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978-1-107-05038-9 - The New Cambridge Companion to: William Faulkner

Edited by John T. Matthews

Excerpt

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JOHN T. MATTHEWS

Introduction

William Faulkner today remains among the most widely read, vigorously studied, and creatively contested writers in English worldwide. An informal tabulation of professional scholarship on U.S. writers reported in the annual bibliography of the Modern Language Association shows Faulkner second to Herman Melville, by a small margin, in the number of items published on his work in English internationally since 2008 (Nathaniel Hawthorne, Toni Morrison, and Ernest Hemingway all registered somewhat fewer). But Faulkner's stature as a subject of academic interest tells only part of the story of his importance as an international writer. As we make our way into the century after his, readers from all over the world continue to recognize Faulkner's monumental achievement in describing the extreme transformations of economic, social, and intellectual life that constituted a decisive moment in the history of global modernization. Faulkner's genius was to imagine, with staggering minuteness of detail, over a long arc of historical change, how a set of people sharing a small corner of the earth experienced profound upheavals in their world. Faulkner's enduring relevance has something to do with the way those shocks of modernization continue to be felt in the disruptions of traditional agrarian ways of life; in the century-long emergence of the global city; in reinventions of the local or regional; in the revolutionary effects of new technologies; in the ascendance of market commerce and speculative finance over the making of things; in the challenges to tyrannical political states and varieties of elite rule over minorities, including reactionary ones based on fictions of racial, ethnic, gender, regional, or religious inferiority; in the long-lasting disablements caused by European colonialism and imperialism both to victims and to perpetrators; in the blind assault on the natural world for human gain.

As scrupulously as Faulkner's descriptive powers attempt to comprehend his world, however, his writing still matters because it so extends itself artistically. By that I mean the way Faulkner stretches the capacities of literary form and language in relentless determination to imagine the reality of what

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it meant to be alive in a given place and time and to invent other lives that were partly his own as their author and partly that which he could never fully inhabit. Faulkner created a Shakespearean cast of indelible, larger-than-life characters out of the family stories he heard, out of the local idiosyncrasies he observed, out of the wide variety of literature he read avidly, as well as purely out of his head. Locals in his hometown of Oxford, Mississippi, claimed they recognized this or that individual, this or that anecdote from the real life of the town, but Faulkner is actually one of the least directly autobiographical authors you will encounter. For all the personal material – subject matter as well as emotional and psychological experience – that Faulkner draws upon, his plots and characters are largely composites and layered inventions.¹ To forge a way to see those individual characters in motion, against the backdrop of their common history, Faulkner experimented with narrative form and style in ways that extended the methods other modernists were also developing to record the whirlwind of modernization. Faulkner once compared writing a novel to building a henhouse in a hurricane, and readers who respond to his artistry are often spellbound by the extensive rearrangement of chronology in his plots, which cut quickly between scenes, flash backward without warning, alternate between parallel narratives, and offer conflicting versions of events.

Yet Faulkner's admirers testify most ardently to the seductiveness of his style. Its technique of easing unhurriedly into the evocation of a place, for example, which requires minute notation of sounds, sights, and the feel of things, nudges Faulkner's sentences into motion, barely, reluctantly (think of the image of Rosa Coldfield in her father's office that develops slowly in the opening pages of *Absalom, Absalom!*, like an old-fashioned photograph, or the hardly discernible movement of a mule-drawn wagon making its way uphill toward the patiently waiting Lena Grove at the outset of *Light in August*). Sometimes they gather momentum as they describe, correct, re-describe – distinctions proliferating with nearly every assertion. In Faulkner, the sentence becomes the measure of the world. Faulkner comments, "This I think accounts for what people call the obscurity, the involved formless 'style', endless sentences. I'm trying to say it all in one sentence, between one Cap and one period."² Frequently, a narrator's underlying anxiety, rage, desire, or terror unmoors the sentences, and a torrent of emotion carries words beyond syntax, beyond manageable units of thought, even beyond reason, to the almost unimaginable extension of prose style as the very stuff of self. Faulkner understood the extreme demands he placed on literary language: "The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that 100 years later when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life" (*LG* 253). When the

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contemporary French African author Tierno Monénembo was growing up in Guinea, he came across a ragged book with missing pages on the shelf of his village store. “Stunned by the unfurling of sentences, dazed by the flood of images and adjectives,” he recalls, “I did not immediately pay attention to the title and the author’s name. Nor did I understand the importance of my discovery when I realized a few days later that it was *The Sound and the Fury*.”³ As an author from a country with a past of colonialism and slavery, Monénembo would later process Faulkner’s writing in historical terms supplied by another post-colonial writer, Édouard Glissant. But at the moment of Monénembo’s personal discovery, it was Faulkner’s sheer artistry that entranced.

The central features of Faulkner’s writing that contribute to its endurance and influence – probably of any literature that lasts – are the depth and subtlety of its portrayal of humans interacting with circumstance, and its transcendent realization of form and style. Yet one must also acknowledge that Faulkner persists because he is a *valuably* difficult writer, one who looms over succeeding generations because he wrestles so strenuously with what we recognize as still-urgent social and aesthetic problems. It’s not just that the formal features of his writing require sustained attention, patient reading and rereading, trial and error, and a willingness to accept lingering confusion and irresolution even after the novel is over, amid the hang-over of besotted reading; Faulkner also willingly put himself in awkward positions with respect to any number of popular attitudes and ideas. He was a white Southerner from a prominent (if declining) Mississippi family that included slave-owning ancestors. He made his home in the town of Oxford all his life, and wrote about the most horrid elements of Southern and national life: slavery, racism, lynching, segregation, desegregation, patriarchal misogyny, plantation evils, the destructiveness and destruction of his own civilization, the intolerability and intolerance of life in a poor rural world, the lethality of ignorance and bigotry, the contradictions of American democracy and capitalism. Faulkner’s accomplishment as a modernist writer also involved the perversity of calling into question the very authority of the “literary” to convey worlds and render individual subjectivities. Haunting his texts is a deconstructive suspicion that what feel like the immediate realities of thought, consciousness, truth, and the real are fundamentally effects of discourse, of the way people construct reality with agreed-upon concepts and interpret it with words they must share. Such an uncompromising mistrust of the very artistic medium the novelist must so desperately trust reflects wider modernist doubts in philosophy, physics, psychology, and new mechanical recording media about the “presence” created by representation.

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There's a lot of obstinacy to Faulkner. He admired mules and bred them on his farm. Faulkner reflexively refuses to compromise with readers, to endorse conventional wisdom, to side with history's winners or spare its losers, to side with history's losers or spare its winners, to accept the judgment of others, or to see only one side of an issue, no matter what question of justice or morality is involved. However enchanted, Faulkner's readers unavoidably must expect to be offended by his writing. That has been true since he began publishing wickedly perverse books, such as *Sanctuary*, as well as uncompromisingly demanding ones, such as *The Sound and the Fury*. Faulkner makes you uncomfortable (and in fact he often seemed unbearable to himself) as he asks everything of you in making sense of a puzzling world, in savoring the pleasures and agonies common to all human lives, in reveling with pure delight in the "miracle" of the written. That's how Vladimir Nabokov has one of his characters, a crazed scholar of literature, put it: "We are absurdly accustomed to the miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal imagery, involutions of thought, new worlds with live people, speaking, weeping, laughing."⁴ Nabokov in fact had no taste for what he considered Faulkner's stylistic vulgarity, yet he shared his willingness to make art a matter of outrage and scandal. Nabokov once makes fun of Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, a novel that tells the story of a young woman's horrific sexual assault by a gangster whose impotence leads him to use an implement to defile her, as one of the Southern author's "corn-cobby chronicles."⁵ Yet his own masterpiece, *Lolita*, defies readers to separate the utterly abhorrent (its narrator, a child kidnapper and molester) from the sublimely beautiful (who happens to write gorgeous prose). And *Lolita*, after all, perversely ends up mimicking *Sanctuary*, Faulkner's evil Popeye a mute anticipation of the florid Humbert Humbert, *Lolita* a prepubescent avatar of Temple Drake. The perverse, the difficult, the unwelcoming, the critical, the uncooperative, the unbelievable, the mad – these are all manifestations of the force of *negation* in Faulkner's writing, as in much great literature. Theodor Adorno describes the power of art to say "no" to life led unthinkingly, to life in which human evil proceeds untroubled from one unspeakable atrocity to the next. Writing in the wake of the Holocaust, Adorno develops a theory of modern art that emphasizes its powerfully critical or negative function. Literature stands apart from the world as we know it, even as it reproduces that world's ways, giving readers the opportunity for critical reflection.⁶ Optimistic affirmative "messages" belong to self-help books and moralistic literature. Faulkner's books provide little consolation, although they do suggest a kind of indefatigable capacity in humankind to "endure," and maybe even to "prevail." At least that's the bare hope Faulkner ventured in his Nobel Prize speech in 1950, delivered in the midst of the Cold War, as

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the writer's generation stared at the possibility of global nuclear holocaust. Faulkner's novels urge us today to cherish the passionate intricacy of literary art; to value prolonged stays in freely imagined worlds; to reflect on the interplay between individual will and the world's contingency; to be as concerned with what is hidden as with what is conspicuous; and to realize that the stories we tell about our lives are inseparable from the lives themselves.

The original *Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner* (1995), edited by Philip Weinstein, contained eight essays. Five were organized as studies of Faulkner's relation to principal cultural formations: American modernism, post-modernism, the culture industry, European modernists, and post-colonialism. Each of them dealt with a range of Faulkner texts, but they mainly crisscrossed through Faulkner's major novels: *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*. The second set of essays (entitled "The World in the Texts," complementing Part I's "The Texts in the World") offered sample critical readings by zeroing in on three of those novels and examining specialized topics important to Faulkner's fiction: the Great Migration; the Southern discourse of race; and plantation paternalism.

The first *Companion* attempted to represent "recent trends in Faulkner studies" by placing his work in the "critical practice of the 1990s." Twenty years later, our *New Companion* attempts to capture continuing developments and fresh directions in the ways scholars and teachers conceive of principal contexts for Faulkner's writing and in the methods advanced to study them. Readers familiar with the earlier version of the *Companion* will find continuities here with its interests, as well as important evolutions, fresh takes, and new additions. Modernist studies, for example, newly emphasizes transnational features: modernism's relation to anti-colonial cultural projects, the growth of the modern state, and the formation of sub-national cultural mentalities; its international modes of production and consumption; its mindfulness of concurrent developments in film and other electronic media; the submerged centrality of environmental history – to name just some. Formerly predominant analytical categories have been challenged, complicated, or replaced. For example, as useful as the concept of post-modernism has been for identifying the ontological skepticism and meta-narrative playfulness in Faulkner that anticipate the generation of John Barth or Thomas Pynchon, it might be helpful today to think about Faulkner's imaginative legacies more diversely and pluralistically – in the wider ambit of post-1945 fiction that he began to participate in himself during the later portion of his career.

Each essay in the *New Companion* reflects a disciplinary sub-field or methodological approach in which current broader thinking about

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literature – from new theoretical platforms to new paradigms in modern, American, or Southern studies – has advanced or transformed the questions critics bring to the study of Faulkner’s writing. In some instances, a solid body of scholarship has already materialized; in others, a few notable pieces promise the emergence of a fresh line of inquiry into Faulkner. In addition to representing the precepts of its method, the main task of each chapter is to provide a strong piece of interpretation that warrants the approach taken. Our *New Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner* attempts to give readers at least a partial sense of the innovative ways Faulkner is being read in the twenty-first century and to bear witness to his continued importance as a world writer.

The opening chapter by Julian Murphet wonders what it meant for Faulkner to be writing at a time when new forms of mechanical recording technologies like the phonograph and film were making a broad impact on modern life. Murphet’s approach is based on the premise that many forms of modernist experimentation in literary techniques were stimulated by competition with transformative developments in audio and visual reproduction. Within this “multimedia ecology” of modernism, novelists like Faulkner directly depicted novelties like “the graphophone” that appears in *As I Lay Dying*, exploring how the technological preservation, circulation, and broadcast of sound created new sensations of the divorce between body and voice, the living and the dead, the individual and disembodied communities. Murphet presents Faulkner as a pivotal figure in modernism’s confrontation with the eclipse of received models of consciousness, of narrative as storytelling, of style as voice, of the “literary” itself under the pressure of the mechanical reproduction of voice and image – the appearance of new media provoking equivocal responses from modernist writing, of rejection and imitation, often simultaneously.

Peter Lurie pursues the implications of the graphic or textual nature of film’s mechanical inscription of reality by taking up the way Faulkner’s writing reflects the relation between early cinema and depictions of race. The surprising centrality of race in early American film was advanced by Michael Rogin in his essay on D. W. Griffith’s masterpiece of racism, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Lurie shows how Faulkner, as a novelist deeply interested in race, writing at the moment of film’s emergence, was particularly alert to Griffith’s use of the medium to establish whiteness as the bedrock of national identity. Both modes, literature and film, betray how whiteness is the result of a process of projection (psychological as well as mechanical), structured by differential representation and compromised by representational instability and inadequacy. Lurie’s premise is that film must be understood not as a transparent window on reality but as a coded representation of it, and

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that, in particular, *The Birth of a Nation's* effort to depict races as visually distinct – a tendency shared by other early films – is compromised by the inseparability of black and white as they define each other. The impossibility of establishing absolute racial difference is replicated in the technical inseparability of black and white film images and process, a phenomenon that may be seen as an individual case of the general structure of writing, of textuality. Cinema is a kind of modern writing with light.

Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman addresses a Faulkner who must face a legacy of post-Reconstruction Southern dreams that a moribund white aristocracy might be resurrected, visions that informed wider racist fantasies about white solidarity and modern nationhood. She studies *Absalom, Absalom!* as demonstrating the exclusionary oblivion of Quentin's racist conditioning, seconded by Shreve's, and the multiple narratives' shared inability to imagine social and political futures in which African-Americans have gained full enfranchisement, let alone reparation. Abdur-Rahman's chapter shows how the modern South reproduced the moral blindness, ethical indifference, and social and economic violence demanded by an order of elite identity that does not understand itself to be already dead. This situation amounts to something like the newly dead memorializing the long dead. Abdur-Rahman's reading demonstrates the repeated, willful avoidance by Faulkner's privileged characters of realities that challenge fantasies of white supremacy: for example, Quentin Compson's cutting off Shreve in *Absalom, Absalom!* when he brings up the fact of West Virginia's statehood, since it recalls the South's internal divisions over the injustice of slavery. This is exactly the refusal of history one sees in *The Sound and the Fury* when Quentin daydreams during a lesson on Mississippi colonial history. *Absalom* exhibits how racist projection shapes the various tellings of Sutpen's saga, with Charles Bon taken to *signify* the sort of future Quentin finds unimaginable, unsurvivable, as opposed to who Charles Bon might actually *be*. Abdur-Rahman's reading for racial exclusion and projected unintelligibility intersects with Peter Lurie's treatment of race as textualized in film image and narrative.

Patricia Chu's chapter probes another facet of Faulkner's response to modernization: his concern with the growth of the modern state, and expressly its monopolistic production of biopower. Chu reverses the habit of reading Faulkner's South as an exception to national modernization by showing it as an epitome of modernity. In a richly contextualized close study of one of Faulkner's short stories about New Deal Southern farm reform, "The Tall Men" (1941), Chu illustrates how Faulkner dramatizes the perils not just of traditional Northern/national domination of the South but more broadly of the evolution of total modern state power – not just the U.S.

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Government but “governmentality” itself. By framing Faulkner’s story with modern developments in the scientific understanding of life-forms, with Georg Simmel’s theorization of how modern urban life affects habits of perception, and with a genealogy of the modern state’s control of biopolitics drawn from Michel Foucault, Chu’s essay exemplifies how issues prominent in the so-called new modernist studies enable us to see Faulkner afresh.

The question of Faulkner’s engagement with the modern transformation of the South also roots Susan Scott Parrish’s chapter on the impact of the Mississippi River’s “Great Flood” of 1927. Parrish’s essay suggests how Faulkner’s texts, and modernist literature more broadly, must be read for its “environmental unconscious.” Focusing on *As I Lay Dying*, Parrish describes how this environmental trauma hides behind two crises more salient in the novel: World War I and the Great Depression. Parrish shows how Faulkner’s modernist modes of representation engage with a thick substratum of local and regional history to represent the South attempting to deal with uprooting transformations associated with national modernization. The essay traces the catastrophe of the flood as experienced by the novel’s characters to environmental degradations caused by the “second” modern industrial revolution, witnessed in the South roughly between 1880 and 1930. Leading to that moment is a long history of environmentally abusive hemispheric and regional plantation economies, exacerbated locally by federal (mis)management of the Mississippi Valley. Such a genealogy creates the conditions for the “natural” disasters depicted in Faulkner’s flood novels (which include for Parrish *The Sound and the Fury* and *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*).

Greg Forter develops an account drawn from psychoanalytic theory to describe the overlapping phenomena of individual and collective trauma, exemplified by Parrish’s study of the Bundren family. Forter distinguishes between trauma felt as an external impingement and trauma experienced as an internal problem of self-interpretation. Moving between the conceptual and textual levels, Forter shows how these contrasting models of trauma contribute to the struggle to render the formation of consciousness in Faulkner and how his style’s rich surfaces embed trauma in their figurative language. In his reading of *Sanctuary*, Forter finds the expression of traumatic symptomology in varieties of formal delay or deferral (Nachträglichkeit) and shows the stylistic effects of psychoanalytic logic in the novel’s imagery, which repeatedly overwhelms visual order with somatic excess. Forter’s essay also raises an important question of ethics in trauma studies: how to distinguish trauma as suffered historically by certain people from the sort that is passed on to others.

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Jaime Harker ranges widely across Faulkner's work to show the extent of transgressive sexuality explored in his fiction. Demonstrating how ubiquitous Faulkner's renegade sexual imagination is, Harker expands our comprehension of Faulkner as a writer of same-sex desire. Focusing on the subversive and often subliminal relations between women, the chapter patiently assembles a compelling argument from the plenitude of Faulkner's depiction of intimacy between women. Given the brutalities of heterosexual violence rife in the South that Faulkner portrays, Harker's illumination of dissenting relations between women and the counter-communities they form shows readers how to read across the grain of more expected behavior and relationships. Numerous fresh insights appear in the essay's systematic sweep across the expanse of heterosexism: one sample is the way that Temple's "refusal" to leave Miss Reba's brothel indicates not only that she is a victim of rape and a prisoner (a condition belatedly elucidated in the criticism by trauma studies approaches, as in Forter's chapter) but also that she herself embraces, horribly, a sexist caricature like "nymphomania" – played out in the scenes with her "lover" Red, for instance, and subscribed to further by the men in her world who seek paternalistically to protect her.

Melanie Benson Taylor takes up the consequences of the new Southern studies for reading Faulkner, both in its efforts to expand the conceptualization and material of "the South" and in the scholarly movement's unwitting perpetuation of longstanding preoccupations and blind spots. Taylor is especially interested in new opportunities to redress earlier neglect of Native American expression in accounts of Southern culture. In 2001, Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Dana D. Nelson co-edited a special issue of the journal *American Literature* in which they identified a new determination in studies of the U.S. South to understand its regional exceptionality as a projection of national needs to disavow responsibility for slavery, corporal violence, degradation of nature, commercial opportunism, and so forth. Baker and Nelson referred to this movement as the "new Southern Studies" and reported that their editorial maxim had become: "'The South' is the U.S. social, political, racial, economic, ethical, and everyday-life imaginary written as 'regionalism.'" Looking back at more than a decade of ensuing reconsiderations of the region, Taylor rehearses the overlapping, contradictory, uneven constitution of what has been meant by "the South." In doing so, she prepares for her reading of what Mikhail Bakhtin would call a heteroglot (or linguistically composite) South in Faulkner's heterodox depictions. One key Faulkner text for this chapter is *Requiem for a Nun*, in which Taylor delineates Faulkner's critique of national origins, with its resonances for U.S. democracy's Cold War embattlement. Her reading of this hybrid literary work prefaces her excavation of the problematic of the Native American for conceptions of

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national solidarity. The chapter suggests how the new Southern studies has inspired much innovative work on Native Americans while still lagging in fully reckoning with native presence in the formation of nation and region, particularly the South.

Martyn Bone lays out the burden of the Faulkner syndrome – the sense among Southern novelists who followed him that Faulkner’s was an impossible achievement to match, coupled with the conviction that certain limitations of his vision rightly call for stratagems of creative revision, elusion, and complaint. Bone’s chapter brings mainstays of contemporary U.S. fiction such as Cormac McCarthy and Richard Ford into focus as *Southern* writers, rarely the way either is classified, making clear what the stakes are for each in their desire to escape Faulkner-likeness. Bone’s account of more expressly avowed Southern writers, such as Barry Hannah, who, having lived in Oxford, Mississippi, had to parody Faulkner to breathe, captures the agonistics of post-Faulkner Southern writing. The chapter’s turn to African-American writing from, of, and about the South does not spare Faulkner from the disappointment and even rage that compel their engagement with his work. Such novelists as John Oliver Killens, twenty years younger than Faulkner, and Jesmyn Ward, a contemporary novelist from Mississippi, have their exemplary challenges to Faulkner compellingly set out in Bone’s account.

Benjamin Widiss constructs another post-Faulknerian lineage by conjoining the projects of Gabriel García Márquez and Toni Morrison, two of the twentieth century’s most prominent novelists, both of whom have acknowledged the importance of Faulkner’s writing to their own. Although their departures from Faulkner are usually understood to be quite distinct – Márquez creating his Colombian version of a multi-generational plantation saga via the mode of magical realism, Morrison concentrating on the rendering of black subjectivity in the afterlife of U.S. slavery in twentieth century racism – Widiss’s analysis lets us see how much these authors share as they explore the possibilities of post-realistic narrative. From Faulkner’s admission that stories of the past often just “don’t explain,” to Márquez and other Latin American Boom writers’ appreciation for the Faulknerian novel as the very genre that dramatizes the discrepancy between history and the individual’s synthesis of time, to Morrison’s incarnation of history in the very body of a lost child, Widiss charts a genealogy of commitment to the novel as a modern literary form. In the novels of contemporaries like Jeffrey Eugenides and Jonathan Safran Foer, Widiss locates a devotion to “alternative explanatory systems” that, rather than bemoan the failure of narrative authority bedeviling Faulkner’s tellers, revels in the opportunity to fill such truth-gaps imaginatively.