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William Faulkner:  
The Substance  
of Faith

ELMO HOWELL*

The young generation in the United States today, the generation of the Vietnam war, must be unique in at least one way: it is the first to call into question its country's moral position by rebelling, in sizable numbers, against its policy at home and abroad. But this defection is only a part of a general retreatment from faith and commitment. The magazines and moving-picture screens flash pictures of nudity, they publicize the break-through of Victorian taboos in accounts of aberration, drugs, promiscuity, and violence. They give ample coverage of one of the major discoveries of the generation that God is, after all, dead. The whole country is, in one way or another, gathered up in this melee of excitement in the breaking of old images; and even those who have been around long enough to be aware of the fads of social change must yet recognize the altered premise on which young Americans today are facing the future. It is our national conviction, says John Steinbeck, "that politics is a dirty, tricky and dishonest pursuit and that all politicians are crooks." It was not always the case. The nation was founded by a tremendous act of faith, in God, in our leaders, in the rightness of our cause, a faith which permeated every element of American life. In the eyes of the European, the American's faith became his earmark, the source of his simplicity and naivete and at times of his truculence, but always of his strength.

The fiction of William Faulkner is one of the strongest affirmations of faith that American literature has produced. Ironi-

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1John Steinbeck, America and Americans (New York, 1966), p. 35.
cally, the first decade of his writing, beginning with the publication of *Sartoris* in 1929, which represents his finest achievement, was condemned by many as it appeared for negation of values and for an emphasis on the sordid and violent. Southerners were offended by an unpleasant picture of their society, while beyond the South Faulkner’s introspection and brooding concern over a small segment of life in north Mississippi seemed morbidly parochial. He was, in fact, a mind turned in on itself, not just indifferent to the outside world but actually afraid of it. New York was a horror, and California a siren’s land of “men and women without age, beautiful as gods and goddesses, and with the minds of infants.” Home was nowhere but Oxford, Mississippi, where he could listen in atavistic seclusion to the sound of rain on the roof of his back porch. The broken roof of the South—that was the image that stirred his imagination during his great creative period. From *Sartoris* to *Absalom, Absalom!* his protagonists are men who have been defeated, who disintegrate in madness or despair, caught as they are between two worlds in the cultural backwash of Southern history, where enough of the old lingers on to make them unfit for the new. “If you could just ravel out into time,” says Darl Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*. “It would be nice if you could just ravel out into time.”

**FAULKNER’S SENSE OF LIFE**

But these protagonists, these “sick heroes,” as Mr. Melvin Backman calls them, do not command interest for long; Faulkner’s robust sense of life drowns out their dying wail. The South of his youth crowds his canvas, country and village, black and white, and the red man too: their houses, food and clothing; their speech and singularities of manner and attitude; the interrelation of class and caste—all presented against the natural world of bird and beast and flower and tree and in the context of seasonal change. By temper, Faulkner was buoyant and cheerful, and though grieved by the decay of the old order and the decline of an ideal, he was enough of a realist, like old Aunt Jenny DuPre of the Sartoris family, to survive the heartbreak

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and to make the best of the world as he found it. And so the reality of his fiction is not in the nihilism of the central characters but in the teeming life of his country.

Faulkner’s faith is not to be identified with the creed of any particular church. He is, in fact, severe on the religionists, who in his case are usually Baptists, the dominant group in his country; but his complaint is against what he considers an obtrusive interest, in the name of religion, in the other person’s business. He belonged to no church himself; in a sense perhaps he was not even a Christian. And yet all of his work is suffused with the virtues of humility and forbearance and the Christian concept that he who loses his life shall find it. He has no gift for the mystical and he is impatient with theology, but he still reflects, unconsciously perhaps, the values of a Christian culture. Above all he is reverent. One of the effects of reverence is good manners, the “automatic courtesy,” as he called it, in the saying of “Thank you” and “Sir” and “Ma’am,” which he valued in Southern life. Unfortunately, outside Faulkner’s country this custom is sometimes looked upon as somehow degrading in a society where all are supposed to be equal. But obeisance of servant to master, of child to parent, the young to the old, native to stranger is a grace of manner, a social modesty, which finds ultimate expression in man’s relation to God.

In his best work, Faulkner participates in a communal faith of the Southern people. Through Absalom, Absalom!, at least, he seems to think of the South as having a destiny apart from the rest of the country. History reveals no sadder spectacle, perhaps, than the death of a civilization, and however the North may have looked upon the South in 1860, it looked upon itself as a separate nation, with the despair of Appomattox five years later only confirming it in a hopeless defiance. But defeat in battle was not the end; by slow attrition of morals and manners the South was to be shorn of its distinguishing qualities and remade in the national image. This is the South of Faulkner’s fiction, just before the consummation of the final Northern victory, when enough of the old remains to suggest (perhaps in grandiose terms) what the past was like and what the future might have been. “For every Southern boy fourteen years old,

not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's still not yet two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863. . . . It's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet. . . . This time. Maybe this time with all this much to lose and all this much to gain: Pennsylvania, Maryland, the world, the golden dome of Washington itself to crown with desperate and unbelievable victory the desperate gamble."

Faulkner draws his generation of the South with two faces, despair and defiant hope. Miss Jenny (Jenny Sartoris DuPre) is one of his best representatives from the aristocracy who even in the twentieth century still approaches life with assurance, though invariably marked with the Southern experience of failure. Though a commonplace of criticism that Faulkner's fiction reflects the grotesque end of a society founded on wrong principles—an aristocracy gone to seed—in actuality, the leaders of Jefferson three generations after the war (with the important exception of Flem Snopes) are drawn from the old families where the blood still courses strong: DeSpain, Stevens, Edmonds, Priest, Mallison, Sartoris. Miss Jenny, the sister of old Colonel Sartoris, is one of Faulkner's best portraits of old ladies, of whom he was particularly fond. "I think that as fine an influence as any young man can have is one reasonable old woman to listen to, an aunt or neighbor, because they are much more sensible than men, they have to be. They have held families together and it's because of families that a race is continued." Miss Jenny presides over the household of her nephew, and it is primarily through her manipulations that Young Bayard, the sole survivor of the young generation of Sartoris, is brought to marry and perpetuate the name. While all the time reviling the impossible Sartoris male, her family pride is fierce. A relict of the old order, simple, unassuming but adamant, she is the last of the "quality," says the servant Elnora, Quality is something the young people know nothing about, "because you born too late to see any of it except her."

Miss Jenny is not drawn in the romantic terms of most heroines of Old South fiction. Her speech is sometimes crude and her grammar peculiar. (Her English is authentic, however. The use of substandard terms like "ain't" and "it don't" persists

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6Collected Stories of William Faulkner, p. 752.
in informal Southern speech today, even among cultivated people, as it did among the English upper class well into the nineteenth century.) Unlike the lady of tradition, she finds amusement in her vacant hours, not with a Waverley romance, but a lurid Memphis newspaper, filled with "arson and murder and violent dissolution and adultery." She is very much at home in her world, though her roots are in the past. Elnora recalls her coming to Mississippi to join her brother John Sartoris, after her husband had been killed, bringing only some flower seed and a wicker hamper of broken colored glass from a window in her destroyed home in Carolina.

She got here at dusk-dark on Christmas Day and old Marse John and the chillen and my mammy waiting on the porch, and Her setting high-headed in the wagon for old Marse John to lift Her down. They never even kissed then, out where folks could see them. Old Marse John just said, "Well, Jenny," and she just said, "Well, Johnny," and they walked into the house where the commonality couldn't spy on them. Then she begun to cry.10

Miss Jenny died when she was ninety, sitting in her arm-chair by an upstairs window; her death brought on by a violation of her standards by her niece-in-law Narcissa, who according to Elnora shouldn't have been a Sartoris in the first place. "Born Sartoris or born quality of any kind ain't is, it's does."11

Faulkner's world has been looked upon as one of decay and degeneracy, but the characters and incidents which represent a defection from the old standards are after all exceptions rather than the rule. His country is made up largely of men and women whose lives are quietly molded by tradition and prejudice, a people still close to the earth, a particular piece of the earth which their ancestors fought to defend in an old war, and where the bones of their fathers lie buried in some obscure churchyard bordered by fields of corn and cotton.

In such a world the past is always present—not only to those who dream, like Miss Jenny occasionally, of faded glories, but to those to whom the past meant chattel slavery. Faulkner's Negroes are tied to the past, not through battlefields and a lost cause, but through their intimate association with the white people and their acceptance of a common destiny. There are only

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9Collected Stories of William Faulkner, p. 753.
10Ibid., p. 752.
a few instances of the "new Negro" in Faulkner, those who go away and put on new clothes and new ways (like Caspey in Sartoris), and usually they don’t fare very well, either at home or abroad. By an ironic twist, the last surviving descendant in the male line of old Carothers McCaslin, one of the pioneers of Yoknapatawpha County, was the mulatto Samuel Worsham Beauchamp, who broke the pattern with his Hollywood attire and "expensive coiffure" and an attitude towards society that Jefferson would not tolerate. He was electrocuted in Joliet, Illinois, for killing a policeman, but even in death the long arm of the past enfolds him again, when his old grandmother Mollie Worsham Beauchamp goes to the District Attorney in Jefferson and says, "I don't know what he is. I just knows Pharaoh got him. And you the Law. I wants to find my boy."12 Gavin Stevens, after a public subscription, has the body returned, and with her white folks attending, old Mollie has the satisfaction of a funeral procession and a proper burial.

Then, with Miss Worsham and the old Negress in Stevens' car with the driver he had hired and himself and the editor in the editor's, they followed the hearse as it swung into the long hill up from the station . . . until it slowed into the square, crossing it, circling the Confederate monument and the courthouse while the merchants and clerks and barbers and professional men who had given Stevens the dollars and half-dollars and quarters and the ones who had not, watched quietly from doors and upstairs windows, swinging then into the street which at the edge of town would become the country road leading to the destination seventeen miles away.13

One of Faulkner's favorite characters was the Negro Dilsey of Sound and the Fury, who raises the children, two generations of them, and holds the family together until her mistress Caroline Compson dies. Then she goes to live, old and half-blind, with her daughter Frony in Memphis—Frony moves to Memphis from St. Louis since her mother will not go farther away from home. Dilsey suffers neglect and abuse, even from those she loves, but she knows what she has to do and she does it. "Dis long time, O Jesus. Dis long time."14 She was drawn, it has been suggested, after an old Faulkner servant, Caroline Barr, who

13ibid., p. 382.
14The Sound and the Fury, p. 332.
died when she was a hundred years old, with Faulkner himself speaking at her funeral in his own front parlor. "Miss Hestelle," the old woman said to Mrs. Faulkner a few days before she died, "when them niggers lays me out, I want you to make me a fresh cap and apron to lay in." And Faulkner spoke his piece, "hoping that when his turn came there would be someone in the world to owe him the sermon which all owed to her who had been, as he had been from infancy, within the scope and range of that fidelity and that devotion and that rectitude."16

The virtues of Dilsey and Faulkner’s old nurse suggest his approach to the creation of Negro character. This is not to say that his Negroes are not individuals, as much as his white people. They are, but characteristically they reflect the values of the best of the white element who have formed their character in a close association that goes far into the past. The Negro, says Quentin Compson, is "a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among."16 In this respect, although they have no conscious affection for the past, they as much as the whites keep it alive and help to perpetuate its values. Mark Twain reduces this penchant of the Southerner’s to absurdity in the story of the old Negro mammy in Louisiana who followed her white people in judging everything in the present by the happier days before the war. When she heard a Northern visitor admiring the Southern scene and above all the beautiful Southern moon, she sighed and said, "Ah, bless yo’ heart, honey, you ought to seen dat moon befo’ de waw!"17 Faulkner is very serious in his attitude towards the past, not in any romantic notion about vanished glory but in the code that informed its moral life: honor, pride, honesty, loyalty. Though the modern world threatens these values—and that is the source of the tension in all of his fiction—they still survive surprisingly strong in the group consciousness of his people, black as well as white.

In addition to the planter class and the Negroes, there are the poor white people, who have always made up the bulk of the population. In the old days, this element, slaveless for the most part, lived in the upcountry on small farms where they

17*The Sound and the Fury*, p. 105.
18Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (New York, 1904), p. 338. (Chapter XLV)
pieced out a bare subsistence in the frontier fashion. In Faulkner’s time, and especially since World War II, they have moved in increasing numbers to the cities, leaving their farms to return to the wilderness, but taking along with them, at least for the present, the values of their rural background. The new urban South is still the Bible Belt. Memphis, Tennessee, the metropolis of the Faulkner country and one of the most progressive cities of the South, still boasts more churches than service stations.

The yeoman farmers of the Old South had little cause to cast their lot with the planter aristocracy, and it was a matter of consternation to Northern observers that they did. However much they may have been exploited by their leaders, as outsiders suggested, when the first guns sounded, they sprang to arms in complete unison with their captains, composing, as W. J. Cash points out, “an extraordinary and positive unity of passion and purpose.”18 They shared the planters’ racial pride and, just as important, his sense of independence and personal dignity. However ragged and small his domain, the little man stood on it with the same fierce attachment as the planter on his baronial acres; and “the thing that sent him swinging up the slope at Gettysburg,” says Cash, “on that celebrated, gallant afternoon was . . . nothing more or less than his conviction, the conviction of every farmer among what was essentially only a band of farmers, that nothing living could cross him and get away with it.”19 In a rude and wild society, says Sir Walter Scott, whose Scotland is in so many ways parallel with the American South, there is a more intimate mingling of people of all conditions: “the high and the low are more interested in each other’s welfare; the feeling of kindred and relationship are more widely extended, and, in a word, the bonds of patriotic affection . . . have more influence on men’s feelings and actions.”20

With some exceptions, these poor white people do not figure prominently in Faulkner’s fiction; but their presence is felt in the background—quiet, unhurried, solid, and enduring: the Tulls, Bundrens, Armstids, McCallums, Gowries, Workitts, Pruitts, Quicks, Varners, Ingrums, Frasers. The past is not so

19Ibid., p. 44.
vivid to them as to their social betters, and consequently their nerves are less fraught, for their main concern today, as in the past, is getting a living out of the earth. However, in their own way they also participate in the South's history. After the Civil War, Anse McCallum, who had gone to Virginia to do his fighting because "his Ma was a Carter," walked back home to Mississippi, built a log house and raised a family of six sons, four of whom he named for Confederate heroes. In World War I his youngest son Buddy refused to wear a medal of honor awarded him because it was a "Yankee charm,"21 and during the New Deal years the McCallums refused to allow government agents on their land to determine their cotton acreage or to distribute subsidies. "Give that to them that want to take it. We can make out."22

SOUTHERN INDIVIDUALITY RESPECTED

Even the lawless Gowries of Beat Four command Faulkner's respect because of an individuality which he considers the Southerner's peculiar heritage. ("I admire strong character," says Miss Jenny, "even if it is bad."23) They are the leaders of a bad element who almost lynch an innocent Negro; but their lawlessness appears ultimately no worse than a foray of minor Scots Highlanders—a parallel that Faulkner suggests—who are committed to their own way of doing things and willing to fight the intruder to the death. It is altogether characteristic of Faulkner that the head of the Gowrie clan, as well as one of his sons, is named for General Nathan Bedford Forrest. In "To-morrow," he tells the story of Stonewall Jackson Fentry, "a little worn-out hill man," whose principal quality is the ability to endure. There is nothing in his present but hard work and deprivation, but his name associates him with a broader experience and gives his life a dignity that it would not otherwise have. He names his son Jackson and Longstreet Fentry, because "Pa fit under both of them."24 Like Conrad's simple heroes, Lord Jim and Captain MacWhirr for example, Faulkner's little people hang on to what has been passed down to

21Sartoris, p. 320.
22Collected Stories of William Faulkner, p. 57.
them, impervious to ideas, with complete assurance in the destiny of their race and nation.

The essential vitality of the Yoknapatawpha fiction is in this underpinning of simple faith. Like the Negress Nancy in Requiem for a Nun, whose philosophy is summed up in her oft-repeated statement "I believes," his characters accept rather than question and dispute. They do not appreciate or understand the cynic's quip; they will have nothing to do with that new chic idea—born of a sterile weakness that cannot face up to unpleasantness anywhere—that our country's wars should be called into question since morally we may be on the wrong side. Young Pete Grier of Frenchman's Bend volunteered after Pearl Harbor, not because of intellectual conviction—he was barely literate—but because the honor of his country had been challenged: "I jest ain't going to put up with no folks treating the Unity States that way."25

In Faulkner's world the continuity of the generations is unbroken. "Nothing is ever forgotten. Nothing is ever lost. It's too valuable," says the grandfather of young Lucius Priest, who wants to be punished for disobedience so that he can forget it.26 The past lives on to inform the present. Can any literature, asks Sean O'Faolain, be "in health and vigor without some form of faith?"27 Faulkner's art communicates a sense of faith and confidence nurtured through generations, in one particular place and quite inseparable from it. It takes into account all elements of experience, individual as well as social—the errors, the pain and ridicule as well as the triumphs, and builds its house on that foundation. The faith of his people still burns strong because it has been tested and not found wanting, and because they refuse to forget.