's kinsman, Congressman Preston Brooks of South Carolina—some say he was a nephew, some say a cousin—avenged the insult by beating Sumner nearly to death on the floor of the Senate with a gutta-percha cane, an act of violence that helped bring on the war that followed.

“As soon as the abolitionist Yankee North started to contest slavery,” Bleikasten notes, “its justification drove all political discourse.” He stops there, but we might go further and date the birth of the “solid South” to the 1845 split of the Baptist Church into a Southern and a Northern Convention, resulting from disputes over the issue of slavery. The solid South has never cracked but has continued to speak with a single dominant voice, justifying slavery before the Civil War and defending Jim Crow laws and lynching in the following century. During that century the solid South controlled the US Senate on the issues that mattered to it most, and it is no less solid in speaking with a single political voice now following its takeover of the Republican Party.

Faulkner learned about the history of race in the South from living there, not from books. His use of the word “nigger,” of which Bleikasten offers a full spectrum of examples, along with much else, identifies him as indelibly white in the Southern manner of the times. The day is probably coming when younger readers, bumping into “the N-word” repeatedly, can no longer pass the test I earlier mentioned. But the word was an ineradicable part of Faulkner’s world. A walk through the streets of Oxford in his youth revealed the South’s great either/or—black or white, one or the other, no exceptions. What Faulkner saw, and found a way to say that could not be silenced, was the fact of two centuries of sexual exchange, in which African-Americans were compelled to endure exploitation that whites minimized, rationalized, and violently denied.

Faulkner did not ultimately disguise what he thought about the great fact. The thing he refused to admit to the Japanese reporters in 1955 was something he had already said plainly in the final words of *Absalom, Absalom!* when Quentin Compson is flatly asked, “Why do you hate the South?”

The question comes at night in Quentin’s room at Harvard College from his friend Shreve, a Canadian. Quentin has been telling Shreve the story of Thomas Sutpen, his two sons, and the fate of his house at Sutpen’s Hundred. Quentin had been present when Clytie, Sutpen’s daughter by a slave, burned the house to the ground, killing both herself and her white brother, Henry, who had shot to death their half-black brother thirty years earlier.

Then Shreve’s question and Quentin’s answer:

“I dont hate it he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark; I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!”

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