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William Faulkner Seminar

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William Faulkner
Seminar

by Joseph Blotner

JB: Joseph Blotner

Q: Questioners from the Audience

JB: Our title—"William Faulkner"—is so general that it presents problems in what to do with it. I thought that I would simply leave it, in many respects, to you, so we could just sort of explore, go where you wanted to go. That is, if there are any things that I said in my talk that you want to pursue, fine, we can pursue them. If you want to go on into the area specified by the title, talking about William Faulkner, I'd be glad to try to answer any questions I can in that area, too, rather than my giving you a biographical spiel which would be folly to attempt in the time that we've got. I'd be happy to try to tell you anything I can about those areas or about problems of writing biography. Why don't we just begin that way and see where it takes us?

Q: This is trite, but I have relatives here in Oxford, and they swear that Miss Estelle didn't go to Byhalia, you know, the last time, when he went to the hospital.

JB: Well, unless my memory deceives me, my informant was Jimmy whom I trust implicitly. And, although it is possible that what I've written may be erroneous, to the best of my knowledge, it was accurate. I learned only subsequently from Floyd Watkins, for one, in a review he's done in the *Sewanee Review* of this book, that there were all sorts of rumors. I knew there had been some rumors about Mr. Faulkner's death, but I did not realize to what extent there were other speculations, none of which, so far as I know, is true. It was a simple, tragic case of the heart attack taking him off.

Q: Well, he lived with pain at that point a great deal, didn't he?

JB: Yes, he was apparently just miserable. He had this condition. He had sustained fractures, a number of fractures, certainly

as early as 1955. They were old in 1955, because there were some x-rays done in Paris in that year which showed old compression fractures of a number of lumbar vertebrae. And this kind of fracture, I've been told by physicians, is often sustained by landing on the seat of your pants from being tossed by a horse. And when he sustained these injuries, I don't know. But in the years when I knew him at Virginia, sometimes I would see him, when he had not sustained any injury that I know of, straightening his back, painfully, the way people will with a back condition. During those last months, though, he apparently was in severe pain from these repeated falls.

Q: When did you first meet him? How old was he?

JB: I met him, for the first time, in November of 1953, which would have made him 56, just turned 56.

Q: A long time ago I was talking to some professors from Ole Miss, and they were saying that they didn't think a biography, a complete biography of Faulkner, could be written until after the Faulkner women had died, because of the problem of Faulkner's relationship with women.

JB: Well, that's true only insofar as it might involve people still living who might conceivably have reason to object to certain kinds of material. I can say, though, that I did not feel constrained to tiptoe around and that if any reader reads the biography that I've done carefully, I think if he reads it perceptively, if he reads not only in the normal manner but, as Theodore Reik says, with the inner eye or ear or whatever it is, he will have a sense of what Faulkner's relationships were with women and what some of his major attitudes were. How, on the one hand, he would always say, "I think women are wonderful, they're much stronger than men, I admire them tremendously"; and how, on the other hand, some of the characters in his novels suggest a feminine type that most women, I think, would probably abhor as much as he did.

Now, when you go into personal relationships, it becomes extremely complex. Some of you have read Michael Holroyd's biography of Lytton Strachey, some of you have read the Bell biography of Virginia Woolf, where in England they're telling all, it seems. The slightly expurgated diaries of

Evelyn Waugh. This is the kind of thing that demands a number of conditions—that they be co-existent. That is, if you're going to do that kind of in-depth psychological portraiture, it's necessary to have it from the closest source. And in those instances of Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf and now Vita Sackville-West and Waugh, they've got diaries, and in the case of Harold Nicholson and Vita Sackville-West, there's the son of that marriage describing in detail the relationships existing between his parents and other lovers, both male and female. In the first instance, you have to have that information. In the second instance, if you are to present it, if you feel that this is the kind of work that is necessary in something like clinical detail, because of the laws, libel laws, you have to have clearance. And these are some of the things that confront the biographer. But it seemed to me from the outset that if you tried to render, as Conrad says, "the highest kind of justice to the visible universe," you can present the heart of the truth without doing a *New York Daily News* or *National Inquirer*, or whatever it is, kind of job. So that I hoped that this was the kind of thing that would be possible to do. Now, as time goes on, if other materials turn up as they doubtless will, at a time when our grandchildren, let's say, are at a symposium like this, then maybe somebody will have done a Lytton Strachey-Vita Sackville-West-Virginia Woolf kind of job. How far that will put us ahead of where we are now is just no telling.

Q: Place Faulkner as a novelist in national or international terms—and whom will you compare him with who has already achieved?

JB: Well, in our literature, I said in my foreward, and several reviewers agreed with me, and not too many got mad at me, that I could tell—they may have been mad at me about other things but not about that—I said I think he's our greatest novelist, our greatest writer of prose fiction.

Q: He placed himself second after Dos Passos, didn't he?

JB: Well, yes, he said Thomas Wolfe was first because he tried more, which was a kind of courtesy but also a way of fobbing off the questioner, I think. But it seems to me that because of the richness and variety of his work, the scope, the technical

experimentation, the sense of place, the wisdom, the kind of psychological penetration, the sense of life, he is our greatest writer. And I expected some of my friends to be mad at me, the Melvilleans, and the Jamesians, and the Hawthorneans, but it seems to me quite clear that although James has an enormous body of work, that though he's a fine, precise stylist, to me—and this becomes a highly subjective thing—I just don't get the taste and smell and feel of life in James the way I do in Faulkner. And although one may call *Moby Dick* a close effort or result of an attempt to write the great American novel, for me, though it is commanding and overwhelming, it's flawed in many ways and, apart from *Billy Budd* and a few other things in Melville, I don't think that you find the number of masterpieces to quantify it, or the same range. And, in terms of world literature, there, of course, I think he ranks with the great masters. He said, he used to say, that the greatest writers of his time were James Joyce and Thomas Mann. I can't recall his mentioning Marcel Proust in specifically those terms, but it seems to me that he ranks with them to my taste, and I'm obviously an extremely interested witness. There are things in his work far more compelling to me than in theirs. There one runs the danger of becoming chauvinistic and, I suppose, should back off a bit. But he certainly is in their company, I would say.

- Q: I'd like to mention the fact that Mr. Faulkner seems especially interested in his great grandfather's statue, and in *Flags in the Dust* I've noticed he mentioned it three times. And then in your book you said that he had Mr. Cullen go and try to repair the statue and clean it. And I had done this research on the statue and had thought that a man from Grand Junction had actually carved it, and then I found out later that he hadn't, after Mr. Duclos had written his dissertation. So I believe now it was actually done in Carrara, Italy. And I have this brief letter, if you don't mind, you could read. He said, "I can assure you"—this man Renarto Caffi from the Italian Marble Company in Carrara—"I can assure you that the statue you write of of Colonel W. C. Falkner was executed by Mr. Alexandro Luccetti of Carrara, who died in 1935." And the way this was done, see, the man that actually did it died in

1935. A photo of the Colonel was sent to Mr. C. J. Rogers, who had a stoneyard in Grand Junction, and the frock coat was sent there. And a Mr. George Mitchell, Sr., fitted the coat; the coat was his size so they took measurements. They sent the photograph and the measurements to Carrara and that's the way it was made.

JB: That's fascinating.

Q: I wasn't satisfied with the idea that this man in Grand Junction could do that kind of work. And it turned out that he could carve roses and lilies, but he couldn't do a statue.

JB: I wish I'd had that; it's so much more exotic, isn't it? And it's so much truer to the old Colonel, having it done there. If you'd be kind enough, some time, I'd love to have a copy of that, because I hope to do another edition of the book and I'd like to correct it. If anybody knows of any other errors, let me know please.

Q: How many copies in your first edition?

JB: 10,500.

Q: When did you know or when did you decide to write this biography?

JB: In early 1963 I was at Faulkner's home in Charlottesville, and we were sitting around talking at drink time, as a matter of fact. I used to stop in from time to time. And Mrs. Faulkner and Jill and her husband were there. And I asked them if they had known about a couple of Faulkner books that were coming out. And they did not know and were a little—I didn't know whether it was aghast or whether they were surprised. But they said suddenly—I was taken aback—"You knew him. Why don't you write a book about him as he was?" And I said that I really had not thought about doing it, and I hadn't. And could I please think about it. Like a fool, I said, "Let me think about it." They could have changed their minds in the meantime. So I went home and discussed it with my wife, and she said, "Of course, you want to do a book about William Faulkner." And I realized she was right, and the next time I was there I said I would like to do it. And so I began in '63.

Q: Knowing how he felt about his privacy and his idea that he wanted his works to stand for himself, I just wondered when you were writing it sometimes, I suppose you did what you

did thinking, "I wonder what he would think of this. And I wonder how he would feel." I don't feel that you violated it in any way and I really think that it is really so tasteful, done with such discretion. But I wondered how you felt about it, knowing him as well as you did.

JB: Thank you very much. It is, was, a problem. I would often feel twinges. I have in my study a photograph of him, one that is taken in such a fashion that no matter where you are, the eyes are looking at you. And sometimes I feel him looking at me with a particular intensity. But I realized, as one would, that such a book would be done. There will be other biographies, as you know. But I felt that the first one entailed some special obligations and that it should be done by someone who had what seemed to me to be a relationship conducive to doing justice to the heart of the truth. And one that would be a biography which took as its starting point the fact that this had to be written because he was a great artist and a fine man, a very complex one, but a fine man of whom I was extremely fond. So, I just resolved to go ahead and do it and whenever I felt twinges, I just waited until they went away and kept going.

Q: I want to know if you have any information as to what happened to the old Colonel's wife, the one that he met on the steps of the store. We see her the last time at the funeral. But from there on you make no mention of her. And she seemed to be a very interesting character, and all at once she's no longer present. What happened to her?

JB: I think Donald Duclos says that there had been rumors in Ripley that they were on the verge of a separation before his death, that they had been spending more and more time apart. They would go to Memphis, and they would stay at the Gayoso, in which the Colonel owned stock. And my recollection, at any rate, is that after his death she did go to Memphis. Whether she stayed, as they had done before, at the Gayoso or not, I am not sure. My belief is that she probably went to Memphis and died there, although I never did run it down.

Q: Floyd Watkins once said that writing a biography of Faulkner would be terribly difficult because he made so many paradoxical and contradictory statements about himself. Did you en-

counter that difficulty or could you give me some examples of times when he did?

JB: Oh, yes, and there are varying levels and degrees of difficulty. The most obvious kind relates to his saying, for instance, that he had been shot down in aerial combat in France and had a silver plate either in his head or his cheek or limped or had various miseries that derived from this. And then at a later point in his career, he would say no, that he had not flown in combat, he had not been to France, the war had ended too soon. So, here one had contradictory statements, and it was a matter of checking out the evidence insofar as it was available, and it verified the second version rather than the first, which still had to be further modified.

Now, that kind of contradiction is more easily resolved than certain others. We were talking before about Faulkner's attitude towards women, and I quoted these two kinds of things he would say. And what you come up against, I think, is not just an extremely complex person, but problems in the assessments that we all make at different times. There were times, I think, for instance, when he felt himself jilted in love, when he must have felt the rejected lover who tended to be cynical about women in general, just as a woman might have been cynical about a man who had rejected her. There were other times when he was happy in love, when the romantic verses would flow; he would celebrate romantic love or let's say conjugal love. Now, these are antithetical statements by the same person, yet meant at the time they are said, and they are therefore differences which need not be reconciled given the emotional set of the speaker at the time. Now, there is another kind of a red herring, or smoke screen, whatever you want to call it, when I think he would just say the first thing that came into his head to get people to quit asking him questions. Like the business of *Light in August*—"Mr. Faulkner, does it mean when you use that title *Light in August*, does it mean when a cow calves, she's going to be light in August?" "Yes, ma'am, that's exactly what it means." Or "What did you have in mind when you used that title?" "Well, in my country in Mississippi, at that time of the year in August, there's a

certain quality of light in the sky, and that's where the title came from." Well, I believe the second one. And I think the text bears out that second interpretation. But I think he would often say things because it was convenient, because the last thing he wanted to do was to have a conversation continue. And sometimes he would come out with an absolute stopper. You know, like the news reporter who said, "Mr. Faulkner, what do you think is decadent in society today?" And he said, "What you're doing, miss." And then other times he would say we need the press, that terrible scrutiny to which the press subjects people. Boy, is that apropos. He was talking about the McCarthy era; he said this is the intrusion upon our privacies, the price we pay for the safeguard which the press provides.

But then there are other areas where, as I said a moment ago, you get into problems not only of the complex individual but of human psychology. Like the business of, well, let's see—I mention Floyd Watkins, not just because you do, but because he sent me a copy of his very nice review and it is fresh in my mind. And he says that in the biography, he thinks that the treatment of Faulkner's view of personal immortality needs expansion. He tends to believe, from what he said in the review, that Faulkner had more of a belief in personal immortality than I have tried to reveal him as showing. And I wrote back to Mr. Watkins and said that I presented it as I did in dealing with his last days in spite of the fact that I heard him say grace before meals and in spite of the fact that I knew that he attended church services from time to time, because I remember vividly one instance in which we had just had a classroom session at Virginia and somebody had raised a question bearing on theological issues, and more specifically, the question of the immortality of the soul. And I did something that I almost never did, namely asked him a technical question outside of class, because it was still fresh in my mind, and I thought in his. And I asked him about this question of personal immortality, putting it in a more general context, and he used the editorial "we," which he sometimes used in the classroom, I think, in order to avoid the business of the repetition of "I." And he said abruptly, almost with impa-

tience, almost as though I'd heard this before and why couldn't I remember it, he said, "As we've said, we all have to pass through the wall of oblivion eventually, and therefore—" And so he continued the answer. I don't remember the rest of the answer because his gaze with those brown-black eyes was so level and so steady and so chilling, in a way, that there was no question in my mind but that William Faulkner believed that when life left the body, there was no such thing as a sense of continuation of what we call the soul in any form. But then, I've been thinking since I read Watkins' review. Even putting aside this business of his using immortality metaphorically, as I think he does in the Nobel Prize speech—I think that is a metaphor for the continuation of the race in spite of its attempts to destroy itself—who is to say but that at moments when he was experiencing the dark night of the soul or when he went to Felix Linder when he was experiencing such great pain with his back and when I think he had intimations of oncoming death—who is to say that at that time he might not have considered in a more serious way an answer he once gave his brother which has a touch almost of the flippant about it. When his mother was dying, Jack Faulkner came from Mobile to Oxford; and they took shifts in the hospital. And Mr. Faulkner was there, and Jack Faulkner describes this in his book, *The Faulkners of Mississippi*. And he said that they were sitting there outside the hospital, the old hospital, watching the traffic go by, and Jack said to his brother, "What do you reckon happens to you after you die?" And he said, "Well, maybe we'll all come back as radio waves," or something like that. And, you know, there was a question in my mind: Was this the old process of fobbing somebody off? Was it a process of not wishing at this moment to discuss one of the most profound questions which perplexes the human mind? Was it a metaphor? Was it the kind of thing that Jung talks about, when, in one of his books—*Dreams, Meditations*, whatever it is, some of you know that book?—he talks about something that can be formulated in those terms; he posits, I think, a kind of persistence of the spirit with a gradual diminution of intensity. And how is one to know whether, when Mr. Faulkner felt his intimations of mortality, that the kind of thing that he said

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to his brother flippantly—how is one to know that he may not himself have felt this later in such a fashion as to contradict what he said to me that day in the office, which seemed to me so cold and chilling that it made me write about that question as I did. This is the kind of thing that you encounter—we were talking about it before with respect to intimate relationships—how far inside somebody's head can you get? And even when somebody writes about it as Jung did, you look at Jung's criticism. Well, of course, theological criticism is full of it, and it remains because of its complexity such a vexed subject that I don't know. Maybe when I rewrite, when I do another version, I'll change it some way.

Q: There's that business about the wholesale and retail salvation, too.

JB: Oh, that's very good. We're referring to a session at Princeton. Lawrence Thompson, Frost's biographer, gave me this. He said that a student said to Mr. Faulkner, "Sir, do you believe"—what was it in personal salvation? And he said, "Well, I've always thought of God as being not in the retail but in the wholesale business."

Q: I wanted to ask you: in at least three-fourths of your two volumes, it seems to me, he's worried about money. And then as soon as he gets it, he does things like buy the farm or horses or an airplane or something like that. Do you think that the privacy bit (he seemed to be so nice in his older years, you know, going all over the world) was a pose ever—like Agnew, Nixon, you know, and law and order—or was he genuinely sincere?

JB: Oh, I think he was genuinely sincere. I think situations really presented problems for him. At one point, I described that cocktail party we went to where he said, "I gotta get outa here." We hadn't been there more than five minutes. He said, "My claustrophobia is closing in on me." And he did not, in the technical sense, have claustrophobia, but he did feel that kind of intrusion. He was, as he said of Addie Bundren, a very private person, and I think, was totally sincere. That is not to say that he did not derive some pleasure at some point from knowing he had made the mark he wanted to make as a young man. But the trappings that went with it, the business of

photography and all of that, I think these are the things that made the privacy of the farm and the home very pleasant.

Q: Didn't he seem to change somewhat there after he, in his older age, met and became friends with the Williams girl? Did he seem to come out some during that period?

JB: Well, let's see, what's the best way to assess this? Here at Ole Miss, in 1946 and 1947, he had classroom sessions. Now, this would contradict the privacy hypothesis, but not necessarily. I think it is consistent with another aspect of his personality, and that is a sense of responsibility. The same thing that went through his State Department jobs. His Alma Mater asked him to come talk to students. And it was not the kind of thing that was as much fun for him as riding horses, but he felt he should do it and he did it. Now, this activity, which began in '46—well, actually Chapel Hill in the fall of 1931 he had sat in on one creative writing class. Although he was not tremendously responsive, he had done it: 1931, 1946, 1947, State Department work in the fifties, then at Virginia in '57 and '58—this is the public man who does these things because of a feeling of obligation of sorts. Now, the motives are not un-mixed; I think he wanted to be in Virginia because he liked and admired the University and found it pleasant to be there, and because his daughter was there. And this was something he felt like trying and all right, the University did what it could. It could have done more. It did some for him. And in order to hold up his end of the deal, he did participate in these private sessions. Now, this constitutes to some extent a change from the phase in which he would just reject, seem to reject, contacts almost completely. But as for a change beyond that, that's something else.

Q: I saw the film, I don't remember the name of it. It started with Jill's graduation and ended with his acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize. And it went with him through his routine at Oxford, and I have always wondered, did you persuade him to do that? I thought it was such an unusual film because you could see the reticence, but he seemed to be in a sense enjoying it.

JB: This was the Omnibus film, the one that was done under the auspices of the Ford Foundation, right? Phil Mullin, who had

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been editor of the *Oxford Eagle* and had then gone to Arkansas, I think, acted in part as a kind of intermediary in getting him to agree to this documentary. I would guess he had two feelings—one was that it was perhaps fitting, and it was going to be done by an institution or by a group that he trusted. They said it would not be onerous. Mullin, a friend, had asked him if he would do it and offered to help with it. So, once committed to it, he then had to follow through. Now, this was a familiar pattern. After he agreed to it, he had second thoughts about it. And at one point before Mullin arrived, he sent Mullin a telegram saying, “Don’t forget the snake juice.” He wanted Mullin to make a stop in Memphis before he came down to Oxford with beer and other refreshments. And I think this related to the fact that he was feeling uneasy about the whole thing and wished it would go away. But when the time came for him to stand and deliver, he did, as he did with the Nobel Prize acceptance trip, the trip to Brazil, and the trip to Japan. It was a familiar psychological pattern. He would be convinced either on intellectual grounds or the grounds of friendship or obligation that he should do something, which would run counter to these feelings of privacy. He would attempt to evade the obligation but eventually would come to terms with it and once into it would do the best he could. Somebody in the crew said that he thought he had talent, natural talent, as an actor. And those sequences, you remember, really are good. When he goes out to the farm, and he’s talking about stringing wire on some fence, he delivers the line with aplomb.

Q: The one that’s amusing the most, I think, was the one where they are going through the thing with Phil, where he’s saying you asked me to do it and—

JB: That’s right. The dialogue was really delivered very convincingly.

Q: I read Faulkner’s speech to the Delta Council and he’s saying that a man had written him a letter saying he didn’t regard him as a good author and a lot of people in Mississippi often were mad at him. I was wondering if at times he was uncomfortable about it?

JB: Oh, he surely was. And John Faulkner, if I remember cor-

rectly, in his book talks about his brother getting phone calls in the middle of the night. You know that part of the story "Dry September," just before the lynching takes place and Hawkshaw the barber is the only one who says, "Now, calm down, we don't know what happened, we don't know that for sure." And the drummer, the traveling salesman, flings the sheet off and says, "Why don't you go back up North where you came from?" And he says, "What, up North! I was born here." And that was Faulkner's situation in the mid-fifties at the height of the civil rights crisis, when he was speaking out in such a fashion that he had alienated, he felt, both the NAACP and the White Citizens' Councils, and people were saying "why don't you go up North where you belong?" And, of course, the speech that you point up is actually a very conservative speech, in many ways, and it points up the paradox of his position on civil rights, which I think given his age, his generation, his time and place, was what we would call a liberal one. And then as time went on, he felt that the torrent had swept away any ground on which a moderate—he considered himself a moderate, I think in the context he was a liberal—could stand. Frank Smith, for instance, the former Mississippi Congressman was another who tried for a viable way of accommodating to Federal law and civil rights. People like that in those days tended to find their influence diminishing as the crisis heightened. I think he felt very keenly this sense of alienation. It's one reason, I think, why he spent less time at home than he might have done in his last years.

Q: I've often wondered. He has such a marvelous vocabulary, not only the scope, but the fact that he uses words in ways I never thought of using them and then they seem to mean that and never to have meant anything else. And I just wondered if when he was actually working, did this flow out of him, or did he dig it out painfully? You know, was it groping for a word to fit a situation or did it just seem to come up? Had he read so much that it was natural?

JB: Well, part of the vocabulary had a kind of an Elizabethan luxuriance which came from the reading and came from his own tastes and prose style. He once wrote to one of his publishers (I think maybe he was having trouble with *A Fable*)

and said the material was coming slowly, that the book was slow, hard work for him. He said, "It's not like when I was young." He said, "When I was young, I used to write like a paperhanger slapping it on the wall, and I'd never look back." So, he felt a diminution of sorts as time went on. Now, if you take him at his word, and I can imagine when the creative juices were flowing, that he probably did go along like that and made up some words in the process. But there were other times when Saxe Commins would question him. There's one word, I think, in *A Fable*, it's "revulsive," or "revoltive," or something like that and Commins said, "Bill, there isn't any such word. Would you like to use another one?" And he said "No, I'm trying to combine the idea of revulsion and revolting against something. Let's use that." So that once again there's not just one answer but two or three.

Q: I just wanted to ask about his relationship with John Faulkner and the fact that when they would get together and talk they'd never discuss writing that I know of. I'm interested in John Faulkner. Is John Faulkner ever going to be able to get out from under this shadow of his reputation, or is he always going to be the pastel brother, as one newspaper has written?

JB: The pastel brother?

Q: That's what he was called, the pastel brother.

JB: Really?

Q: Right.

JB: It doesn't seem quite fair to him, does it?

Q: In the reviews of *Cabin Road*, when it first came out, he was called the pastel brother, and I thought that was very unkind.

JB: It is. It's one of those things. It's like Thomas Mann and Heinrich Mann. It's like James Joyce and John Stanislaus Joyce, although John Stanislaus Joyce wrote memoirs instead of fiction. Look at some of those English families. Frost used to talk about quotations on the stock market, the literary stock market, about how high Richard Eberhart's stock was or how high T. S. Eliot's stock was. If you had to make a judgment, I think you'd have to say that John Faulkner was in the position of being the younger brother of a genius of great range and power, but that hopefully he would get the recognition that's due to him. And, if he does, it will be in no small part due to Ole Miss and the kind of thing they're doing here.

- Q: Did you have difficulty in making your time breaks? You know, you had a number of criteria, like leaving on trips or new phases of writing or—
- JB: Oh, that. School, mainly. How to keep supporting my family and get away. It depended upon when summer school started and ended and—
- Q: I mean your division into the chapters of the times, month by month.
- JB: Yes. Sometimes it was easy—the Nobel Prize segment, the segment in Japan. But others got very tricky, and I just had to look at the material and see where I could break it, where natural division fell. And in revision sometimes I would chop one chapter into two. I should have done more chopping and cutting probably, like somebody chopping cotton.
- Q: I'm sure that what he had was a gift plus, of course, he never really sat down and said I'm going to study creative writing. It just, through the years, developed.
- JB: He developed, and he also gave himself an intensive course in—
- Q: His mother was so helpful in this. She had so many wonderful books to help him to read.
- JB: That's right. But also, in some of the unpublished material, there is a long imitation of the "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." It's so close you can hear echoes over and over again. It's as if he said to himself, "Gee, now, how did Eliot do that? And maybe I can do it in the same way." So, he described himself as a kind of untutored person and in many ways, except for talk with people like Anderson and with Phil Stone, so he was.
- Q: I don't know who specifically has said this, but we get hold of it as school teachers here in Mississippi, that Faulkner has done more to degrade Mississippi—which I certainly don't agree with; I think he's a genius. I encourage my children to read him. And I've had several notes from parents—that surely you don't want the children to read Faulkner and I say surely you wouldn't want them not to read him. Did you run into any kind of bitterness in your research?
- JB: Not of that kind, no. There were a couple of people who just wouldn't talk to me at all, without specifying the reasons, although I thought I could intuit them in some instances. But

the amazing thing was how much I did get. Even people who started out thinking, "I'm not going to give him a thing," but who wound up being kind and helpful. So, it's the kind of thing that I guess would have pleased him. He always used to say, "People try to be better than they think they can be, try to be better than they are." And I saw lots of the nice side of people when I was doing this.

Q: Well, did he absolutely object to wearing what he called the monkey suits? Did he really want to wear the tweeds with the patched elbows?

JB: I think part of him loved wearing the full dress on that occasion. Because all you have to do is look back to the young man and there must have been some sense of the appropriateness of this. And, as a matter of fact, in one letter subsequent to the Nobel Prize occasion, he writes to Saxe Commins and says, "You can send along the evening clothes." I can't remember specifically, something like that, which suggests that "Well, it wasn't so bad after all." And maybe he could do it again under some circumstances.

Q: Did he use Jill as an excuse or did he really want to go?

JB: I think again it was half and half. No, I think in the pit of his stomach he didn't want to go, at all.

Q: He was drinking at the time.

JB: Well, he tried to evade it. He used his regular strategy. Other people say, "I just can't get away from the business." I mean, "Who's gonna run the store? We'll be bankrupt." And this is one kind of evasion. Some of the people say, "This ulcer's acting up so much I just couldn't possibly appear." Well, he took a more obvious out, but then eventually did it, I think partly because of pressure from all sides, partly because of a fine sense of responsibility that he couldn't escape.

Q: What did he do with the \$40,000?

JB: Actually, it was less than that then; it was about thirty-some. And he set up a foundation, which dispensed much of the money, a substantial amount, to black students to do college work, to do graduate work, one Japanese girl to come to this country to do graduate work. Much of it went in that fashion. Thank you very much.