H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daniel J. Singal. *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xii + 357 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2355-2.

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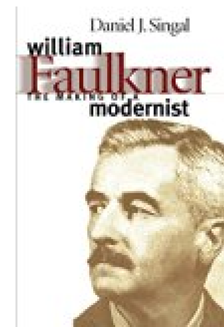
Published on H-USA (March, 1998)



Biographical William Faulkner

Faulkner is an enigma that scholars, critics, and biographers have never fully reconciled, and not for lack of trying. The biographies come regularly. The first followed the Nobel Prize, when journalist Robert Coughlan published *The Private World of William Faulkner* (1954), a very insightful set of personal impressions. Joseph Blotner published his massively thorough, two-volume *Faulkner: A Biography* in 1974, and followed it with a revised, condensed one-volume edition ten years later. Connections between Faulkner's life and work are common in the criticism, and the best examples of the approach are Judith Wittenberg's *Faulkner: The Transfiguration of Biography* (1979) and David Minter, *William Faulkner: His Life and Work* (1980). A number of new biographies have appeared in the last decade, including Stephen B. Oates's *Faulkner: The Man and the Artist* (1987), Frederick R. Karl's *William Faulkner: American Writer* (1989), Louis Daniel Brodsky, *William Faulkner: Life Glimpses* (1990), Joel Williamson's *William Faulkner and Southern History* (1993), and Richard Gray's *The Life of William Faulkner: A Critical Biography* (1994). A film biography, *William Faulkner: A Life on Paper*, aired on PBS in 1979, and A. I. Bezzerides published his script under the same title in 1980. Faulkner scholars contemplate as well the biography that was never written when Carvel Collins died without publishing his. Evidence that it would have been important is seen in Collins' ninety-page essay, "Biographical Background for Faulkner's *Helen*" in William Faulkner, *Helen: A Courtship and Mississippi Poems* (1981). Additional biographical studies are specific to certain portions of Faulkner's life, such as Martin Kreiswirth, *William Faulkner: The Making of a Novelist* (1983), and biographical materials may be found in introductory essays to posthumous publications of Faulkner's work. Relatives have also gone on record. John Faulkner published *My Brother Bill* in 1963, Murry C. Falkner published *The Falkners of Mississippi: A Memoir* in 1967. Jim Faulkner published *Across the Creek: Faulkner Family Stories* (1986), and then was interviewed for *Talking About Faulkner: Interviews with Jimmy Faulkner and Others* (1996). Malcolm Franklin contributed a memoir of his stepfather in *Bitterweeds: Life with William Faulkner at Rowan Oak* (1977). Two Oxford, Mississippi neighbors, James W. Webb and A. Wigfall Green, collected local impressions in *William Faulkner of Oxford* (1965). Ben Wasson published his memories in *Count No 'Count: Flashbacks to Faulkner* (1983), and Susan Snell published a biography of Faulkner's closest friend, *Phil Stone of Oxford: A Vicarious Life* (1991). Two lovers have recorded their encounters with Faulkner, one fictionalized by Joan Williams, *The Wintering* (1971), and the other not, Meta Carpenter Wilde and Orin Borsten, *A Loving Gentleman: The Love Story of William Faulkner and Meta Carpenter* (1976). My list is selective, as there are additional biographical chapters in critical studies and anthologies, and there is the very useful *A Faulkner Chronology* (1985), by Michel Gresset, which simply chronicles the life.

The number of biographical studies on Faulkner is especially noteworthy when one considers that there have been no major discoveries of letters or diaries, and no releases of new biographical materials since Blotner's 1974 volumes. The major exception is Joel Williamson's study,

which uncovers evidence of an African-American branch of Faulkner's family. The motivation to write Faulkner's story again and again is based on the fact that, as Mr. Compson says in *Absalom, Absalom!*, "It's just incredible. It just does not explain." It does not seem possible that this man wrote those books. And so each biography since Blotner has applied an interpretive framework, or tackled one aspect of the life, in an attempt to represent the person or at least make some aspect of the author more intelligible. Likewise, the market continues to be good for memoirs by anyone that knew Faulkner, saw Faulkner, or was in the same place at the same time as Faulkner. Daniel J. Singal is aware of these issues, and addresses the problem in his book immediately: "Curiously, amid all that has been published on Faulkner, one subject remains largely unexplored–the structure and nature of his thought. To the extent that critics have dealt with the content of his mind, they have usually thrown up their hands in despair, unable to detect any thread of intellectual consistency" (p. 1).

Ultimately, Singal's hands end up similarly placed. The book's subtitle, "The Making of a Modernist," is accurate. Singal's purpose is to explain the origins of Faulkner's genius in the tensions between Victorian and Modernist sensibilities. Singal's Faulkner is "a writer caught in the midst of a momentous transition between two major historical cultures–the Victorian one into which he had been born in late-nineteenth-century Mississippi, and the Modernist one he discovered and absorbed through his extensive readings. His earliest work clearly reflects late Victorian and post-Victorian modes of thought, while by the midpoint of his career he had become in most respects a twentieth-century modernist. The journey from one sensibility to the other was neither swift nor easy.... In fact, I argue, it is this very conflict of cultures within him, never entirely resolved even late in his life, that provides the crucial key to making sense of Faulkner" (p. 2). Singal is particularly qualified to apply this thesis to Faulkner, as he is the author of *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (1982). Singal does a superb job in following through on his thesis. He begins with an examination of the career of "The First William Falkner," Faulkner's grandfather, author of *The White Rose of Memphis* and other novels.

William Clark Falkner (his grandson placed the "u" in the family name) was a violent man who wrote genteel fiction, and the gap between his life and his writing was as wide as that which characterized the life of his grandson. A rather substantial discrepancy between life and fiction may be a Fa(u)lkner signature. At stake is young William Faulkner's identity, which begins firmly rooted in Victorian sensibilities but is shattered by the Modernism he encountered in urban settings such as New Orleans and Paris in the 1920s. The author we know as FAULKNER was born of the combination of these acquired Modernist sensibilities and his local, Southern materials. Specifically, the discovery of Yoknapatawpha marks Faulkner's personal synthesis of his roots in traditional southern culture and Modernist aesthetics. The novels, thus, become sources for biographical inference. For example, "Like the young William Faulkner in the days when he conceived of himself as a poet, Horace enjoys nothing more than allowing his imagination to wander transcendentally" (pp. 109-110). Or, "The planter class, to which southern society had always turned for direction, had now reached a historical dead end, a cultural morass from which it would likely never extricate itself. That is the ultimate meaning of the story of the Compson children" (p. 131). As such, these are insightful readings of *Flags in the Dust* and *The Sound and the Fury*. Nonetheless, our hands still must go up in despair. To argue that the novels display the intellect at work leads to a tautology, and does not quite explain the origins and progression of the mind, or the reasons why the mind's productivity turned to these particular aesthetic forms. By the end of his book, Daniel Singal arrives implicitly at a similar conclusion.

Once the essential division between the Victorian past and the Modernist future is established as Faulkner's crucible, the book settles into a series of close readings of the novels through *Go Down, Moses*. Very little biographical information is provided, and because there is so little evidence of it, we don't learn what Faulkner read, or how his thinking evolved. Aside from a few, mostly businesslike, letters, and sporadic efforts at nonfiction, all we have are the novels and the short stories. Singal explicitly chooses to ignore the short stories (p. 167), and thus brackets out a major portion of Faulkner's intellectual work in order to concentrate solely on the novels (the screenplays are also ignored). One story, "The Tall Men," is analyzed as a particularly bad piece of writing (p. 276). The decision to focus only on the novels in order to write an intellectual history sharply narrows the represented content of Faulkner's mind. For example, while *Light in August* (1932) may be "decades ahead of its time" (p. 175) for its representation of racial politics, a biography must contextualize the work within a decade of racial tensions in Mississippi, where Faulkner was not always to be found among the better angels. Similarly,

when Singal explains that Faulkner took time off from writing novels to work in Hollywood in the early 1930s, he leaves the reader of the intellectual biography curious as to what kind of work he was doing there, and how it contributed to his intellectual development.

A number of very fine insights into the novels emerge. Quentin may have been resurrected from textual death in *The Sound and the Fury* in order to demonstrate Faulkner's successful emergence from his Victorian origins. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, "Quentin's post-Victorian sensibility has gradually and reluctantly become Modernist, if just barely, during the course of the novel" (p. 219). The critical framework employed here is that of a literary biography, though, and not an intellectual history of Faulkner's mind. Singal's main concern is the meaning of the texts, in other words, and not the mysteries of the author's intellectual life. The hands must still go up in despair for Faulkner's intellect. In his discussion of Charlotte Rittenmeyer in *The Wild Palms* (*If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*), Singal asks "What...was *Faulkner's* intention in creating this character? To what extent can we fathom the forces operating in his mind as he summoned up Charlotte to express his own values and beliefs? " (p. 227). An intellectual history should probably take into account all of what operated in the mind of the subject–the short stories, the screenplays, the letters, the nonfiction, the conversations, the books read–where no single novel, plot, or character is isolated as a singular expression of the essence of the mind. The questions Singal asks are the questions of literary criticism. When we wish to know Faulkner, we have little else but the texts on which to base our speculations. Hence, in his book, Daniel Singal, who is a historian, becomes a literary critic. He has no choice.

Let me stop at this point to make clear my admiration for this book. Singal has made a heroic thrust into what is proving to be an unfathomable mind. The Victorian/Modernist thesis is compelling, and students of Faulkner and twentieth-century American literature in general should read this book. It is an important contribution, but it does not explain. Faulkner worked very hard in his life to exist independent of institutionalization. He quit public school well before finishing and attended only a few college classes. There are gaps in his early life when we don't know what he was thinking about or reading. He did not keep a journal or a diary. He confided in very few people. He left very few unpublished manuscripts or works in progress. He had a marked distaste for literary and intellectual conversation, and did not have a wide circle of friends or correspondents. When he was interviewed, he was liable to say almost anything and was not consistent in his public statements. This is not the kind of person about whom an intellectual history is readily constructed.

Singal makes one astonishing move in this book, though, when he suggests that Faulkner suffered brain trauma in 1940. Critics have always been puzzled by the change in Faulkner's writing in the late 1940s. (They are similarly puzzled by the change in his writing in the late 1920s, but that change is universally valued, whereas the move in the 1950s is not.) In fact, Faulkner is a major author whose self-identified masterpiece, the work he spent a decade writing, is largely ignored by scholars and critics. An intellectual history must account for *A Fable* and Faulkner's work throughout the 1950s if it is to be complete. However, here this writing is dismissed as "lightweight Faulkner" (p. 256). In November 1940, Faulkner suffered "internal hemorrhaging stemming from alcohol abuse" and came precariously close to death. Singal presents evidence to suggests that the result was "a neurological scar...one consequential enough to affect his mental and verbal agility, cutting into his capacity to work his usual literary magic and portending the greater loss that lay ahead as the disease of alcoholism followed its predictable course" (pp. 259-260). An attenuated Faulkner emerged, his powers weakened, his vision spoiled. (The one exception is *The Mansion* [1959], which is considered as an astonishing return to past levels.) *Intruder in the Dust*, *A Fable*, *Requiem for a Nun*, *The Town*, and *The Reivers* are either dismissed or ignored. Singal suggests that the Faulkner of the 1950s had suffered brain damage, and as a result, wrote novels that were not masterpieces. The point is not debatable, as we cannot produce Faulkner's brain to check it out. Nonetheless, the claim is symptomatic of the enigma. If the intellectual moves made by Faulkner after 1942 are so unpalatable, unfathomable, a medical explanation may be necessary. It's the Twinkie defense for literary scholarship.

When Joseph Blotner wrote his two-volume biography of Faulkner, it earned a nickname among colleagues, the "blotter" biography. The reason was that the two volumes chart every movement, statement, negotiation–in short, if evidence of Faulkner existed, it was blotted and placed in the biography. Blotner knew he had to limit his interpretive framework, and by doing so, performed an invaluable service to literary history. In a reflective essay published in 1979, "The Sources of Faulkner's Genius" (in *Fifty Years of Yoknapatawpha*, Ed. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie), Blotner acknowledges the enigmatic nature of the man he knew, worked with, and wrote about.

He admits devoting much time to speculating as to the source of Faulkner's genius. "I am not sure that it *is* possible, finally, to say, It came from this talent and from that grief, from this part of his mind and that part of his heart" (p. 249). Daniel Singal has done a valiant job in his attempt to map the workings of Faulkner's sensibilities. In an era when we would greatly prefer material, even medical explanations for human productions, and are not likely to find mysteries satisfying, Faulkner remains enigmatic. Deeply flawed personally (the drinking, the women, the politics), and yet capable of inspiring awe through remarkable texts, we are faced, finally, with a human being whose individuality defies efforts at intellectual categorization. The fault is more likely with those who categorize and not with the life that was. In an era of dubious agency and displaced subjectivity, Faulkner's is indeed a virtuoso performance in being.

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Citation: Joseph R. Urgo. Review of Singal, Daniel J., *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist*. H-USA, H-Net Reviews. March, 1998.

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