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Faulkner: The Man and the Artist

by Carvel Collins

This evening I want to discuss a few widely-believed biographical and critical clichés which seem to be false. When I go around the country lecturing about Faulkner and his art, members of the audiences bring up these particular clichés most often; so this lecture is the result of a statistical study.

Discussion sessions or lectures earlier this week which ran beyond the programmed time only interfered with other discussions or lectures. But this lecture is to be followed by a party. So I have kept it flexible: I hope to discuss four of the more important popular, questionable concepts, but if when the time is up we have gone through only two or three of them I will stop right there and we can leave for the Holiday Inn.

The first false cliché which I want to discuss is that William Faulkner was rather shaky when organizing the structure of his novels. The second, equally false, is that Faulkner's works are not autobiographical. The third, that Faulkner was isolated artistically from his literary contemporaries. And the fourth, if it does not interfere with the party, is the unsound belief that the voluminous published statements by Faulkner the man are a useful guide to our interpretation of his work as an artist.

To look at the first of these concepts which seem to be incorrect—that Faulkner was shaky when he came to organizing the structure of a novel. *The Wild Palms* supplies an example of the early operation of this idea. As you know, it has a structure which is not conventional: two separate stories, one called “Wild Palms” and one called “Old Man,” are interlocked—first chapter of “Wild Palms” followed by first chapter of “Old Man,” then the second chapter of each, and so on. Early critics often said that the two plots bear no relation to each other, or insufficient relation. Clearly, one publishing house thought they were not related: back when the world was young and paperbacks cost twenty-five cents, a publisher brought out “Old Man” as one volume and “Wild Palms” as another so that to recover what Faulkner had written you had to spend fifty cents and read the

two books alternately. This arrangement certainly suggested that the publishers thought Faulkner did not have anything in mind when he put the two plots together in the original volume. Actually, of course, he had made them a unity, and many articles have been published to point this out; I am not here rushing to you a new idea. I merely bring this up as one early example of the conception that Faulkner was not in control of his works.

Ernest Hemingway made a statement on this subject which is partly flattering and partly not. He said that Faulkner had such great ability that Hemingway would have been content just to have been Faulkner's manager. This reminds me of a statement by one of the more colorful and imaginative graduates of this University, whom Faulkner knew rather well and greatly enjoyed, and who is known to some of you here tonight as "V. P." When I was interviewing him in Paris he said with feeling, apparently because of some immediately current episode, "Women are marvelous, but they *need direction*." Hemingway obviously felt that way about William Faulkner, saying, in effect, that Faulkner had great speed but not enough control.

Sean O'Faolain, holding the same opinion, injected, as relative terms, "genius" and "talent." O'Faolain, a writer of first-rate fiction and a fine human being, proved to be an inadequate critic of Faulkner in the period shortly after the awarding of the Nobel Prize. In 1953 O'Faolain was invited to come from Ireland to Princeton University to give a series of lectures on modern novelists, one of the lectures to be about Faulkner. Because O'Faolain had not spent much time on Faulkner, a friend of his in Boston set up a dinner party to which I was invited so that O'Faolain could ask me for information about Faulkner useful to the lecture he would give at Princeton. I was so informed—which was quite sporting: sometimes people are doing that but you do not know it. Out of that dinner came a small result which I find partly pathetic but mostly very amusing. After the dinner O'Faolain went to Princeton, gave the lectures, and later published them as a book, *The Vanishing Hero*. His chapter on Faulkner in that book bears a subtitle: "More genius than talent"—a version of the misconception we are discussing.

At the dinner, the purpose of which, as I just said, was to talk about Faulkner, I began to describe to Mr. O'Faolain, among other things, one feature of *The Sound and the Fury*: the carefully constructed relationship between the events of the Compsons' lives and the

events of Christ's Passion Week, an aspect of the novel which you and I have discussed here earlier in this conference. At that time I had just stumbled upon and puzzled out that elaborately detailed, sustained, and well-rounded inverted parallel which runs throughout *The Sound and the Fury* and had not yet published anything about it, having mentioned it only in one or two of my classes. But because I found Mr. O'Faolain to be such an admirable man and likely to have trouble in his lecture about Faulkner, I began to describe for him that particular example of Faulkner's skilled and systematic symbolism. Having got somewhat started in my mad flight, I suddenly looked about and said to myself that this was a terrible thing to be doing to our excellent hostess. Here is a most pleasant dinner and here are two people talking shop, one of them holding forth as though he, not the visitor, were the lecturer. So, though the purpose of the dinner was the conveyance of critical information about Faulkner, I dropped at mid-point the presentation to Mr. O'Faolain of Faulkner's inverted Christ material in *The Sound and the Fury*.

I did not hear the lectures at Princeton, but when they appeared as the book, *The Vanishing Hero*, I read the chapter on Faulkner with fascination, the chapter subtitled "More genius than talent." You learn many odd things from that chapter. You learn, for example, that Gerald Bland, the self-entranced Harvard student, is possibly the father of Caddy Compson's daughter, which brings up the kind of long-distance insemination we now practice with highly-bred livestock. But what interested me most, and seemed both sad and amusing, was one piece of evidence which the chapter presented to support the concept that Faulkner wrote sloppy novels, that, as the book maintains on page 76, "his psyche" was "completely out of his control." As an illustration of what it calls Faulkner's "willful, sporadic use of symbolism," his "sporadic and capricious use of symbolism," the book brings up the parallel in *The Sound and the Fury* with Passion Week: O'Faolain wrote that Faulkner drew our attention to "the paschal time," stuck with that symbolism for awhile, and then, without bringing it to completion, dropped it.

I am glad to see you find that as amusing as I do. Actually this little episode did not stop there: a British literary entrepreneur later published a large volume discussing literature written in the English language in which much of O'Faolain's chapter on Faulkner reappears—with no credit to O'Faolain, so far as I could make out. So,

chatting at an extremely pleasant dinner party, one can point out part of an element of a Faulkner novel and now—I don't know who reads such a book as that one on literature in the English language, it looks like one of the books published to be put on coffee tables—somebody may have read that lifting of O'Faolain's chapter which lifted, and distorted, the point I started to make at dinner, somebody far away, who now knows that Faulkner could not control the structure of his novels.

Actually, as you all know, Faulkner was a very careful craftsman. I think of two or three examples, not all of which could be known to you and therefore might be of interest. Years ago when calling on one of the people I had learned might have Faulkner documents, I was allowed to work with the set of original galleys of *Sanctuary*, the set on which Faulkner had made his elaborate revisions. As you will recall, when Faulkner had sent his typescript of the first version of *Sanctuary* to his publisher, the publisher had read it and had replied that it was too censorable to publish. Faulkner accepted that and went on with another novel. Later, unexpectedly, the publisher set *Sanctuary* in galleys and sent them to Faulkner. Seeing the book thus after a lapse of time, he was very critical of that first version and therefore changed the galleys extensively, killing many sections entirely and revising and rearranging others. Because that book early struck many readers as pornographic, which, in view of what we can buy today from the revolving racks of any grocery, is ludicrous—and, frankly, was ludicrous then when you really read the novel—the general assumption for a time was that Faulkner changed the first version because he had become critical of its so-called salacious content. Actually, the comparison of the original galleys which their then owner allowed me to make with the published novel immediately showed clearly that what Faulkner was improving by his extensive revisions was the novel's structure.

Another set of galley proofs also shows Faulkner's concern with craftsmanship and that he not only had genius but talent—that, contrary to the widely-held conception, he did have control. He gave a set of the proofs of *Absalom, Absalom!* to Meta Carpenter in California, along with, over the years, a number of letters and other items. Not wanting to profit materially from having known Faulkner, she considered burning all of the documents but graciously agreed with me some years ago that it would be better to place them in a library,

sealed for many years but ultimately to be available to literary scholars. That set of proof sheets of *Absalom, Absalom!* shows Faulkner's conflict with an imperceptive, conventional copy editor. It is interesting to see in that set of galleys how much Faulkner was fighting to retain certain aspects of the novel which some readers have accused him of putting in or leaving in because he was careless or indifferent. Parenthetically, Faulkner's responses to the copy editor's imperception contain many amusing passages as Faulkner became more and more astonished and exasperated. At one point he felt required to write that the copy editor should leave one phrase unchanged because it was that strange English construction known as the subjunctive. Later on Faulkner put the copy editor in his or her place: During that period a still-remembered best seller was Elinor Glyn's sentimental and badly written novel *Three Weeks*, once famous because thought to be "spicy." Well on in these galleys of *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner was so irritated by one intrusion of the copy editor that he exclaimed in the galley's margin that at last he knows the identity of his anonymous collaborator—it is Elinor Glyn.

To speak of a third set of galley proofs bearing on this point, out of loyalty to Mississippi Faulkner accepted an invitation to supply a manuscript to The Levee Press of Greenville, which was publishing works by writers native to this state. He sent them what eventually became *Notes on a Horsethief*. They set it in galleys and sent to Faulkner a package containing the galleys, his original of the story, and, as a gift, a book by Eudora Welty which they had published. After some time had passed with no response from Faulkner, the publishers asked him to send back the corrected proof, for they were eager to put out the book. When Faulkner quickly and with apologies returned the package, unopened, with the gift book still there and the proofs unread, the publishers went over the proofs themselves. I happened to be passing through Greenville just then; so the publishers asked me to look in the galleys for places where only the author could decide what to print and to take the galleys with me to Oxford so I could ask Faulkner to deal with those questionable points. When I brought the proofs here and asked Mr. Faulkner whether he would look them over, he said he would be glad to and suggested we go over them the first thing the next morning. I wish that Hemingway and O'Faolain and others who felt he needed a manager when he wrote his novels could have been

there immediately after breakfast as Mr. Faulkner went through the questionable points in the quickest, clearest, most professionally effective fashion imaginable.

I feel sure you will agree that the probable cause of the misconception of Faulkner's control was his being so inventive in creating new structures, in so often making a new work, as Ezra Pound had advised, new. Certainly he often abandoned simple sequence and conventional chronological order, those fetishes of the numerous early critics whom Faulkner's works infuriated: *The Sound and the Fury* with its irregular time scheme but real order (early critics thought Faulkner should have put Jason's monologue first because it is the one you can understand); *As I Lay Dying* with its strange injection of Addie's monologue some days after her death; *Light in August* with its leading female character and leading male character discomposing some early critics by never meeting each other—as though this phenomenon is not thematic but is there because Faulkner could not quite figure out how to get them together.

Go Down, Moses is an example here. Having tried other structures in earlier works, Faulkner produced a form first billed as a volume of short stories and still often considered to be that. Later Faulkner wanted the reference to stories removed from the title because he considered the book a novel. In regarding it as a novel everyone has to confront one problem: the book is McCaslin throughout except for one section, "Pantaloon in Black." Even those who are willing to consider the rest of the book to be a novel of sorts—remembering, for example, the structure of *Winesburg, Ohio*—have wondered how to include "Pantaloon in Black." When Faulkner was questioned about it he replied that Ryder, the protagonist of "Pantaloon in Black," is descended from McCaslin slaves and the setting is McCaslin land—which has not satisfied all readers. I would like to argue that "Pantaloon in Black" does perform some unifying service in the book. All of you know the plot as well as I, but to summarize it quickly for the point. Ryder has loved his wife deeply and she has died and his great love for her makes his grief enormous. It also makes his grief violent. The death of the woman he loves cheapens his evaluation of his own life; so he abandons all restraints and is destroyed. "Pantaloon in Black" was written so that we as readers see the events from Ryder's position as he suffers and expresses his grief. At the end of "Pantaloon in Black," after Ryder's death, we are

shown a law officer who has been involved in chasing Ryder. The officer views Ryder from outside and, oblivious of Ryder's grief, considers him an uncontrollable animal. As Evans Harrington perceptively has written about another of Faulkner's stories, Faulkner here too "has managed to effect a progression in the intensity of his story by this contrast." Because, having been inside Ryder's emotion, we identify with him in his passionate grief, we quickly develop a great dislike for the unfeeling law officer. If we let time pass and then reread *Go Down, Moses*, we again come upon the early comic chapter, or story, "Was"—and it is very comic, many humorous things are in it. One of them which seems especially amusing at the first reading, before we get to "Pantaloon in Black," is the episode in which the McCaslins with their hunting pack chase one of their slaves, a man in love with a slave at a neighboring plantation, to which he wants to go to be with her. The pursued slave knows the dogs and the hunters and they know and like him; so there is no threat of violence, of dogs dragging him down to maim or kill. So we find the chase funny, and certainly it has many amusing aspects. But when we are going through *Go Down, Moses* again, having shared by now Ryder's love and grief in "Pantaloon in Black," we really cannot read "Was" again with quite so many belly laughs. Here is a man who is in love. He wants to be with the woman he loves. And he is being kept from her. This is a common situation over the world, the subject of much literature. It seems to me that Faulkner, by "Pantaloon in Black," has arranged for us to feel somewhat embarrassed about ourselves as we read "Was" the second time and, remembering "Pantaloon in Black," realize more fully the hunted slave's love and recognize that we are much closer than we would like to think to the officer of the law at the end of "Pantaloon in Black" with his shocking inhumanity.

If that is true, whether it sufficiently draws "Pantaloon in Black" into the unity of the whole book may still be open to question. But it does seem to me that here as well as in the rest of *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner, trying something new, in spite of its unconventionality is controlling it.

He did take chances. And that led to conflict with Ernest Hemingway. At this University Faulkner agreed to appear before several English classes. The class meetings turned out to be mostly question-and-answer sessions, which are interesting because they

are the germ of the later similar, more numerous sessions he took part in at Nagano, the University of Virginia, and West Point. At one of the meetings here Faulkner made a reference to Hemingway which came to have ramifications.

I once was allowed to read ninety or so letters which Hemingway wrote to a literary critic over a considerable period of time. In the early years, when Hemingway was extremely successful while Faulkner was less well regarded, Hemingway very generously praised Faulkner. There came, however, a sharp change in the content and tone of Hemingway's letters after Faulkner at this University was asked how he ranked the fiction writers of the United States and gave an answer in which he did not put Hemingway at the top, ranking him lower because he was afraid to take chances. Hemingway, as we all have read, did not like to be thought afraid of anything; so when Faulkner's remark was publicized Hemingway's letters turned to attacking Faulkner, and Hemingway moved into a little action. Because his letters suggested that in connection with this matter he had written to General "Buck" Lanham, with whom he had been associated during the Second World War, I got in touch with General Lanham, and a finer human being, judging from my brief observation of him, would be hard to find. He said it was true that Hemingway had written to him about Faulkner's remark: Hemingway had pointed out that he had been with General Lanham during considerable action and that Faulkner had said Hemingway was a coward and that Hemingway would like for General Lanham to write to Faulkner and tell Faulkner how brave Hemingway had been in the Second World War. General Lanham told me that he realized what Faulkner had meant and knew that the remark was not a judgment of Hemingway's physical courage but that he also knew how much this meant to Ernest Hemingway. So General Lanham, to be helpful, wrote to Faulkner. Faulkner made a fine reply, very courteous to Hemingway and wanting to make clear that here at the University of Mississippi what he had been saying was that, because all art fails, the way to judge artists is by the size, the magnificence of their artistic failures and that Hemingway had settled for taking fewer artistic chances and had failed therefore less than those writers Faulkner had ranked above him.

This did not appease Hemingway, who began in those ninety or so letters and in others to attack Faulkner. In one letter he scoffs that

Faulkner thinks himself so brave going about shooting bears when a bear is the closest thing to a man and Hemingway knows one bear, a personal friend, with whom he sits around socially. If Faulkner wants to show how brave he is let him shoot at things like Germans, who shoot back.

Parenthetically, General Lanham was in one amusing exchange with Hemingway which may relate sufficiently to Hemingway's resentment of Faulkner's supposed questioning of his courage to justify my bringing it in here. General Lanham, Hemingway, and others were in a low, heavily sandbagged forward command post which had a safety cellar beneath it. When a German shell hit a corner of the roof, everyone but Hemingway dove into the cellar. When they emerged, the General criticized Hemingway for not taking shelter. Then another shell hit another corner of the roof of the command post, and again into the cellar went all but Hemingway. When the General emerged and was additionally critical, Hemingway responded with the staple piece of fatalistic combat wisdom that the only shell which will get you is the one with your name on it. General Lanham replied that maybe these shells don't have our names but they sure seem to have our address.

To move on to the question of whether Faulkner's works are autobiographical. I do not know what difference it makes whether they are autobiographical or not. But we were discussing briefly in the panel this afternoon the relationship between biography and literature, and it does have interesting aspects. Many readers feel that Faulkner is remarkably less autobiographical than other writers, such as Hemingway and, notably, Thomas Wolfe. I would like to use here *The Wild Palms* to suggest just how capable Faulkner was of being autobiographical in his fiction even when not writing about the community which all of us are here this week to observe and to enjoy connecting with his fiction. That *The Wild Palms* is not set here where Faulkner grew up gives us a good chance to ask in more isolation the question of how he put himself into his works.

Much good criticism of *The Wild Palms* has been published, most of the best of it by Thomas McHaney. Some of that criticism has interestingly connected Faulkner's life with the novel, but I should like to make the connection even more noticeable by giving you some information not otherwise available because it comes from interviews with people connected either with the plot of the novel or

with Faulkner's writing of it or with both, people who were not available to other students of Faulkner's fiction or refused to be interviewed by them.

Faulkner certainly based many of the characteristics of his fictional Charlotte Rittenmeyer on Mrs. Helen Baird Lyman, whom he met at New Orleans in 1925, though he and she had no such relationship as that of Charlotte and Harry Wilbourne. William Faulkner had been in love with Estelle Oldham but in 1918 they had parted and she had married Mr. Cornell Franklin and was, when Faulkner met Helen Baird, living with her husband in the Orient. According to later letters which Faulkner wrote to Mrs. Lyman, he fell in love with her the first time he saw her, on a balcony in the French Quarter. The point I want to make is that Faulkner drew in detail and in depth on his recollections of his own emotions, which seem to have intensified his fictional presentation of Harry Wilbourne, who meets and falls in love with the fictional Charlotte in New Orleans when he is exactly the age of Faulkner when Faulkner met and fell in love there with Helen Baird. Faulkner modeled Charlotte in careful detail on Helen Baird's person and personality—color of eyes, complexion, figure, slight childhood injury, vivacity, compelling attractiveness—and on some of her activities and interests, such as her artistic work. She told me that Faulkner had proposed marriage to her but that she had refused him—the second time in his life that he was unable to marry a woman whom he loved. She married Mr. Guy Lyman, and Faulkner continued to be a friend of them both, seeing something of them for a few years. Later, writing to Mrs. Lyman from Hollywood a social letter, in no way courting her but recalling the past, Faulkner did revive briefly in the letter his old emotion and his loss, like Harry Wilbourne's loss at the end of *The Wild Palms*, by writing an extremely moving last line consisting of just her first name repeated several times.

The setting of the final days of Charlotte and Harry in *The Wild Palms* is Pascagoula. Faulkner had spent considerable time there in the mid-twenties, part of it in the beach cottage belonging to Helen Baird's family, where he wrote much of *Mosquitoes*. Some years ago, knowing that Faulkner, starting out as a writer, tried to make money in almost any way he could, I thought there was a possibility that he might have written small pieces in the twenties not only for the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* but for smaller newspapers in Louisiana and

south Mississippi. So on one of my trips to Pascagoula I stopped at several towns along the Gulf Coast to look in various newspapers of that period. Courthouses are repositories of newspapers because they record deeds and other legal documents, and in one courthouse on the Gulf I found the newspaper files in disarray because a contractor was redoing the room. After kindly helping me to search for the newspaper volumes which I wanted to examine, he asked what I was looking for. When I told him, he said with interest that he knew something about William Faulkner: returning from the Second World War on a troopship he began reading a book supplied by the USO, *The Wild Palms*. He soon said to himself in astonishment that this is about *home*. He had grown up in Pascagoula, where his father had been sheriff, and he immediately listed for me the detail in which Faulkner had put the Pascagoula of the twenties into the novel. For example, the former jail, where he had played as a child while his father was sheriff, had among its cells one from the window of which the view was exactly that which Harry Wilbourne after his arrest sees from his cell.

Faulkner's emotional association with Pascagoula was not limited to his being there in 1925, 1926, and 1927. In 1929, after Mrs. Estelle Oldham Franklin had been divorced for some time, he and she were married. Following a honeymoon trip they went for the summer to Pascagoula where they rented a beach cottage—which Faulkner used in detail, along with a few other elements of their stay there, when he wrote of the Gulf Coast days in which the fictional Harry and Charlotte await her death. An interview with a woman who had lived next door to the cottage in which the Faulknors spent that summer added details which bear on the novel. So Faulkner in that part of *The Wild Palms* is further drawing on his own life. One might even be permitted to speculate that by including the setting and some of the events of the early months of his marriage to Estelle Oldham, William Faulkner may somehow have been invoking the memory of his loss of her in 1918, the pain of which dramatically appears in a letter he wrote immediately after her wedding to Mr. Franklin.

In the nineteen thirties, during a time in his life when he was much drawn to Mrs. Meta Carpenter, Faulkner wrote *The Wild Palms*. Later he reported that he had written *The Wild Palms* when he was in a time of great difficulty. Also later, in one of his letters to Meta

Carpenter after she, like Estelle Oldham and Helen Baird, had married another man, Faulkner wrote that he then had been in emotional stress—and went on to quote what he said was a statement by a character in one of his novels, which was Harry Wilbourne's thought at the end of *The Wild Palms* that "between grief and nothing I will take grief." That letter, like the letter in which Faulkner repeated Helen Baird's first name to her several times, was not courtship but recollection, recollection of another passionate loss which Faulkner incorporated in the very base of *The Wild Palms*. So, autobiographical in that novel, as in many others.

How long does it take for the buses to get to the Holiday Inn? Perhaps we can go on here a little longer because of the announcement before the start of this talk that it will be a cash bar.

One cannot discuss *The Wild Palms* without dealing with its well-known relationship to Ernest Hemingway, and this fits here in relation to the third of the unfounded clichés which I listed, that Faulkner was isolated and unaware of contemporary writers. *The Wild Palms* contains, as is well known, the mention of "heming-waves," other references to Hemingway, and a pair of lovers who are trying to avoid the rest of the world as Hemingway's Lieutenant Henry and Catherine are trying to do in *A Farewell to Arms*. I would like to go a little further and say that I think Faulkner considered *The Wild Palms* to be in part a demonstration to Hemingway of how he should have written a significant section of *A Farewell to Arms*—the ending.

As is well known to us all, that is a major problem with *A Farewell to Arms*. Most of the novel is marvelously written, troops moving, interplay of characters, the great retreat—hard to surpass. But there is that would-be philosophical essay embedded in it and, then, the serious problem of the ending. We are not the first to worry about the ending: Hemingway himself worried about it, writing—how many?—fifteen or seventeen versions of it. And many readers feel he should have tried it at least one more time. What happens is that here is a couple in love, who would give excellent care to a child born to them. Lieutenant Henry even has money coming from home! But Catharine dies in childbirth. And she dies of an ancient ailment, a literary ailment which we might call Author's Need. If she had lived, the ending of the novel would be rather affirmative, but Hemingway has been setting up a tragedy with the expository state-

ment of gloomy philosophy which I just mentioned and with all that rain (which Faulkner was to parallel by the clashing of the dried fronds in *The Wild Palms*). The hospital where Catherine dies is in Switzerland, then probably among the first places one would go for excellent medical care. The tragic dying could have been avoided if they had not selected a doctor who had insufficient faith in the Caesarean section. Not a new operation even then, witness its name. (So Faulkner is not the only modern American to write a novel in which one of the essential characters is an idiot.) That defective doctor, in order to help Ernest Hemingway, lets Catherine strain and suffer until she is worn out and dies so that Lieutenant Henry can walk away in wet weather and you and I can know that things are tough all over.

In short, Catherine dies unthematically or at least not inevitably. Had she lost the baby and her life, let us ludicrously say, because, pregnant earlier, she had shared the difficult rowing across the lake in their escape from the too loud contemporary world, she perhaps could be said to have died thematically, though such a solution would be neither rich nor fruitful.

In *The Wild Palms* Faulkner does make Charlotte die thematically, her death coming directly and inevitably out of a central theme of the novel, a theme I now should talk about.

Some early critics saw the "Old Man" portion of *The Wild Palms* as an account of an attractive primitive hero, the convict, a male version of an earth mother, in contrast with the "Wild Palms" portion which they saw as an account of two unattractive decadents, the chief of which is Charlotte, in their opinion a nymphomaniacal dropout. As we all know now from the perceptive criticism of this novel, the convict is no hero. I would like to suggest here that Charlotte is more of a heroine than any criticism I know about considers her to be. Having just argued to you yesterday that Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying* should not be considered an heroic woman because from the start of his life she emotionally abandoned her son Darl, I now must seem inconsistent to be arguing that Charlotte, who abandons two children as well as her husband, is a heroine. But I think Faulkner presented her as a kind of Promethian figure—and I am not here trying in any way to argue for an organized mythical parallel—who is our representative in a significant matter which bothers us all.

Thoreau considered one of the great tragedies to be to realize at

the end of life that we have not lived. Faulkner liked Bergson, whose concept of the present moment interested him, but he also liked Walter Pater, who held that the ideal for life was to “burn with a hard, gem-like flame.” What Charlotte wants, it seems clear, is, like Pater, to be intensely alive. It is toward this goal that she drags the sometimes reluctant Harry Wilbourne. When she finds them settling down and beginning to do what most of us too often are doing, just drifting through the day, she tries to get their lives, like a speedboat, again up on the step. Many of you have been in the hospital, and I think we all may share this experience. You get well enough to go home and, walking away from the hospital, you live intensely. There is the sun. There is that row of trees. You say—and you are ambulatory, you are out!—you say, “And I have been wasting my life worrying about the Internal Revenue Service!” You are aware that the primary thing is just being alive and you know, “I am never going to forget that!”

By about eight o'clock that night you have collapsed into what we all do most of our lives. I used to run around taking photographs, two and three months at a time. I became all eyes and could really see, and it was a rich life. I feel like a fool now because I no longer do that. I see all right—I do not bump into buildings—but I am not fully alive in the eyes, noticing shapes and taking intense response from them. I think Charlotte Rittenmeyer is really trying to live with more intense awareness of living. It is the Gods, They, the Powers That Be, who have arranged for us not to live intensely but just to go routinely along, and I believe that Charlotte in her limited human way is our representative as Prometheus was. He went against Olympus to get fire for us; as punishment he suffered—and I assure you I am not making this analogy because Charlotte ends with intense abdominal pain and the eagle eternally tears at the abdomen of Prometheus. Odd character as Charlotte is to select for the role of heroine and unheroic as she is in many ways, it seems to me that the most significant aspect of *The Wild Palms* is her often exemplary effort to live with the intensity which Pater famously spoke of. Charlotte and Harry move into disagreement over this central concern of the novel when Charlotte becomes pregnant; for Harry—who has never known conventional, unintense domestic life—partially hopes she will bear the child. So the abortion which Charlotte most of the time wants is delayed too long, and she dies. Her

death, like that of Hemingway's Catherine in *A Farewell to Arms*, is related to childbearing, but her death is artistically superior to the death of Catherine because it is the direct outgrowth of a major theme of its novel: the desirability, the significance, and the difficulty of being intensely alive. As such it was available as a teaching example to the artist who wrote the conclusion of *A Farewell to Arms*.

There are others of these large, prevalent misconceptions, and there are many small ones too. Just to list three or four samples of those which, however small and unimportant, nevertheless are untrue and widely believed: That Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury* is based on Mrs. Caroline Barr. That the staff of a Hollywood studio was surprised to learn that when Faulkner said he would work "at home" he meant here in Oxford. That Sherwood Anderson placed *Soldiers' Pay* with his publishers provided he did not have to read Faulkner's manuscript and that he did not read it. And that Benjy is the "conscience" of the Compson family.

Two score and nine years ago our fathers began to plant these and other misconceptions of Faulkner and his fiction in what we sometimes hear called the Faulkner field. We cannot hallow this ground. The critics, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it, far above our poor power to detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. You and I, even with the last full measure of devotion, cannot eradicate most of these false clichés.

They will endure.

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