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The Riches of Yoknapatawpha

Panel Discussion

JB: Joseph Blotner
MC: Malcolm Cowley
EH: Evans Harrington
EK: Elizabeth Kerr
GW: Gerald Walton
JW: James Webb
Q: Questioners from the Audience

EH: We come now to discuss finally the Riches of Yoknapatawpha, to sum up the experiences of the conference. I imagine the other panel members are like me: they've been concentrating on their individual duties and haven't thought too much about this general summary one. But I want to start out by bringing forward one facet of Riches in Yoknapatawpha that I don't think has really been touched on. We've had the gorgeous splendors cited in various ways. We've had the dramatic and the decadent, the awkward clash between race relations. We've had practically everything I can think of except something that I have always particularly valued in Mr. Faulkner's works. He has, of course, done those splendid, dramatic things which we have heard discussed. And you wonder how a man who could do that could also do a gentle, tender, simple thing as well as he can. And besides, I haven't had a chance to read anything from Faulkner all this week, and it's one of my favorite pastimes. So if you will allow me, I want to read to you a paragraph from Chapter 2 of The Hamlet, in the section entitled "The Long Summer." This is about the woman Houston married. She "was not beautiful. She had neither wit nor money. An orphan, a plain girl, almost homely and not even very young (she was twenty-four) she came to him out of the home of the remote kinswoman who had raised her, with the domestic skill of her country heritage and blood and training and a small trunk of neat,
plain, dove-colored clothes and the hand-stitched sheets and
towels and table-linen which she had made herself and an
infinite capacity for constancy and devotion, and no more.
And they were married and six months later she died and he
grieved for her for four years in black, savage, indomitable
fidelity, and that was all.”

The rest of the story is very good, the rest of the description
there. And I did want to add that, to start off, as a kind of
illustration. We could talk about that sort of thing. We could
also talk about the part of “The Bear” in which Faulkner does
what Matthew Arnold, I believe, describes as “what a genius
can do.” He puts the world in a focus. He gives a cosmic
viewpoint, his art does, as Wordsworth attempted to do. He
can also write beautiful prose poetry, as in the section about
the idiot and the cow, which was quoted in the film you saw.
He can tell a story like the one we were looking at last night.
He can invent the Snopeses, that Dr. Pilkington spoke so well
about today. He can experiment in the dazzling way that Mr.
Cowley so beautifully illustrated this morning. He can apply
his observation to an area that we have seen through Mr.
Blotner’s studies of the beginnings of Yoknapatawpha and
invent an imaginary county, which by now you certainly
know, though it resembles Lafayette County, is not Lafayette
County. It is an imaginative creation. And he can develop it;
he can enrich it in the way that Professor Kerr so well illus-
trated in her discussion of the evolution of Yoknapatawpha.
You’ve had, largely through Dr. Webb’s guidance, a knowl-
edge of the man who lived in Oxford and many of his habits.
Dr. Walton and I have been factotums of the present, mostly,
guides through Lafayette County and various places. But this
is the time, it seems to me, that our panel members can be
released from the duties I rather ruthlessly assigned them.
And now Miss Kerr and gentlemen—beginning with Profes-
sor Blotner—would you comment on anything you would
like to that you think has not been properly emphasized, or
just anything you like about the Riches of Yoknapatawpha.

JB: One thing I’ve been thinking as the week has gone on has
been the kind of mutual effect that takes place when you get a
group like this in an environment that is as rich as this one is.
For people like many of us, like those who have grown up here, or those of us who had the opportunity to come here often before, it's a constant pleasure to return. But for those of you who have come for the first time and have responded with the kind of passionate intensity that you have, I want to say that something of that bounces off on us. It's absorbed by us with a very heartwarming effect. And I want to say that, although all of you are very kind in the things that you say about things that we may have said to you or may have tried to do for you, I want to tell you how fine this week has been for me and how much my own sense of Yoknapatawpha and its extent and its richness—how much I have learned about that extent and richness from your own response. And I want to thank you.

**EH:** Mr. Cowley.

**MC:** I would like to echo Mr. Blotner's statements about this conference. I've been very cheered by the liveliness and keenness of perception of the participants here and by the level of the questions asked. You know, stupid questions drive one up the walls and through the ceilings. I must say that we have all gotten very, very intelligent questions based on a knowledge of Faulkner. I watched this, the process of Faulkner's reputation with great interest. I look for the time... you know, because reputations run in fashions in the United States. And at present, for example, Hemingway is far down, Fitzgerald is up high—and he deserves high but he's up, I think, a little higher than he deserves. Faulkner's reputation has stayed up and has increased; and I think that's perhaps on account of the richness of his work. That's manifested once again by times like this which I've enjoyed and which I've profited from.

**EH:** Professor Kerr.

**EK:** Well, you may resist a pun, but I won't. I will say that the riches of Yoknapatawpha are buried treasure. But, unlike the kind that they're digging for at the Old Frenchman's Place or Lucas Beauchamp was digging for, it is buried treasure that when you dig enough you get enormous returns that keep on growing and growing and growing. And the very fact that Faulkner demands so much from his readers, from their
cooperation, not merely in reading one book, but in coordinating, synthesizing, and finally getting a cosmic view of Yoknapatawpha, means that the rewards you get are reaped in proportion to the effort you put in. And I think that is what makes the study of Faulkner practically in a class by itself, because you've got this whole mythic domain, and Faulkner obviously wanted his readers to be able to hold the whole thing in their minds. And one of the fascinating things that happens is as you look at any of the works from a different point of view, or if you look at the works in new combinations, new things come up. And I decided that it's just inexhaustible. If you look at the bookcases full of dissertations on Faulkner, you would think he would be exhausted by now; and I assure you he isn't.

EH: Dr. Walton.

GW: I think there are a lot of riches that we've seen, and I think that people do need to see people who knew Faulkner. They need to see places where Faulkner was, places where he lived. And then, they need to see people who were here at the time, whether or not Faulkner even knew them. And I think I've seen some of this this week. People didn't realize that they were participants in our workshop at all who sometimes became participants because of various experiences we had of bumping into them sometimes at helpful places. One of the most frustrating things for me, not just this week, but any time somebody wishes to come for a quick tour of Yoknapatawpha, is I wish sometimes we could for a second when people are in their busy world, in a hurry, get rid of some of the problems of time and space, because you've really just gotten a little bit of it. We've tried to pick out some of the places we think you ought to see, but then there are many, many others. As we've said repeatedly we can't, nobody can, say this is the one place. And it's been frustrating trying to say "and fifteen miles over that way we think there might be one little thing that you ought to see also." And we simply could not put them all together. And that is a kind of richness that you can't really appreciate until you have stayed with us for about fifteen years.

EH: Professor Webb.
JW: Well, I'm just about overwhelmed by all of this. And, now, I live here, have lived here since 1947; and I have entertained or worked with many visitors. And I am struck by the fact that there is a common interest here. I am struck by the extent to which Faulkner's world is a microcosmic world, that we find places in common elsewhere. And I suppose our—my—problem is a kind of self-consciousness. I've heard others say, well, I live here, maybe I'm taking a great deal for granted and don't see it. You people point out things to us that we may not have seen before. In addition, we have found here how very human Faulkner was, in being able to write things that interest us as simple human beings, and, above all, we've had a good time.

EH: I think of another sort of investigation, inspection, of Mr. Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha. Professor Kerr is just the person to lead us into a consideration of that. If you've looked into her Yoknapatawpha—and if you haven't, you should; as Professor Pilkington said today, it could well be a text for our particular conference—you'll find that before she began her study of Faulkner, she had made a study of sequence novels, and among those are Balzac's and Zola's. Would you compare Mr. Faulkner's series of sequence novels to those, Miss Kerr?

EK: Well, both Balzac and Zola were approaching the sequence novel in a much more systematic fashion, and Zola particularly because he was beginning with a specific scientific theory, was trying to demonstrate the workings of heredity in two branches of one family. In other words, he was trying to prove scientific fact by imaginative creations, which is, you know, not very conclusive. And Balzac, by the time he got started in the Comedie Humaine, began classifying and deciding whether he would do such and such works in this and such and such a category. Now, Faulkner didn't do that at all, ever. He was free afield. He was letting his imagination go wherever it wished, but he was using that idea, which fascinated him in Balzac, of the intact work, where you have the same characters reappearing, where you have the sense of the wholeness of the work. And I did the comparisons in the beginning of my book. So, what I think Faulkner did was to adopt a general concept, but he did not have, thank goodness,
that kind of over-systematizing way of going about it. Well, I
gather it was over-systematizing in Zola's approach, because I
think that some things defeated Zola. And you can't prove
anything scientifically when you're dealing with creations of
the author's imagination.

But I avoided doing anything with Faulkner for a while. I
just excluded him from my doctoral dissertation for that
reason, because that was the late thirties, and I couldn't see
where he was going. And I thought, well, there's no sense in
dealing with an author whose works are incomplete, where
there is nothing to indicate what he is going to do. Now, had I
had the 1938 synopsis of the Snopes Trilogy which Mr.
Blotner so kindly reprinted in his biography, you see, I would
have had some kind of guideline. But we discovered Faulkner
didn't follow it. So I think that probably that is one of the
reasons why the Snopes Trilogy didn't turn out as well as
some of the others, plus all the other things, a long delay in
completing it, for which there are many, many reasons. But I
think the very fact that for purposes of giving his publisher
something to tie to and advance money on, he thought he had
to put down the plans for all three volumes, and this may have
rather inhibited him. Certainly by the time he got to *The Town*,
he had gotten so far away from his original idea that it is
scarcely possible to see a relationship except for the story of
Flem. That, of course, he followed through, more or less. For
instance, I was delighted with the information I got from Mr.
Blotner to find out that Faulkner had intended to use Sarty
Snopes again, because I had always felt, now here is a charac-
ter I feel Faulkner was so involved with I just cannot believe
that he's not going to use him again. So when I first found out
from one of the Random House representatives at an M.L.A.
convention that *The Reivers* was going to come out and it was
the story about a boy, I said immediately, "I'll bet it is Sarty
Snopes." Well, of course, what he had intended to do with
Sarty Snopes was so far removed from anything like *The
Reivers* that my guess was only partially right. But, as I said, I
think that for Faulkner's kind of mind to try to plan in
advance too far was detrimental. Furthermore, remember
almost all of his action is as of the time of writing. Well, how
can you plan? You don’t know what’s going to be happening in 1956, 1946, say.

EH: How would you compare individual segments of the series of Faulkner? Would you say that several of his novels are greater works of art than any in Balzac or Zola?

EK: Oh, yes, unquestionably.

EH: So that in individual segments, or novels—

EK: Well, no, of course, you see, as I was pointing out in my talk the other day, Faulkner has continuity of themes. And the account that you get of one family in one novel or a couple of novels, as the Compsons, reinforces or throws new light on the story of other families in other novels. It is the continuity of themes involved as well as the setting and the people that constitutes the characteristics of sequence novels. They reinforce each other. And you can see a certain kind of a progression, a progression from, very roughly, the negative to the positive for one thing. That is one of the great virtues of the sequence novel—continuity of themes. Well, for instance, I’ll give another example, and it’s very useful for comparison of Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe. Now, Thomas Wolfe and Faulkner started from very much the same place, Southern boys who deal with their Southern backgrounds, who are fascinated by their families, by the people around them, who had both a poetic and satiric view, and they were both involuntary sequence novelists. Faulkner didn’t know when he wrote *Sartoris* what he was going to do with *Yoknapatawpha* except he knew that he was going to be picking it up. And so, sort of involuntarily, bit by bit, until after he got through with *Absalom, Absalom!*, he didn’t have fully the idea of having the memories of his characters convey the legend of the community and didn’t have fully the idea that in the minds of the community should be the stories of all the major families that he had written about. He was very, very late in filling that gap with the Compsons. The Sartorises were right in there all the time. But the idea of doing that with all the other families, he didn’t get for quite a while. And he kept himself out. He is very autobiographical in some of the less obvious ways. Well, Thomas Wolfe was very autobiographical in the most obvious ways. You change the names of fictional characters to the
names of real people, and you get a pretty close approximation of Thomas Wolfe's life. And he never got outside of himself. And he became a sequence novelist inadvertently because he discovered what he wanted to write was his experience. And to write his experience, he couldn't do it all in one novel, he had to keep going. I think, Look Homeward, Angel and Of Time and the River are the best examples, because after that he was sort of repeating some of his earlier material. But if you consider those two novels and see that in addition to the growth to maturity, the various experiences of Thomas Wolfe as Eugene Gant, you have also beautifully worked out some highly poetic themes that echo and re-echo in the two volumes, then you get this other dimension that you get in Faulkner. But one reason why Faulkner is better than Wolfe is he was able to get outside of himself and use his own experience, transmute his own experience into the more subtle reflections of life as he had lived it that you get in the Yoknapatawpha novels. And I think one may very well get a bit exasperated with the hero of Thomas Wolfe. And this is a curious thing about Faulkner. In all the Yoknapatawpha chronicles, there is no creative artist. There's no character that can possibly represent Faulkner. You have some, some failed artists, although I don't think I would even grant Quentin Compson more than a somewhat artistic inflatable temperament. I don't think I would call him a failed artist. Horace Benbow, yes. He aspired to artistic expression, and all that florid prose of his, and his apostrophes to Narcissa and so forth. He was the artistic type but lacked the discipline to do anything with it. But so far as any character in Yoknapatawpha is concerned, who had the artistic vision and developed the dedication to do anything with it, there simply is none. And that is why you have no success in Yoknapatawpha, such as you have in Lafayette County.

EH: No what?

EK: No such success, as you have in Lafayette County or you have in William Faulkner.

EH: Yes, it's interesting, as you comment, he left out a man like L. Q. C. Lamar and furthermore gave part of his name, L. Q. C., to McCaslin.

EK: Yes.
EH: Another sequence—I guess you'd call it a sequence series—that one thinks of and that back in the fifties there was a good bit of discussion of in conjunction with Faulkner's work, is Hardy's Wessex series.

EK: Yes. Well, Hardy, I have never been able, even before I got involved in the sequence novel—incidentally, Joseph Warren Beach and I invented the term, and so if you've never heard it before, that's the reason—I've never been able to see why Hardy didn't go that second step. Here he had this wonderful geographical area that he was obviously absolutely fascinated with, and he jumped all over it. I know that Hardy country, oh, moderately well. He was using it very realistically in some respects, very poetically in other respects; but he never takes that second step of having the characters interrelated, where you'd expect them to be because the area is so small. The distance from Dorchester to Weymouth is something like eight miles. And remember all the distances that Tess covered, she covered on foot. And yet Hardy never goes the second step. And I think that Hardy's Wessex novels would have gained interest and common knowledge, common legend.

EH: Do any of you other panelists think of anything on this particular subject or anything related?

MC: I can think of a practical observation bearing out this thing about Hardy. We're about to publish a Hardy Portable and it's quite a problem because Julian Moynihan, who's doing the Portable, decided to put it together somewhat like The Faulkner Portable, very much against my advice because I didn't think that with Hardy it would work. There are not the interconnections. What is your word for the psycho—

EK: Sequence.

MC: Sequence novels. It's not there.

EK: No. Well that's it, you see; as I said, Hardy didn't go that other step.

JB: One comment that occurs to me, which is a casual one in a sense, is that Millgate, as some of you may know, is now engaged in the completion of a biography of Thomas Hardy. And, given the fact of his fine book on William Faulkner, he may suggest some correspondence between the two.

Q: In this connection Millgate teaches a graduate seminar at the
University of Toronto called “Wessex and Yoknapatawpha Counties.”

EH: Weber, I believe has discussed this at some length. And Campbell and Foster dealt with the resemblances between Hardy and Faulkner.

EK: Guerard has some things on it.

EH: I wonder if any of you would make a comment on Faulkner's use of the land as compared to Hardy's use of the land. Do you have anything right off hand on that? We're still talking of the riches—

JB: Actually, if we pursue this, I'll bet we could use up forty-five minutes talking about Faulkner and Hardy. After a group met in which I participated, one of us started talking about Faulkner and Hardy and saying, "Well, they're not all that close." And then we spent about ten minutes lining up areas in which correspondences exist.

EH: There are interesting things there, but it is time to ask the audience to help us in our discussion of this subject. Undoubtedly, you will have encountered some things or want to ask some things of some of our panel members. Questions?

Q: You know that in their new anthology, Warren and Lewis comment on Faulkner's relationship to Stribling.

EH: Yes.

Q: And we do have that series of Slavic novels written around the same time as Stribling. Then, of course, earlier than Faulkner that whole group of novels by William Gilmore Simms. Does anybody up there want to talk about the differences between these series and Faulkner?

EK: Well, I did do Stribling in my dissertation, but I got my degree in 1941, and I haven't looked at Stribling since, so I can't say too much, except that that was a genuine sequence. And it did have a clear interrelationship. And I wish it were more vivid in my mind, but I just don't remember enough details to say anything more. But I do remember that I did use it and was aware that it has sort of an anticipation of Faulkner.

EH: Joe.

JB: I corresponded at one point with a man who was doing a book on Stribling, and he said that he'd check for me with Mrs. Stribling to see if she recalled Stribling's making any com-
ment about Faulkner's use of the same kind of material. And the answer, as you may anticipate, was no.

Q: Well, I'd like to ask Dr. Kerr. You mentioned Thomas Wolfe and Faulkner as a kind of sequence writers, and I wondered if you would comment upon Faulkner's famous controversial statement about Thomas Wolfe being ahead of him.

EK: Well, I think that I understand exactly what Faulkner was getting at—that their reach exceeded their grasp. And he was contrasting them, as you remember, with writers like Hemingway who realized the limitations of their powers and stayed within those limitations and did extraordinarily well within those limits. Whereas, you'll remember this Faustian complex of Thomas Wolfe's. He went up to Harvard and he wanted to read every book in the Harvard library. And it was this driving, this gargantuan appetite for life and achievement that I'm sure is what Faulkner was thinking of. And Faulkner just in trying to create the whole cosmos—which he went much farther with, you see, than Thomas Wolfe did. Thomas Wolfe kept within the limits of his own life and a relatively small group of people. And because the focus was on his hero, he could include only those characters that came within his hero's experience. So, Faulkner's aim was greater in a little different way from Thomas Wolfe's; but they were both aspiring beyond the limits of any one theme. I might mention—it just happened to pop into my mind—one trilogy that offers some good parallels with Faulkner, if you regard Faulkner in his whole historical perspective, is Conrad Richter's *The Trees, The Fields, and The Town*, where he's using the same area from the time of the first settlers through the time and the growth of the establishment and civilization.

Q: I have a question for Mr. Blotner and Mr. Cowley. It seemed to me that Faulkner's greatness as a modernist writer depended on his novels up to about 1942, *Go Down, Moses*. That sort of seemed in the tradition of Mann or Lawrence, Kafka; and that was the writer who was admired by the existentialists. Do you think that one of the reasons for Faulkner's falling off was in any way a result of his becoming self-conscious of his work as a chronicler of the county?

MC: Well, you really should have asked Mr. Blotner instead of me,
because Mr. Blotner has worked intensively with Faulkner's story. But, in reading it and going back to correspondence and what not, it strikes me more and more that there was a change in Faulkner, oh, beginning to be announced in Go Down, Moses. That part of this change was what is familiarly known as the "forty-year-old crisis." But in Faulkner's case, he was actually tired. He was tired after finishing Go Down, Moses, and he was having at that time intense difficulty in selling stories to magazines. And then he went to Hollywood and worked with conscientiousness at tasks that were beneath him and at tasks at which, when he did well, the Hollywood people didn't appreciate what he had done. So that he got finally credit on only two successful pictures out of his three or four years in Hollywood. And he was becoming more and more discouraged at that time; at the same time, becoming more and more interested in public affairs. This began with the war; and as the war developed, he became impressed by the injustice during the war to the Negro soldiers. And he had already been heartbroken about the condition of the Negroes in Mississippi. So that this novelist who had been intensely private, so private that he said that he'd often written things and sent them off to print before he realized that strangers would read them, became in his later work more of a public man. Now, at the same time, we do not set such a high value on his later and more public work as we set on his earlier and more private work. And sometimes, it seems to me, that public and broadly human issues, are better presented in Sartoris, Sanctuary, and especially in Go Down, Moses, than they are in Intruder in the Dust and The Town and The Mansion.

EH: Another writer that comes to mind when we're thinking of comparing Faulkner's achievement to that of others is one whom he is sometimes said to have learned from—Conrad. Though those are not, I guess, sequence novels, there is Marlowe, who goes through them. Would any of you care to comment on that? Not necessarily the influence of Conrad on Faulkner, but a comparison because often there are various things in Conrad that bring to mind Faulkner and vice versa.

EK: Well, I think he learned a tremendous amount about narra-
tive methods from Conrad. And I think he gained from the Marlow device, although Faulkner never uses that Marlowe device, the narrator with the fully realized, dramatized audience, the way Conrad does in *Lord Jim* and in *Heart of Darkness*. But, so far as the impressionistic techniques are concerned, and so far as the basic approach to reality of fitting together bits of truth as they are discovered, he did learn much from this theory of Conrad's and Ford Maddox Ford's that we don't learn things in reality in a logical sequence the way we have become accustomed to finding them in fiction. We learn them gradually and haphazardly, and we have to fit them together for ourselves. And Faulkner is expecting us to do that. Really, his whole Yoknapatawpha chronicles constitute a gigantic example of that basic principle of having to learn the things haphazard and out of sequence and fitting them together for yourself and coming up at the truth, at the appraisal of the truth that lies therein. But I want to return to the question raised earlier about the falling off of his later work. Now, we're looking at Faulkner as the novelist of Yoknapatawpha. How much of the falling off in his later work came from his devoting his energies to *A Fable*, instead of going on with Yoknapatawpha?

**JB:** I think that that point is very well taken.

**JW:** About ten years, wasn't it?

**JB:** That's right. And as you were speaking about the comparisons which could be made, I was reminded, of one line in Albert Guerard, Jr.'s book on Joseph Conrad, which he published, I think, in the middle fifties. It seemed to me to be an extraordinarily acute remark and also an extraordinarily generous one to make when he was doing a book about somebody else. He said, in effect, if you want to see what Joseph Conrad was trying to do ultimately, read William Faulkner.

**EH:** How about that? I, being a devotee of each of those men, have experienced with my students something that supports Guerard. I admire Conrad tremendously, I love to read him. I admire Faulkner tremendously. But over the years I've found that I cannot get my students tied up in most of Conrad
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as I can in William Faulkner. There's an intensity, a headlong quality, an immediacy in Faulkner that Conrad, most of the time, lacks.

We talk about the parallels a bit, but we don’t take a bold stand on what in Faulkner makes his achievement superior to these other people's. Somebody give us a bold statement on this and something that we can challenge for a few minutes. Joe, do you think Faulkner's work is superior to Conrad's? I know this is sophomore beer talk, but it's more interesting a lot of times than academic talk.

JB: Yes, I do. But I feel as you do. Conrad is one of my favorites. To be fair to Conrad, I think one of the things we have to say is that—I once heard Shelby Foote say that he told Mr. Faulkner, “One of the great advantages that I have had as a writer coming along is one you did not have, namely I could learn from Marcel Proust and William Faulkner.” And Conrad wrote in a tradition in which prose experimentalists did not stand there, so to speak, from whom he could derive the kind of technical expertise that Faulkner could derive from Conrad. And if we are to try to make an assay of the quality of the ore, I would have to say that to my own taste it is higher in Faulkner, that the range is greater. But once again, we can play the game of Hardy and Faulkner with Conrad and Faulkner. We've just been talking about what some people call the diminution of power or whatever you want to call it in Faulkner's later years. Think of Conrad's later years. If you think of the time when recognition came to Conrad, when you think of the days during World War I, when he was asked to go out on the North Sea on a British dreadnought finally when he had achieved the kind of stature that came with Victory in 1917, I guess, then he started writing those novels which went back to the Napoleonic era, things that he had planned long before. He was an old man then. He had gone through a lot of living andanguishing. And people said, “Gee, it's too bad he's not writing things like Lord Jim and Heart of Darkness.”

EH: Well, I think we may have that same thing with Faulkner, too, one of these days.

EK: I think the moral of that is you shouldn't live too long. Look at

**EH:** I don't know how to broach this; but I want to ask Mr. Cowley's indulgence if I commit a real *faux pas*. I meant to ask him this in private, and I hadn't thought of it. His introduction, which, of course, as we've said many times here, called attention of the nation again to the work of Faulkner, also had as its basic premise the unity of the work and that it was more important as a unity. And that has been attacked by Mr. Meriwether. If you don't want us even to bring this up, that's fine. If you would like to comment on it, I would love to hear your comment.

**MC:** It's funny. One of Jim Meriwether's attacks went to one passage in one of Faulkner's letters that he misread. Faulkner said in the letter, "I don't think there's too much Southern legend in it." And Meriwether took for granted that this "it" was Faulkner's work. It was an answer to a question in a letter of mine that had been lost: "Do you think I've put too much Southern legend in the introduction?" "It" was the introduction. Meriwether, by misinterpreting that "it," was able to base a large argument on it. Later, I saw that I had been wrong in that original introduction to lay not enough stress on the separate novels. I've said so in the revised edition. I did not appreciate at its full worth *Absalom, Absalom!* or I still don't appreciate *As I Lay Dying*. My favorites are elsewhere. But nevertheless, there is that Southern legend in Faulkner. And there is, as you see, through even the fourth part of "The Bear," or from *Absalom, Absalom!* this attempt to restructure Southern history in terms of legend. That is there. And I valued that very highly. Meriwether always plays up the separate novels. Well, there's a reason for that, too; and I didn't play them up enough in the original introduction. Yet, nevertheless, I'll stand by what I said.

**EH:** That was a qualification that I had in mind constantly when we were designing this conference. In a way we were assigned that theme, you know. Circumstances assigned us "Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha." Yet I was uneasy for two reasons: one, that it was as though we were insisting that right here was Yoknapatawpha and not the whole of Northeast Mississippi.
Another is that I didn’t want anyone to get the idea that we thought the novels were not novels individually.

One other thing—we were talking about these various influences. Thomas Beer, whom Faulkner acknowledged as an influence, wrote sequence stories, so there’s another sequence kind of thing that Faulkner might have learned from. And Beer furthermore had his own town similar to Jefferson. I’ve put that in my dissertation and everybody has overwhelmingly ignored it. But one day I’m going to publish something else about it and show you some rather fascinating parallels, not only in the use of words—this is what Faulkner said he learned, and the characterizations—but also even in the structuring of stories and so forth.

Q: Well, I have two questions. The first one I want to address to Miss Kerr and Mr. Cowley. In regard to the sequence and use of Southern legend and so forth, it seems to me that a very good analogy can be made. And it seems to me that it’s perhaps the closest analogy I can think of. That what Faulkner has done is what Shakespeare did in the history plays where he had a national myth that he used in his plays. I’d like for both of you to comment on that. And then the second question is addressed to all of you. Some of you may know that the Modern Language Association last year sent out questionnaires, and they wanted to know people’s fields and interests. And in a category of individual authors, the first three, of course, were Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Milton. And it may surprise some of you to know that number four was William Faulkner. So, the question is where does the criticism of Faulkner go from there?

EK: Well, I think that one of the differences between what Faulkner was doing and Shakespeare in the history plays, was Shakespeare was following more, you might say, the accepted line and Faulkner’s myth is not the traditional myth of the South. He was reinterpreting.

Q: Now, you were sort of implying then that Shakespeare accepted the orthodox view of man. I was not suggesting that myself.

EK: Well, I really haven’t been doing anything in that field for so long that I wouldn’t go so far as to say that he was accepting it,
but I don't think he was deviating from it as much as Faulkner was deviating from the traditional myth when you examine Faulkner very carefully and in light of the conventional legend of the South.

MC: Well, I said about what I had to say on that subject in the original introduction to *The Portable Faulkner*. Obviously, Faulkner's legend of the South was not the accepted one. But there were some very curious readings of history, especially when Uncle Ike starts out on the Civil War with that strange interlude in it of Uncle Ike's praise for John Brown. That would not recall the conventional Southern legend. And also more and more the stand that Faulkner took was that of an antislavery Southern nationalist. Let's see—he wasn't a Southern regionalist; he was a Southern nationalist but at the same time was firmly opposed to slavery and all its fruits in the land.

Q: We've heard a lot about the influence of people on Faulkner. I wonder if anyone would like to comment on Faulkner's influence on the novelists since 1950.

EH: People like Styron?

Q: I mean where do you see the greatest influence of Faulkner since 1950?

EH: In my creative writing classes. Mr. Blotner.

JB: That's the subject for a whole conference like I think has been held more than once. There are some famous lines you could cite. You could talk about people such as William Styron. Was it Flannery O'Connor who said, "When you hear the Dixie Special coming you better get off the track"? And a whole generation of Southern writers has had to deal with this double inheritance. There's a fine young novelist, Cormick McCarthy, who has done three novels so far—*The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, and *Silent God*, which are enormously powerful things full of poetic imagery and enough violence to turn your stomach about every twenty pages, not to say that William Faulkner does this, although when I read *Sanctuary* in high school, I just had never read anything like that before. But what I'm trying to say is that what he has, his legacy, the riches of Yoknapatawpha have now passed into the mainstream for people like Cormick McCarthy in a way that they
RICHES OF YOKNAPATAWPHA

had not done when the preceding generation, the inter-
mediate one, came along.

EH: I can testify to that personally. I can't think who it is but some
man in studying Southern literature back ten years ago or so
came up with something that struck me as part of my personal
experience. He said that when a great genius comes along he
creates a mode of apprehension, a mode of perception of his
era, his area and his era—that Faulkner was such and that for
fifty years or so after that smaller writers, minor writers write
under the umbrella of influence of this man. I started a novel
ten or fifteen years ago about my own people, Harringtons
and Pattersons and a bunch of people down in south Missis-
pippi. One of the reasons I started that, I later realized, was
because Faulkner had written his novels. But more than that I
wrote about forty pages into the thing, and I realized that my
uncles and aunts and all those people looked like Faulkner
people. They did, too, you know, as far as I could see. And I
was writing pure Faulkner. Somebody pointed out if I'd put
the name William Faulkner on it—he was still alive—and send
it off, he could get a nice check. But I stopped and started
reading John Cheever, somebody as far away from William
Faulkner's rhetoric and view as I could get. And I know a
number of writers who have had that problem. That's one
kind of influence that is not so good, but it is very powerful. I
can testify to that.

Q: Mr. Blotner, to return to the later novels of William Faulkner,
what was Faulkner's thinking in putting so much time and
effort into A Fable? It stands outside the novels that we are
most familiar with in Faulkner. Can it be at that time he felt he
had exhausted his material? Or was he trying to say some-
thing, and if so, that he was so obviously symbolic that his
efforts ended up in a rather poor novel as in comparison to
other Faulkner work? If another writer had written it,
perhaps it would be a great novel. What is your thinking
there?

JB: First, before I try to begin an answer that I will try to keep
short, I think in Malcolm's review of A Fable on the front page,
one review you did you said, "This novel is like a ruined
cathedral which nonetheless towers over all the things alongside it.” Wasn’t that right?

MC: Yes, I said that.

JB: I would put my response in this context. A Fable is not as much of a sport as one would think. All one has to do is to go back to the early stories like “The Leg,” for instance, which is set in England during World War I, and “Crevasse,” which is an early story which is set in France and has to deal with trench warfare. There is his great interest in the lore of the First World War. So all of that material constitutes another well upon which he drew. We must be careful not to exclude other areas because they’re not within Yoknapatawpha. And, of course, Mr. Brooks’ second book is going to explore this area. As for A Fable, we were talking about Hollywood—all these things start getting linked together eventually. But he began the work in Hollywood as a three-way deal with William Baker and Henry Hathaway who came to him with the idea of redoing, according to one person, a legend which was very common, namely the reappearance of Christ in the second crucifixion. And Faulkner began work on this with the money advanced by Baker and Hathaway in the hope that the three of them could do something that was not nearly as common then as it is now, namely to begin with a property, to develop it, to produce it cooperatively, and then have one of the bigger companies distribute it. His hope was that this would provide what he had gone to Hollywood for in the first place and never had really gotten, namely financial security that would permit him to come and work here where he wanted to be at the things he wanted to write. Well, it was a very complicated deal; but as time went on and he sent material to Baker and Hathaway, I think they began to see that it really was not film material. And over the years he was wrestling with this problem which was a financial one in part, but which became an aesthetic one and in which he had involved himself in ways he could not foresee, namely that he began to make an effort to synthesize ideas which had been only implicit in some of the things that he had done up to that time. And then he became, I think, entrapped to a certain extent in this large effort. He
worked for a very long time on it. Sometimes he would try to break out. He would do "Notes on a Horse Thief," for instance, which would take him back to Yoknapatawpha, and he'd go like a shot. Then he'd get back to the Old General and the problems of the Corporal and his squad and he would be confronted with a number of problems of changing the names so that they were not literally too New Testament. And he began to plow into A Fable the attitudes which had expressed themselves in his concern over the Second World War which we talked about—all of these large problems. So that by the time he was approaching the end of the decade on which he worked intermittently at this novel, he had such an enormous commitment to it that he had no alternative but to fight his way through and to clear the debt. And so he did. And his own judgment of it kept changing. He would say, "It's my magnum opus" or he would say, "It may not be simply the best thing of my work, it may be the best thing of my time."

And then shortly after he had finished it, he said to one interviewer, "No, it doesn't please me." And he couldn't wait to get back to Yoknapatawpha once more. So it's an extremely complex process and one that probably depleted his creative resources as much as anything else that he ever did in his life.

JW: Let me ask you a question in that connection. Why did he outline that work on the wall?

JB: I think he had reached the point where he had so much material and where it had become so impractical that he was trying to impose a kind of time framework upon it in order to make it more manageable. He would even do this with masses of manuscript. That is, he would stack Thursday over here on the bookcase, and he would put Tuesday here on the desk and Friday over on the bed, simply as a means of physically dealing with these masses of pages which had accumulated with the kinds of pagination that you just wouldn't believe unless you saw the manuscript—page 222C13, with all sorts of subdivisions. I think it became a physical problem, but it may also relate to something that he had done earlier. His method apparently most often was to destroy working notes. And whenever anything survived, it survived through chance or through some happy circumstance, as with that one page
of notes entitled “Twilight,” in which he put down the birth-dates of the Compson children before the novel was even named *The Sound and the Fury* or the chronology of events for *Absalom, Absalom!* or the genealogies of some of the families just sketched out. He had used these methods from time to time, and some evidence of this remains for roughly the same purpose—to get straight in his mind things that would be more tractable if he had them graphically represented. I think when he got to that part of *A Fable*, he was fighting for his life, and he needed to have a visual representation to get all this complex material handleable and straight.

**GW:** Do you think, though, that he had to some degree felt that maybe he was something of a failure since readers had not recognized the universality in his Yoknapatawpha works and that he said to himself, “This is the time to be a deliberate stylist—to write a novelist’s novel, with the allegory, the structure, etc.” Is that what made him come back to it?

**JB:** I don’t know. There, there may have been something—

**MC:** No, by that time he had won the Nobel Prize.

**GW:** Yes, but he must have felt that many of the Hollywood years were wasted, and he must surely have wanted to work on something like *The Town* and *The Mansion* for the years since *The Hamlet*. I’m talking about the real richness of Yoknapatawpha being able to give him what he had thought about many years before.

**JB:** It’s a perplexing question. In the six years before he won the prize, he was working on *A Fable*. There was no question he was a novelist of world stature, and he may have felt impelled in part to say, “By George, I’m going to”—as Hemingway would.

**JW:** As we know, he spent some time in France going over that area, even keeping an accurate record of where he went, what he saw, how much it cost, all of that. He took it over to a local attorney here for income tax deduction purposes in connection with his work on the project. And there is a great deal of light to be revealed in reading that material.

**EH:** Thank you, panelists. Thank you for coming.
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