Minter, William Faulkner: His Life and Work

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At the outset it is well, in describing this carefully qualified book, to make a qualification about the title. *William Faulkner: His Life and Work* seems to promise one of those compendious literary chronicles of the nineteenth century, like Joseph Blotner’s two-volume biography of Faulkner. Minter gives us no such thing, nor does he intend to, as he makes clear in his preface: “I do not present this book as a compilation of new data on Faulkner’s life or a series of new readings of his novels ... I draw on scores of essays, monographs, and books ... I try to subordinate critical discussions of Faulkner’s writings to the task of sketching the ‘mysterious armature’ (to borrow Mallarmé’s phrase) that binds Faulkner’s life and art together. My claim to the reader’s attention is specific, then; and it stems from the story I try to tell — of deep reciprocities, of relations and revisions, between Faulkner’s flawed life and his great art.” Farther along, Minter elaborates on his methods and assumptions: “I recount some things that are familiar and emphasize some that are not. Among many moments, I try to locate initiatory and shaping experiences; among many guises, I try to discern deeper faces. Even if we believe, as Faulkner probably did, that a book is in some sense a ‘writer’s secret life, the dark twin of a man,’ we know that all relations between a life lived and words written are problematic. In Faulkner’s case, they are particularly complicated — in part because his writings are diverse and uneven as well as frequently magnificent, and in part because he was never an easy person to know.”

Minter’s goal here seems both clearly focused and admirably refined, and, in my opinion, his book fully meets its promise. He seems, however, to be of a critical persuasion which is in disfavor among many Faulkner scholars. That is, he pays tribute to Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* and John T. Irwin’s *Doubling and Incest, Repetition and Revenge*. He also cites Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman and various other post-formalist critics. He even brings Freud out into the open. His is, in short, primarily the psychoanalytic approach (and, worse, tainted with structuralist nonsense), and among knowledgeable Faulknerians, the response to this approach is usually: “I didn’t learn anything new,” where, apparently, *new* means a new fact about Faulkner or his works (or is it possible that these savants have
also thought all the possible thoughts, seen all the possible insights about the life and works?).

The matter is further complicated because the Freudian approach is a slippery one that does often leave nebulous results; furthermore, some of its basic tenets are only too predictable. Thus, among the "initiatory and shaping experiences" that Minter finds in Faulkner's life is, of course, his struggle not so much with his father as with his great-grandfather, the "Founder": "Too many things open to founders were closed to descendants; whatever else it might teach, [Faulkner's] family's history almost shouted that lesson." Among the "deeper faces" seen in the "many guises" is, moreover, that of "the dark woman. The dark mother" — (Faulkner's words about an "autobiographical" character.).

Many of Minter's emphases, then, are familiar. He re-examines the doubling/incest/repetition/revenge pattern which Irwin explored. He notes the burden of the "family romance" which Richard H. King has put into a larger context in A Southern Renaissance. He finds in The Sound and the Fury, As I Lay Dying, Light in August and Absalom, Absalom! (most notably) the inadequate parents and neglected children that he thinks Faulkner modeled on his own family. Throughout his life, Minter tells us, Faulkner carried a hidden image of an ideal woman, the concept of his heart's darling that was embodied, to greater or lesser degree, in Estelle Oldham, Helen Baird, Caddy Compson, Jill Faulkner, Meta Carpenter, Charlotte Rittenmeyer, Joan Williams and Linda Snopes — and that, at least by implication, derived from his mother — and, one must ask, from Mammy Callie Barr? ("Small like Maud Faulkner, Mammie Callie could be stern and formidable [like Maud Faulkner]. But her capacity for feeling and expressing love [unlike Maud] lasted her a century ... and it enabled her to give William tenderness and affection [unlike Maud].").

But to simplify these emphases or concentrate on them is to miss the value of Minter's work. Even in the treatment of the mother, for instance, there is great subtlety. Faulkner early turned away from his "failed" father and toward his "strong" mother, Minter tells us. But "what is striking about the clear pattern established in dealing with his parents, beyond the direct ways in which it entered his fiction, are the reversals he worked on it. In his fiction, mothers generally fare no better than fathers, and women perhaps less well than men." Furthermore, when Faulkner eventually created "an ideal community," in
“The Bear,” it “is a world without women.” Still, Faulkner’s “long-standing loyalty and continuing dependence on his mother had several sources and several consequences and so must be viewed in different ways, but they derived in part from his early awareness that she believed in him deeply.”

Perhaps the chief value of this work is Minter’s sensitive analysis of the relationship between Faulkner’s experience and personality on the one hand and his work on the other. It does not yield to quick summation; much of its effectiveness is in its nuances, the evocation on Minter’s part of Faulkner’s probable feelings about his work, say, or the extremely cogent selections of quotations from those works. Basically, he shows us a boy who was very happy in his earliest years, then badly hurt and thereby made wary of relationships by strife between his parents, a boy who was inclined, like his mother, to read, and who had a celebrated ancestor who had written. This boy decided to be a writer like his great-grandfather (the founder), and at first was as wary and stiff with his writing (poetry) as he always was with people. Eventually turning to fiction, he “began mastering techniques and strategies that permitted greater displacement and disguise. His art not only became more supple and subtle as it became more indirect; it also became more personal ... The separations and losses [of his life] that enter his poetry primarily as borrowed emotions and borrowed phrases soon began to shape his fiction ... Although he continued to seek a formal, ceremonious life, he experimented in art with the dissolution of everything: one part of the radically venturesome quality of his writing derives from his willingness to brave the loss of all familiar procedures and the disintegration of all familiar forms.”

One would think that almost anyone could learn something from such an analysis. And here I must differ from several other reviewers of this book, particularly (oh, the anxiety of influence!) with that venerable and perceptive collaborator with Faulkner on The Portable Faulkner, Malcolm Cowley (New York Times Book Review, 22 February 1981). In addition to quarreling with Minter’s style (and perhaps Minter does load his text with too many quotations), Cowley states that, after Blotner’s biography and Cleanth Brooks’s two books on Faulkner’s works, no one else can add anything worthwhile on either subject. On the contrary, both Blotner and Brooks have been very chary of a psychological, not to speak of psychoanalytic, approach to Faulkner’s life and work, which, of course, is not reprehensible in itself and has not kept them from making tremendous contributions to
Faulkner scholarship. Still, it is the relationship of the author to his work that underlies most of the fascination with literature and the criticism of it; and the psychoanalytical approach is one of the most fruitful of our times. Caucer’s contemporaries, or Shakespeare’s, probably speculated on the blend of humors in a writer’s constitution. We almost instinctively look to the relationships with fathers and mothers. Five hundred years from now another “instinctive” approach to personality and authorship will doubtless inform literary scholarship. For the present books like John T. Irwin’s, Judith Wittenberg’s (Faulkner: The Transfiguration of Biography) and Minter’s are adding greatly to our understanding of Faulkner and his work. Irwin’s book, brilliant as it is, gets lost eventually in the planes of the Freudian triangles. Wittenberg puts into illuminating juxtaposition many details of the life and work but depends too heavily on the “rivalry” between Faulkner and his brother Dean. On balance, Minter’s work, because of its sensitivity to personality and art, its broad and subtle conception of its principles, and its cool tenacity of mind is the most satisfactory of this “new wave” of interpretive scholarship.

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