

*Faulkner's Subject*  
*A Cosmos No One Owns*

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## Introduction

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A cosmos of one's own: Faulkner conceived as early as the 1920s that his unfolding fictions would come together in the guise of a coherent world. As "sole owner and proprietor," his would be the gaze that brings into being such a world: *Be Yoknapatawpha!* is the vocative engendering the creation. Gary Stonum and Eric Sundquist, among others, have examined the pitfalls and betrayals attendant upon this generative masculine ideal; and Faulkner's commentators more broadly have remarked on the unevenness of the career, the inconsistencies within its unfolding, and the protracted sadness of its closing years.<sup>1</sup>

Like Balzac, but also like Sutpen, Faulkner would become a demigod, drawing upon given historical materials but designing them in such a way as to reveal no traces but his own – the writer's own subjective lineaments writ large in the lives and landscapes of his shaping. Such a masculine urge toward self-ratification appears everywhere in the novels themselves, aggressively in the dynastic ambitions of a Sartoris or McCaslin or Flem Snopes, but just as often defensively as the need for sanctuary (a stay against "*the maelstrom of unbearable reality*" [AA 186]), or as the intensifying narrative desire for completion: to say it all, now, in one inclusive, ten-thousand-word sentence that would close the circle of utterance. Say it now, while coherence – even if only an illusion of memory and desire, an artifact of discourses approaching obsolescence – is still intact, the abrasions of "Chinese and African and Aryan and Jew" (GDM 364) still at bay. "My last book will be the Doomsday Book, the

<sup>1</sup> "Apocrypha" (Faulkner's chosen word for the furthest reaches of his work: from the actual "into the apocryphal" [Stein 82]) has been read by Joseph Urgo as signaling, however unintentionally, the sense not of an orderly cosmos but of a transgressive space where authority is in crisis. Martin Kreiswirth has recently commented on the diachronic/dialogic impulse that generates Yoknapatawpha: "Faulkner is always breaking what Derrida calls 'the law of genre.'"

Golden Book of Yoknapatawpha County. Then I shall break the pencil and I'll have to stop" (Stein 82).

Faulkner's major novels are the ones in which this desire (imperial or beleaguered) for self-ratifying clashes most urgently with the differential forces – shaped by politics, race, and gender – that would unseat the coherence of the struggling male subject. In theme and form these novels enact the invasion of the unknown into the precincts of the familiar, and they suggest that such acts of self-constitution produce a selfhood not sutured but splintered – a subjectivity irreparably fissured, a cosmos no one owns. The goal of my study is to open up the dimensions of that invasion and to remap the terrain of a subjectivity requiring different terms for its reconstrual.<sup>2</sup> I attend therefore to the texts written between 1929 and 1942, the ones in which the pressures for and against the acknowledgment of human *being* (in the writer, his characters, and his readers in the act of response) are most agonistically in play.<sup>3</sup>

Put otherwise, Faulkner's supreme novels are those in which the project of subjective coherence is under maximal stress. As I read him, Faulkner was hurt into greatness. What Kristeva calls the "semiotic" – those gaps and discontinuities in discourse that betoken the subject's living struggle against the culture's grids of Symbolic meaning – drives the experimental novels and reveals a narratorial subjectivity profoundly at odds with its conventional options.<sup>4</sup> The self-ratifying he and his white male protagonists require collides with and shatters against the alterities that make up both his inner and his outer world – alterities that I shall

<sup>2</sup> This remapping involves the use of a variety of contemporary discourses for thinking about the fissured subject: Lacanian psychoanalysis, Althusserian reflection on the subject as constituted by ideology (a paradigm revised and further developed in Macherey, Eagleton, and Jameson), Derridean deconstruction, Foucauldian commentary on the subject as modeled by disciplinary practices, feminist critiques of the universalized male model of subjectivity (articulated by Kristeva and Irigaray, expounded by Gallop, Rose, and Moi), Bakhtin's location of the subject as a site of dialogic encounter, Bourdieu's reading of the subject as one who activates the culture's "habitus," and finally Smith's revisionary critique of the current theoretical dismissal of the subject as an inescapably mystified entity. I apologize for this slew of names at the outset, but insofar as they are going genuinely to be used in the following chapters, it seems wise to introduce them here.

<sup>3</sup> Wadlington's *Reading Faulknerian Tragedy* attends with great suppleness to this dimension of the work.

<sup>4</sup> Whenever Symbolic or Imaginary appears capitalized in this study, the meaning system at work is Lacanian. I elaborate at some length upon Lacan's terminology in Chapter 3, but I might briefly indicate here the range of meanings I intend. *Imaginary* refers to the dimension of experience that operates visually – through irrationally projected and introjected images in the spatial field – and that begins prior to entry into language. *Symbolic* refers to the dimension of experience that operates within the field of language – the learned networks of kinship and culture, of code and law – and that assumes centrality after the Oedipal crisis. Both these sense-making registers begin in early childhood, and they continue to inflect subjectivity in overlapping and conflicting ways throughout life.

examine most fully in the form of women and blacks. From the intensity of this collision come the precious texts.

My “own” criterion of value (my reason for preferring this handful of novels) registers a Modernist sensibility opened to a Postmodernist critique. Faulkner’s brilliantly unruly early texts pass on to us (into us) the visceral assault of culture upon the subject. In their savage refusal to uplift – their continuous ironies – these novels creatively expose as unworkable the larger culture’s ideological designs. Despite a current critical move to rebuke Modernism for the blindnesses preserved within this stance of “seeing through everything,” I continue to locate Faulkner’s most memorable achievement within such a stance of rebellious experimentation. Arguing for his Modernist texts as both the locus of his value and the gauge against which we can read the rest of the career, I seek to identify the implicit (and broadly shared) cultural discourses that, by enabling this cosmos, keep him from ever mastering it as “his own.” The Postmodern dimension of this inquiry resides in my attempt to understand the necessary complicities – the cultural norms and linguistic resources, the positioning of the white male subject in relation to women and blacks – that permit subjective identity, that allow Faulkner to enter the field of discourse and become “Faulkner.”

If these are the texts in which the author most risked his authority, they are also the ones in whose name, over time, he has most obtained his authority. *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses* have enjoyed canonical status for some forty years now.<sup>5</sup> What larger cultural arrangements do they openly contest or implicitly endorse, such that we (the literary establishment) have institutionalized them, made them into Faulkner’s “signature,” even as, in their hazardous activities, they call the coherence of any signature into question? Why, especially, do we turn to *The Sound and the Fury* as not only Faulkner’s “heart’s darling” but ours too? I shall address these questions indirectly throughout the following chapters and explicitly in the conclusion, but my aim is less to puncture than to understand these novels’ claims to canonicity. Indeed, *The Sound and the Fury* has been for me, ever since I encountered it in 1960, the supreme American novel of our century. This study is inconceivable without that prior affection, yet I could never have written it without assenting and responding to cumulative pressures (provoked by critical theory) upon such a protected icon of value. The sanctuary at stake in this book – the subjectivity under scrutiny – bears my name as much as Faulkner’s.

<sup>5</sup> I omit *As I Lay Dying* from this scrutiny because so much of its representative quality is shared with *The Sound and the Fury*. My larger purpose is not to justify canonical exclusiveness but “repercussively” to interrogate Faulkner’s practice within a limited (but not privileged) frame.

I propose to treat this double interrogation (of Faulkner's coherent subjectivity, of my own) not as embarrassing but as enabling. Assignments of literary value involve simultaneously the writer's work, the productive and the receptive cultures' aesthetic politics, and the reader's subjective positioning with respect to these economies. None of these orientations is simply given, all of them invite inquiry. I shall address the four novels identified above as among Faulkner's finest and as problematic sites on which the higher culture has registered its imprimatur. Further, I shall accord the form of *The Sound and the Fury* canonical status within my own study, for I propose, Faulkner-fashion, to treat these four novels as he came at the Compson materials: by approaching them (as a group) four different times and with four sets of competing questions. Such a dialogic strategy privileges difference itself, allowing each lens to produce what it produces as I revisit the same (but never the same) terrain. Faulkner is a supremely perspectival novelist – or a “repercussive” one – and it seems right to frame the theoretical issues that most call into question his “signature” within a dialogic form that virtually constitutes his “signature.”

“Repercussive” I call him, and my book is likewise repercussive, always returning, though the place alters not just under a different set of lenses but in accord with the differing times of my visit. This diachronic dimension is, indeed, wrought into all writing. We would, like Faulkner, say it all in one monstrous sentence,<sup>6</sup> yet the fate of writing is that it proceeds in time and the mind alters during the time of the proceeding. “It is because writing is inaugural,” Derrida writes, “that it is dangerous and anguishing. It does not know where it is going, no knowledge can keep it from the essential precipitation toward the meaning that it constitutes and that is, primarily, its future. There is thus no insurance against the risk of writing” (“Force” 11). This small scandal – the aleatory hallmark of all protracted writing – is what we seek to cover up as we revise, and I have sought in this book both to acknowledge the scandal and to make it productive. I *have* revised, but not with the illusion that my text can become seamless, its argument synchronically complete. So the chapters deliberately retain some of the flavor of their original impetus. I aim for dialogic interactions, not the authority of a magisterial synthesis. This is not a cosmos I can own.

I have claimed that the critical issues I explore in this book problematize Faulkner's “signature,” and I mean by this more than the fact that his identity as a writer alters in time. It also alters according to the discursive options available to (and chosen by) him for pursuing it. No writer simply delivers into a neutral language his achieved identity: his self-engendered sense of “how it is” in here and out there. Perhaps the

<sup>6</sup> John Irwin candidly reveals this fantasy in the opening pages of *Doubling and Incest*, 9.

most far-reaching Western intellectual claim of our century is that between self and world there intervenes discourse, and that discourse inflects both self and world. Benjamin Lee Whorf writes:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized in our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data to which the agreement subscribes. (213)

Implicit and obligatory, the agreement we are party to is most efficacious in our ongoing ignorance of it. Like Molière's M. Jourdain who can hardly believe that it is *prose* that he speaks, we daily participate unawares in the most intricate arrangements the moment we draw upon language. Foucault's epistemological work stems directly from this conviction and from a desire to revise – by exposing – its implications. "I would like to show with precise examples," he writes in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, "that in analysing discourses themselves, one sees the loosening of the embrace . . . of words and things, and the emergence of a group of rules proper to discursive practices. These rules define not the dumb existence of a reality, nor the canonical use of a vocabulary, but the ordering of objects" (48–9). The words do not attach to the things; they sketch out instead the language game in play, the discursive practice's systemic way of ordering its objects.

The order arrived at, because it is produced in language, can only be contestable. The unutterable truth is alone serene; it lives as inarticulable *doxa*. But once it becomes encoded, enters language, it is available for dispute. Orthodoxy is no more than the desperate battle to resist heterodoxy. As the homely analogy of the orthodontist makes clear, orthodoxy seeks to *straighten* the *doxa*, and this effort (which is undertaken only when things have gone crooked) can be both strenuous and painful. Pierre Bourdieu writes: "Orthodoxy, straight, or rather *straightened*, opinion, which aims, without ever entirely succeeding, at restoring the primal state of innocence of *doxa*, exists only in the objective relationship which opposes it to heterodoxy, that is, by reference to the choice – *haeresis*, heresy – made possible by the existence of *competing possibles* and to the explicit critique of the sum total of the alternatives not chosen that the established order implies" (169).



To speak (or write) at all is to enter the Whorfian "agreement" wrought into the medium itself, but it is also to enter an inherently debatable arena, a world of "competing possibles," of discursive insistences that are always partial, always warding off unwanted alternatives. Faulknerian subjectivity – because, like all subjectivity, it is produced by entry into the politically charged turbulence of discourse itself<sup>7</sup> – cannot be conceived as a disinterested power solitarily authorizing a pristine cosmos. It emerges instead "as a way of being as it were at stake in the game from the outset" (Derrida, "Structure" 279). Faulkner becomes Faulkner by what he submits to exactly as much as by what he rejects. To use Derrida's terms again: without accepting the medium's authority there is no signification; without resisting it there is no force.

To be "in the game from the outset" does not mean remaining in it always in the same way. One of my chief purposes in this book is to chart Faulkner's changing mode of participation in his culture's "agreements." Between 1929 and 1942 a virtual revolution in his practice occurs, in which a Modernist aesthetic of shock emerges, transforms itself, and then yields to a more traditional one of recognition. He moves, formally, from the jagged invasions of *The Sound and the Fury* to the sonorous plenitude of *Go Down, Moses*. Whether the practice be iconoclastic or orthodox, it articulates "Faulkner" not as inaugurative native genius but as a set of individual performances and a certain way of activating or resisting the larger discourses – here gender and racial as well as avant-garde and traditional – furnished by his culture. To identify William Faulkner is to speak of an overdetermined site of interchanges in which come into play the writer's discrete performances, the discursive options (accepted, refused, or transformed) of his productive culture (America in the first half of our century), and the interpretive orientation of a reader responding in the receptive culture of the same country fifty years later. It all sounds not so much hopeless as dizzying.



It has not always seemed this complicated. Brooks, Vickery, Howe, and Warren could write with a certain confidence about an author whom they had brooded upon, sympathized with, and finally understood. "But the shift to this previously unknown narrator," Brooks claims in his introduction to *Light in August* (1968), "will seem like a trick only to the reader who has failed to sense the total meaning of the work" (xxv). I know of no astute Faulknerian in the past fifteen years who is

<sup>7</sup> The word "discourse" should be understood in a concrete and plural sense. Faulkner's career involves a changing relation to a range of discursive practices – the nymphs and fauns of *fin-de-siècle* late Victorianism, the ferocious stylistic experiments of international Modernism, the polysyllabic magniloquence of Southern oratory, the mean humor of Southwestern vernacular, among others.

willing to speak of “the total meaning of the work,” and this not because of timidity or laziness but because, in Derrida’s words, “If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is . . . because the nature of the field – that is, language and a finite language – excludes totalization. This field is in effect that of *play* . . . because instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions” (“Structure” 289).

The missing center is of course produced and posited in every reading of Faulkner – I too will produce my center(s) in the course of these pages – but this center is invented as a function of the argument(s) under way. Faulkner centers differently according to who (read: what transpersonal hermeneutic) is looking at him. He has been changing mightily in the past twenty years (unlike his own heroic dead figures, his Sartorises and McCaslins, whose images tend to stay put once they are interred), and I have been changing with him. This book is possible because of these changes. To discuss them, however briefly, is to see that a writer’s identity (his, mine) is likewise not given but produced. How else could it alter so much over time?

The Faulkner of my first love was a towering invention of the New Critics: formally experimental, conservative in his values, detached above and by means of his ever-present ironies, passionate yet not partisan, aware of everything.<sup>8</sup> We competed with each other during the 1960s and early 1970s to see who could celebrate him best, could point out how much further his art penetrated into the nature of things than had yet been conceded. The critic who both culminated this genre of commentary and inaugurated the next one is André Bleikasten. His full-length reading (*Splendid* 1976) of *The Sound and the Fury* attended with great suppleness to the complexity of Faulkner’s formal achievement, but it also began the process of inserting that achievement within a larger intellectual frame of Lacanian, structuralist, and poststructuralist values. Simultaneously with Bleikasten came John Irwin’s intervention, in which “Faulkner” joins the discourses of Nietzsche and Freud and emerges as a latent structure lurking somewhere between his books rather than a set of utterances contained within any of them. After Irwin, the opening of the floodgates and the deluge.

A mere glance at the influential texts on Faulkner written since the early 1980s shows that a writer centers according to the emphases of the

<sup>8</sup> Brooks and Vickery were probably the foremost shapers of Faulkner’s image in the late 1950s and 1960s, though Sartre, Aiken, Cowley, Howe, and Warren – who wrote before them – have remained distinctive voices for articulating Faulkner’s form and value. By 1963 Millgate was able to consolidate these New Critical findings and propose a narrative in which Faulkner’s work appeared both selectively canonical and comprehensively mapped.

culture doing the evaluating. The Faulkner for our decade is a writer about race (Sundquist, Snead), gender (Wittenberg, Gwin), language and voice (Matthews, Ross), the dynamics of reading (Wadlington, Morris), and ideology (Porter, Moreland). Without apology, this is the Faulkner addressed in the following chapters. Bleikasten, Matthews, Ross, and Wadlington have especially served for me as brothers in a many-peopled enterprise. Learning that subjective identity is a matter of affiliations rather than essences has allowed me to find my Faulknors by letting my Faulkner go. That is why the chapters that follow reengage the same books, also why the quarrels among the chapters are overt rather than concealed. Intentionally diachronic, striving to avoid the twin excesses of randomness and overpatterning, this study pursues a Faulkner whose own cultural immersion precludes heroism. But without these remarkable novels there would have been no study at all.



The “cosmos” Faulkner would own is articulable only within a language he cannot wholly own, and it bristles with figures unamenable to the lineaments of his own white male subjectivity. The first two chapters probe the writer’s resources for articulating the Other within his world – its women and blacks – by examining his relation to his culture’s larger discursive practices for saying/mystifying/scapegoating their differences. Chapter 1 focuses upon gender, both laterally, in the representation of women as *other* in the four novels under scrutiny, and vertically, as an attempt to unearth the discursive assumptions that generate a corrosive portrait like Mrs. Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*. In Chapter 2, I turn to Faulkner’s rendering of race, and I begin by examining the marginalizing (as well as the fantasizing) that emerges in Faulkner’s deployment of blacks upon his largely white canvas. This chapter concludes with another vertical exploration, this time into the three different scriptings of Lucas Beauchamp, from magazine stories to *Go Down, Moses* to *Intruder in the Dust*. Finally, they prepare the context for approaching (in the second half of the study) the problematics of subjectivity at the center of Faulkner’s texts: the shaping of the white, male subject whose codes in turn command the figuring of both women and blacks.

Chapter 3 considers in two different ways the social construction of identity. I begin by exploring the privileged notion of individual identity within a Western liberal tradition. Then, through the use of conceptual terms provided by Lacan and Althusser, a critique is provided. Subjectivity emerges, in this later model, as simultaneously empowering and alienating, the interplay – within a single figure – of Imaginary affiliations and Symbolic insistences. Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* and a variety of figures in *Absalom, Absalom!* embody the cultural crossfire that is subjectivity within Faulkner’s most experimental novels. The chapter concludes with a brief comparison of the processes of be-

coming Joe Christmas and Ike McCaslin in their respective novels. Continuing to draw upon Lacan and Althusser, but supplementing them with some other contemporary theorists of the “postindividualist subject,” I propose a variety of signifying economies for thinking about the production of subjectivity. The striking shift in tone and procedure between these two novels about training-to-be-male reveals as well the other subjectivity that has decisively altered in the ten years between *Light in August* and *Go Down, Moses*: Faulkner’s.

Chapter 4 broadens further to identify the ideological field of surveillance and contestation within which the Faulknerian voiced body moves and has its being.<sup>9</sup> I draw on Foucault and Bakhtin to chart the ways in which voice and body are figured according to the larger culture’s norms regarding gender, class, and race. Faulkner’s texts resist and absorb these assumptions in ways that change decisively between 1929 and 1942. This chapter probes the increasingly secure ideological alignment of Faulkner’s work in terms, first, of his rendering of voice and body and, second, of the reader’s transferential “contract” with the texts. By 1942, I argue, he had lost the capacity (or perhaps the desire) to dramatize through reader disorientation and immersion the traumatic entry of the individual subject into the culture’s maturational field: a traumatic entry at the core of the great Modernist texts. At the level of the writing the hurt had ceased, the subject had sutured.<sup>10</sup>

The entry of the subject into the culture, the entry of the reader into the text: throughout my argument I maintain that the former is crucially figured in the latter. Each of these chapters attends to the experience of *reading* Faulkner, for if the subject’s identity is always in process, then the act of reading powerfully activates that process. In reading we confirm/alter/rethink who we are; the suasions of the text seek to realign the traces of our minds. All writing is ideological inasmuch as it strategically offers to its reader models of being – models that normalize and marginalize according to determinate cultural criteria. I seek, therefore, to explore these texts at the intersection of representational tactics (the positioning of race and gender, the selective deployment of interiority) and readerly experience (the subject-shaping encounter with the novels themselves, the kinds of acknowledgment they propose or refuse).

Finally I want to ask why Faulkner has been so important to us, who

<sup>9</sup> “Ideology” serves as a master term in this study, and it receives more extensive definition in Chapters 2 through 4. I should say at the outset, however, that I take it to mean not false consciousness, but rather a set of beliefs and practices that propose coherent subjectivity by securing the individual’s alignment within a repertory of socially propagated roles.

<sup>10</sup> I use the term “suture” in a specifically Lacanian way: “Suture . . . is the way in which the ‘subject’ at one and the same time separates itself from, or disavows, its construction in the field of the Other, and simultaneously erects itself in the garb of coherent ‘subject’” (Smith 75).

the “we” is in this assertion, and what remains of any notion of coherent subjectivity if it can be endlessly reconfigured according to different signifying economies. Something still remains, or better: something new emerges. For subjectivity is a notion we cannot do without. Not the undivided subjectivity of liberal Western thought – the (white, male) autonomous self-knowing individual – but rather the subject in process, the subject in contestation. Beleaguered, charged with Imaginary desires, immersed from infancy within conflicting alignments of the Symbolic field, this subject is more likely to be a site of interior disturbance than a locus of concerted action. Who better than Faulkner has delineated the pathos and value of such a figure? How other than by first probing such disturbance can any demystified notion of concerted action – of subjective agency – once again be liberatingly conceived?