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Faulkner's Mississippi: Land into Legend

Panel Discussion

PANELISTS

Carvel Collins
Evans Harrington

Blyden Jackson
Elizabeth Kerr

Carl Petersen

Harrington We might begin by asking panel members to give a critical rating of Mr. Faulkner in comparison to his peers. Miss Kerr, I know you've given some thought to this because we've discussed it many times before. Could you address yourself to that?

Kerr Yes, I'd be glad to. First of all, it is a fact that William Faulkner and James Joyce year after year attract more attention from the academic critics than any other authors. The annual PMLA bibliographies have many more entries for Faulkner and Joyce than for anyone else. So that is just a hard fact. On the other hand, at last year's conference when I was asked the question of whether I would put Faulkner above Dickens, I said, "No, I wouldn't," because I think Dickens' scope was much, much wider. He wasn't concentrating in just a very small area, and the number of memorable characters that Dickens created is considerably greater than the number that Faulkner created. But there are not very many people that could be put above Dickens. One might also say that Dostoyevsky may have been a greater writer of fiction than Faulkner. Of twentieth-century writers, though, Faulkner and Joyce are staying right up there at the top. Here is an interesting little point. I talked two weeks ago to Harry Schwartz from Milwaukee. He used to own a bookstore, and he was one of the first collectors of Faulkner. He even published some of Faulkner in *Salmagundi*. He now very much regrets that he missed the guess some years ago and sold at an auction his Faulkner collection, including a copy of *The Marble Faun*, for which he could now get about \$4,000. He and some others thought that the Faulkner enthusiasm would die down soon after Faulkner's death, but it

hasn't. It is now 1975, and it still hasn't died down. As I said, those are hard facts.

Harrington I am not at all inclined to argue that Dickens is not greater than Faulkner, but I think I saw some furrowed brows in the audience. It's true that unquestionably Dickens has more memorable characters than Faulkner, but there's another aspect of Faulkner that is related to Joyce—the experimentation, the brilliant manipulation. Dickens doesn't have that kind of thing, does he?

Kerr Dickens for his day did that. The point is, you cannot compare the styles and techniques of the nineteenth century with those of the twentieth century after the rise of Freudian psychology. What Dickens does with abnormal states of mind and dreams and so forth is just as striking as anything that's been done since. Incidentally, I have followed through all this Gothic in Dickens, and Faulkner got a lot of his interest in Gothic from Dickens. Dickens, in his own time, was considerably an experimenter. You may remember the first person narrator in the whole novel of *Great Expectations*, the use he makes of two different narrators in *Bleak House*, with Esther Summerson and his third person narrator presented in completely different styles. Dickens did absolutely stupendous things, and he's just now in the twentieth century being appreciated for what he did because his original readers were interested in the moral lessons. When you read some of the earlier views of people, you wonder, my goodness, how could people fail to see what we see now? A use of symbolism in Dickens is one thing that modern critics are interested in. You'll find if you go back to Dickens—what you have taken for granted because you began reading Dickens in your tender youth—something that was pretty new when Dickens was writing. All things considered, he lived in an age of greater experiment, more radical experiment, and, comparatively speaking, Dickens was just as original as Faulkner.

Collins If when you speak of range you shift from geographical range to range in humanity, Faulkner's range was wide.

I agree with you about Dickens' being a pioneer, but I don't read novels as a historian. I'm entirely selfish as I read; I want to read the most entertainingly sophisticated thing I can read, and when it was

written is not primary for me. Given the choice between almost any Dickens novel and almost any Faulkner novel, I think I'd rather read Faulkner because in Faulkner's works so much is yet undiscovered. Although Dickens is a delight, I find my delight a little greater in Faulkner.

Kerr If you consider Dickens' range in social classes, he goes from the most abject poverty up to the aristocrats; in setting, he uses not only London but so many other places in England. He was interested in schools, prisons, factories—in all manner of things of urgent concern to the society of which he was writing. His range was greater there, too. Now this is not to disparage Faulkner but just to point out that in his choosing to limit himself to Yoknapatawpha—which I heartily agree he should have done—he was adopting one kind of limitation. But then in choosing to develop it so fully, to create a whole new society, he was doing something that Dickens never did. Yet, if you think of all the things Dickens was concerned with in the life of human beings in the nineteenth century, he had tremendous range.

Harrington Professor Jackson?

Jackson I was hoping you would leave me out of this one. I guess I'm sort of old fashioned in many ways. When I'm reading a piece of fiction, I'm really reading for the story. I never have really been able to read books without stories and really enjoy them. I may pretend I'm enjoying them, but I'm not really. The truth of the matter is that Faulkner was a whale of a story teller. I don't think you really capture it the first time you start reading Faulkner. You go back, and you begin to realize how well this guy tells a story. He's awfully good at telling stories, and not many people can do that today. One of the things that irks me a little bit about much of contemporary fiction is that what I seem to get out of a lot of it is that the guy is telling me "look how smart I am, I can do this and that." So I appreciate Faulkner as a story teller. Actually, I appreciate Dickens as a story teller, too, but I like Thackeray about as much as I like Dickens. I esteem *Vanity Fair* highly, but when I get to *Henry Esmond* and when old Henry comes back and realizes he's in love with the mother and not the daughter, I'm crying. I tend to become involved with the

writer I'm reading. If he is a good story teller and can do one or two other things, I like him. Both Dickens and Faulkner can do many admirable things.

As you can see, I have not answered the question; all I've said is I think Faulkner's a whale of a writer and there are many writers who are whales of writers. I'm not going to fall off my horse on which one is better or worse. I do eliminate some writers altogether from this kind of steeplechase because they don't belong there. I do want to point out one thing. Talking about range, I want to remind you of what Faulkner does. Faulkner tells different kinds of stories. For example, *Intruder in the Dust* is a whale of a detective novel. It's altogether different from *Absalom, Absalom!* in this regard. It's true that Dickens tried his hand at detective stories, but he didn't finish *Edwin Drood*, did he? And he had an excellent tutor, because he and Wilkie Collins were just like that. But I don't really believe that Dickens ever did that sort of thing. I keep reminding everybody that *The Reivers* is probably underestimated, that it's a whale of a tall tale. Faulkner also did something that's a little hard to do in a sequence novel. He could, in places where you least expect it, where it requires a real ability to keep what could be thought of as a small thing in mind, he could bring it back and give you reflections, echoes. Let me show you. You remember in "Was," at the end, the second card game, what you see is a real slicker, and the slicker is not Uncle Buck there, it's Turl. Once you see Faulkner doing that, when you get down into *The Reivers*, you suddenly realize that Old Ned is another Turl; he's a real slicker. It's beautiful how he can do this sort of thing. Many writers can't do it. One of the reasons I like Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter* so much is that he does this and does it repeatedly. People sometimes miss it. For example, Hughes has a scene early in *Not Without Laughter* where a cyclone tears the porch off Sandy's home. Sandy's the little boy. So they build a new porch and throw the wood from the old porch out in the yard. As time passes and Christmas comes, Sandy's mother is sick and his grandmother can't make enough money for them to buy him the kind of Christmas present he wants. He wants a sled called a Western Flyer. It's a slick sled with iron runners and everything on it. His mother knows he wants the sled and she can't pay for one, so she goes and gets an old carpenter to make a sled for him. You know what? You know where the wood came from, don't you? Sandy sees his mother

through a window out in the back yard plucking around in this old wood and he knows then that he's not going to get the Western Flyer. You feel the same way when you come back to Ned and Turl. You know why these writers can do this sort of thing? Because they have a sense of life. What you're asking me now is to weigh the sense of life that Faulkner had against the sense of life that Dickens had, and my answer is that they had it and I don't have it and I'm going to turn this over to you.

Harrington Well, I suppose after that I should be kind and not ask anybody to follow that act. So I'm going to change the subject slightly. What Blyden says is true, of course; there are no answers to these questions, but they're the questions we like to debate. Mr. Carl Petersen told us this morning very strikingly about his first encounter with Faulkner. Would you tell us how you got interested in Faulkner, Carl? That is a kind of a testimony of how good you think Faulkner is.

Petersen In 1949 I read *As I Lay Dying*. I had never heard of William Faulkner, and I was stunned that someone could use words this way. I was deeply impressed that I, having grown up on the south side of Chicago, could read about these people from a totally different background than my own and could be excited about them as people but at the same time conscious that the man that wrote this was making me do things and putting me over the fences and manipulating me but doing it so beautifully that I didn't mind it one little bit. Having become hooked at that point, I have been hooked ever since. I was interested, Elizabeth, when you mentioned Harry Schwartz selling his Faulkner. I talked to him shortly before he sold his Faulkner collection in 1963, and at the time the market was very high for Faulkner up to that point. Harry Schwartz said he was selling his Faulkner because he needed the space. If he needed the money, I am sympathetic with him for having sold his Faulkner. If he sold his Faulkner because he thought it was a good time to dispose of it, because the interest in Faulkner was falling off, I have no pity for him whatever. If he didn't have the inner passion to hang onto Faulkner, even if interest did fall off—if no one shows up at next year's meeting, I'm still excited about Faulkner. I don't need outside support. I get that from Faulkner.

Harrington It's time for some questions. Yes?

Questioner Mr. Collins, who were some of the writers influenced by Faulkner?

Collins There've been a good many. I think it's interesting that Robbe-Grillet, who wrote such novels as *The Voyeur* and *Jalousie*, says that he and the makers of the New Novel—which is about as new as the new lecture hall at Harvard—found Faulkner extremely influential to them in that of the older writers he was the one that was closest to the thing they were doing, though it wasn't the same, and they could build on him. Using his work as a base, they didn't have to build as far as if they had used other writers. I bring this up in the way of movements, not just individual writers. Hosts of individual writers imitate Faulkner. Some learn from Faulkner, some imitate Faulkner, and some write Faulkner's works over again. The latter occurred a time or two, and it's one of the great ways to see how good Faulkner really is. Styron, for example, has worked very closely with Faulkner's novels. I have a file folder labeled "Younger Writers Influenced by Faulkner." There are a great many. Many of them learned good things from him. I know of no general movement comparable to the New Novel, though Camus seemed to find Faulkner appealing in the same way. You don't see Camus rewriting Faulkner novels, but Camus felt that Faulkner, of the older writers, was a writer that could speak to him. Camus denied his association with existentialism, but the existentialists, when they turned to fiction, did say they thought Faulkner had been a model for them and would become an available foundation well up near where they wanted to build.

Harrington Of those categories you have, where would you put Shelby Foote?

Collins Shelby Foote is an excellent novelist. If he makes use of Faulkner it is a very creative use. He seems to have stopped fiction while writing his fine history of the Civil War. He now is ending it, and I hope he gets back to fiction right away.

One writer obviously influenced by Faulkner was Nathanael West. He comes to mind at this moment because he is currently in the

news; his novel *The Day of the Locust* has just been made into a film. Once I heard a lecture by E. E. Cummings in which he said that a good writer does not borrow, he steals. The whole audience laughed, but half of them laughed much louder because they knew Cummings was taking that statement from T. S. Eliot. In *The Day of the Locust* West made such good, fully stolen, use of Faulkner's *Sanctuary*. Some years ago I published an article pointing this out: West changed the town of degradation from the capitol of the Mid-South to Hollywood. Faulkner's Popeye as a child unpleasantly cut up birds with scissors; West's cowboy cuts up quail with shears. In each novel a girl sexually attracts a group of men who are gathered in the county. Brothels are involved in both. Each novel ends in a holocaust. Among the little touches: In *Sanctuary* Temple Drake's father at the trial comes down the aisle and Faulkner speaks of his aristocratic paunch, though a paunch is not generally associated with aristocracy. West puts into *The Day of the Locust* a Hollywood producer who is pretending to be Old South. As he stands in front of the columns of his fake Southern mansion greeting his guests he pretends to have an aristocratic paunch. There are other resemblances, large and small, but I don't hear anybody talking about them because West didn't borrow from Faulkner, he effectively and quite properly stole.

Jackson I wanted to get in this because whether you have ever thought of this or not, Faulkner influenced at least one Negro writer. And I am able now to speak authoritatively. When I went to Fisk, the librarian was Arna Bontemps, the Negro writer. We became very good friends. When I went to his office one day, he was reading Faulkner. Arna explained that he read Faulkner because he was learning how to write and he had not found any writer that could teach him as much as Faulkner. If you are just reading Bontemps lightly, you may not suspect that there's any Faulkner in him, but I want to suggest to you that you look at a short story of his. I think the name of it is "November," but I don't trust my memory. In this story you're introduced to an old couple and you find that they are preparing to put on their best clothes and get in their old car. As I remember it, you've already discovered that the man is sick and he can't recover. They get in the car and drive down the road to a stream; they drive into the stream and keep driving until, of course,

the water's over the car. That's the end of the story. It's a very Faulknerian story.

There's a young Negro writer named Ishmael Reed (he grew up in the North but was born in Chattanooga) who reminds me of Faulkner in one special way. I think you would agree with me that Faulkner had a tremendous power of invention. When you're reading a Faulkner story, often you say to yourself, "God, this guy can really invent!" Well, if you read Ishmael Reed's *Yellow-Back Radio Broke Down*, you're going to start saying to yourself, "This guy's got a power of invention like Faulkner." It's highly conceivable that Reed has read Faulkner. It's almost incredible that he hasn't because of the kind of writer he is. He's also a college teacher.

Questioner Dr. Jackson, my memory is not very good either, but I believe the name of that story is "Summer Tragedy."

Jackson Thank you. I knew that was wrong. The story's anthologized quite a bit, too.

Questioner Dr. Jackson, would you say that Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* was influenced by Faulkner, too?

Jackson Professor Kerr would be in a better position to answer this because the use of the grotesque in *The Invisible Man* certainly does connect him with Faulkner. I especially have in mind the final episode—the riot in Harlem, which is just a circus of the grotesque. Ellison's sources are so numerous that it is sometimes difficult to isolate them. I'm not going to talk at length about it. One of the problems with Ellison is that he, to a degree that is most admirable, has fused literary sources with the stuff that he got directly out of the Negro poor and out of the black experience. This does make it a little difficult to isolate this, that, and the other. But I think your question is excellent and would bear pursuing. Professor Collins mentioned a dissertation, and I think this would be a very good topic for a dissertation.

Kerr *Invisible Man* is one of the most Gothic books ever written. Ellison is using the entire gallery of Gothicism over and over again. The whole thing is a series of initiations. So, I'm sure there's some

Faulkner there. As Mr. Jackson says, he has many sources, but Ellison and Faulkner are both using the same tradition.

Questioner Do you on the panel have any ideas about the future of Southern literature? What direction it will go?

Harrington I don't think that's answerable, I really don't. I wish I knew the answer. It's a good question.

Jackson There is a special stance, though, for Negro writers that I have had occasion to think about because, if you'll forgive the personal reference, I have written at least the first script of a tape on black Southern writers. As I developed it, I began to realize that I, like everybody that talks too much, had said some things in the past which I now regret. I argued years ago that the setting of the Negro novel is the Northern urban ghetto. I argued that Negro fiction is far too monolithic. I said that it was monolithic in its setting, it was monolithic in its character, and it was monolithic in its atmosphere. So I was arguing that when you examine Negro literature, and remember that until 1909 our Negroes in America lived in the South, you don't get the South. But then, when I was working on this tape, I made some modifications. If present trends in this country continue, I am prepared to argue now that there is going to be a new relationship between Negro writers and the South. You're going to get the new writing about the South coming from Negro writers writing about the South in a way which has never been really true before. A good augury of it is Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, where you get a Negro writer coming back to the South and treating it in a way which is, in spite of the criticism, much more sympathetic and much more full of a sense of what the South was like. Of course, Gaines' book had already been anticipated to some extent by Margaret Walker in her novel *Jubilee* where she does do a very interesting thing. Up until her *Jubilee* I always had the feeling that Negro writers found it difficult to write about slavery and Reconstruction because they were so tense about it and so angry. And you can understand why. There's no reason for them not to be really. But in *Jubilee* you get a woman going back in her own family really because Vyrie Brown is actually her ancestor and she's saying things about the South in a way that really only Langston Hughes has been able to say as he does in *Not Without Laughter*.

Questioner The use of time in Faulkner is very similar to the context of time in Proust and Bergson. Is there evidence that Faulkner read Proust?

Collins Yes, there is excellent evidence that Faulkner read Proust.

Faulkner gave a copy of *Creative Evolution* by Bergson to Joan Williams and wrote in the front—these are not the exact words but the gist of it—“you will find this hard going, but it’s indispensable for you if you want to become a writer.” So the only inference we can make is that Faulkner had read it too.

Questioner I’d like to know how Faulkner arrived at the title for *Requiem for a Nun*.

Collins I don’t know how he did. The astonishing thing is how extremely early that title cropped up as the title of a manuscript Faulkner was working on. Carl Petersen can speak to this much more precisely than I, for the only place I have seen this early reference to the title is his collection. Carl?

Petersen The clipping on that was 1934, just about the time *Dr. Martino* was published. *Dr. Martino* was published April 16, 1934, and there was a notice in one of the New York papers that it was coming out. Meanwhile, Mr. Faulkner was working on two novels entitled *Requiem for a Nun* and *Dark House*. I was fascinated by *Dark House*, trying to figure out which novel could be *Dark House*. Just as with Saul Bellow almost any of his novels could be *The Victim*, almost any of Faulkner’s novels could be *Dark House*. I was gratified when I found the words *dark house* in *Absalom, Absalom!*.

Collins If you want to have negative comments here about Faulkner I’ll give one. *Requiem for a Nun*, the central dramatic part, is very poor fiction. For one thing, it is based on *Sanctuary* and requires readers to know *Sanctuary*. It seems to assume that readers do know the earlier novel; then it seems to decide that they don’t and proceeds to retell *Sanctuary* in capsule form. This recapitulation is not successful—if it were we wouldn’t need the original *Sanctuary*. It is awkward. And there are other difficulties. The manuscript he was writing in 1934 under the title *Requiem for a Nun* may very well be the

book published much later with that title, for it may have taken that long to write a book which has so many troubles!

Harrington I would like to add, too, that it is also responsible for reams and reams of terrible students' writing. They read those long things where "they (the dogs)" are chasing "them (the something)" while "they (the men)"—and so on; he didn't take time to straighten out his pronouns. It is not good English, even if Faulkner did write it. And I have to tell my students that day in and day out in creative writing courses. They think, man, Faulkner didn't even get his pronoun references straight. If he could put the antecedent in parentheses, we can do it, too.

Well, we must bring this to a close. Thank you all.