John Matthews's new book on the fiction of William Faulkner is a lively and accessible discussion that offers fresh readings and new insights for everyone. While providing rich historical, cultural, and aesthetic contexts for reading Faulkner's fiction, *William Faulkner: Seeing Through the South* is a pleasure to read; it is the best available discussion of the reach of Faulkner's fiction we have now and will have for many years to come.
Patrick O'Donnell, Michigan State University

William Faulkner: Seeing Through the South is an introduction written by a major Faulkner scholar which both "introduces" and transforms its subject (a difficult trick) . . . The study unfailingly requires that in seeing Faulkner clear, we see him in new and necessary ways.
Richard Godden, University of California Irvine

Matthews lays out brilliantly the ideological systems that solicit Faulkner's fiction. No troubled apologist for the Old South, Matthews's Faulkner engages the challenges of modernity, taking on the disfigurements of colonialism and capitalism. Thanks to Matthews, we have a Faulkner for our time: one who sees through the South – demystifying its collective fantasies – even as he labors to see his region through.
Philip Weinstein, Swarthmore College

Blackwell Introductions to Literature

This series sets out to provide concise and stimulating introductions to literary subjects. It offers books on major authors (from John Milton to James Joyce), as well as key periods and movements (from Old English literature to the contemporary). Coverage is also afforded to such specific topics as "Arthurian Romance." All are written by outstanding scholars as texts to inspire newcomers and others: non-specialists wishing to revisit a topic, or general readers. The prospective overall aim is to ground and prepare students and readers of whatever kind in their pursuit of wider reading.

Published

1.	*John Milton*	Roy Flannagan
2.	*Chaucer and The Canterbury Tales*	John Hirsh
3.	*Arthurian Romance*	Derek Pearsall
4.	*James Joyce*	Michael Seidel
5.	*Mark Twain*	Stephen Railton
6.	*The Modern Novel*	Jesse Matz
7.	*Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*	Heather O'Donoghue
8.	*Old English Literature*	Daniel Donoghue
9.	*Modernism*	David Ayers
10.	*Latin American Fiction*	Philip Swanson
11.	*Re-Scripting Walt Whitman*	Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price
12.	*Renaissance and Reformations*	Michael Hattaway
13.	*The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*	Charles Altieri
14.	*American Drama 1945–2000*	David Krasner
15.	*Reading Middle English Literature*	Thorlac Turville-Petre
16.	*American Literature and Culture 1900–1960*	Gail McDonald
17.	*Shakespeare's Sonnets*	Dympna Callaghan
18.	*Tragedy*	Rebecca Bushnell
19.	*Herman Melville*	Wyn Kelley
20.	*William Faulkner*	John T. Matthews

William Faulkner

Seeing Through the South

John T. Matthews

WILEY-BLACKWELL
A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2009
© 2009 John T. Matthews

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007.
Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific,
Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex,
PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Editorial Offices
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

For details of our global editorial offices, for customer services, and for information about how to apply for permission to reuse the copyright material in this book, please see our website at www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell.

The right of John T. Matthews to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book are trade names, service marks, trademarks, or registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publisher is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book. This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is sold on the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering professional services. If professional advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Matthews, John T.
William Faulkner : seeing through the South / John T. Matthews.
p. cm.—(Blackwell introductions to literature ; 20)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4051-2481-2 (hardcover : alk. paper)
1. Faulkner, William, 1897–1962—Criticism and interpretation.
2. Southern States—In literature. I. Title.
PS3511.A86Z89163 2009
813′.52—dc22
2008020118

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 10 on 13 pt Meridian by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong
Printed in Singapore by Fabulous Printers Pte Ltd

1 2009

Contents

List of illustrations vi

Preface vii

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction: *Seeing Through the South:* Faulkner and the Life Work of Writing 1

1 An Artist Never Quite at Home: Faulkner's Apprehension of Modern Life 19

2 That Evening Son Go Down: The Plantation South at Twilight 77

3 Come Up: From Red Necks to Riches 124

4 The Planting of Men: The South and New World Colonialism 172

5 Seeing a South Beyond Yoknapatawpha 225

Notes 288

Bibliography 296

Index 302

Illustrations

Figure 1 Faulkner posing in Royal Air Force uniform (July 1918). Cofield Collection, Southern Media Archive, University of Mississippi Special Collections (B1F38). 27

Figure 2 Faulkner in Hollywood (December 1942) by Alfred Eriss/Stringer/2870705/Getty Images. 53

Figure 3 Faulkner in 1930. Publicity still for *Sanctuary*. Cofield Collection, Southern Media Archive, University of Mississippi Special Collections (B1F1). 120

Figure 4 Faulkner boarding a flight to Stockholm for the Nobel Prize awards ceremony in 1950. Cofield Collection, Southern Media Archive, University of Mississippi Special Collections. Reproduced by permission of *The Memphis Commercial Appeal*. 239

Preface

Faulkner once remarked – in a fit of annoyance at having to provide autobiographical information to accompany an edition of his work – that he wished he might annihilate any knowledge of himself as a human being on the other side of the typewriter. That way there'd be nothing for the reader but the books. To write as if anonymous: that's the dream of an author who put all of himself that mattered into the words on the page. It's true that what we learn about any artist's life and times may enrich our sense of the created works themselves. In the case of Faulkner, readers are fortunate to have a number of excellent biographies, each examining different facets of his outwardly simple but emotionally turbulent life.[1] Most of these also give brief accounts of Faulkner's literary works and artistic career as they interplay with the course of his personal life. As well, Faulkner's stylistic inventiveness and his ability to imagine a whole fictional world full of extraordinary characters and stories have stimulated close study of his technique and themes. Faulkner's art has inspired analysis as wide-ranging, intensive, and original as that of any author in English. Interpretive criticism continues to find fresh meaning in Faulkner's writing and surprising new contexts for understanding its cultural and social environment. I have dealt with the abundance of specialized scholarship on Faulkner by trying to assimilate it as discreetly as possible into my discussions, conceding that it would be impossible to do justice to the many books and articles that constitute the professional body of work on Faulkner. I urge readers to explore the massive archive of criticism to discover how many other "Faulkners" emerge in distinct accounts of this hugely imaginative writer.

In my effort to survey the whole span of Faulkner's creative life, and to introduce readers to the marvels of his artistry, I try to honor his preference for concentrating on the writing itself. I proceed as if the books themselves actually were the essence of Faulkner's life, as I believe them to be. Biographies give us Faulkner's personal and professional life, critical biographies the evolution of his imagination. General introductions offer overviews of Faulkner's key concerns and achievement, while specialized analyses allow readers to pursue particular topics and interpretations of individual works. *Seeing Through the South* attempts something different: I try to present Faulkner's entire imaginative career as a distinctively coherent project. My study reads all nineteen novels and a number of the best short stories as inter-related episodes in a vast chronicle of a world becoming modern; it shows the indispensable rooting of Faulkner's imagination in the place he chose to live all his life; and it emphasizes how the US South was embedded in the history of global colonialism, in doing so suggesting what a Faulkner for our times might be.

Acknowledgments

It would be impossible to identify all the debts I've incurred in writing this book, since it reflects a lifetime of learning about Faulkner from the published work of other scholars, from lively conversations with specialists, students, and fans everywhere (including several on Boston trolleys), and from exchanges with numerous colleagues over work in progress. I wish especially to thank Richard Godden, Patrick O'Donnell, and Philip Weinstein for reading this manuscript so carefully in its final stages, as well as for friendships of a lifetime forged around our regard for Faulkner's art. I've benefited in countless ways from the collaborative teaching of Southern culture, including Faulkner, I've done at Boston University with my colleague Nina Silber, and from her own invaluable scholarship on Southern history. Leigh Anne Duck, Peter Lurie, Anne Goodwyn Jones, Donald Kartiganer, Noel Polk, and Theresa Towner helped me in a variety of particular ways for which I am grateful: confirming my approach, recommending more to read, correcting errors. Although the introductory format of this book prevents a full scholarly apparatus, I have tried to acknowledge sources for all material deriving directly from the work of others, and have attempted to mention as many principal book-length studies on Faulkner as space allowed. Nonetheless, I wrote this book cheerfully if humbly aware of how many other readers' ideas have become indispensable to me as I think about Faulkner. Those companions will see themselves on every page. I trust them to grant me the privilege of transmitting accumulated knowledge to readers just beginning to appreciate the writer we have cared about for so long.

I also wish to thank the many students at Boston University who have come to share my passion for Faulkner's fiction, and whom it has been my privilege to guide as they explored his created world. I've especially loved watching new dimensions of this remarkable writer come into view every few years in response to the changing interests of undergraduates and the shifting intersections of his imagination with the course of contemporary life. I've been blessed as well with superb graduate students through the years; they also will recognize the contributions they have made to my thinking through their hospitable yet tough-minded reactions to my ideas, and through the distinguished scholarship many have gone on to produce themselves.

My editors at Wiley-Blackwell have been extraordinary, beginning with Andrew McNeillie, who first proposed that I do such a book, and continuing to Emma Bennett, whose encouragement and support were unfailing, and thus decisive, as well as Rosemary Bird, Louise Butler, and Hannah Morrell, who superbly oversaw its final stages (which they must often have doubted they'd ever witness).

INTRODUCTION

Seeing Through the South: Faulkner and the Life Work of Writing

We encounter William Faulkner in the twenty-first century as the greatest novelist America has yet produced. He may also be its most paradoxical. If Faulkner has become the United States' most influential world novelist, he did so while setting his most significant fiction in a single obscure county in the Deep South, and spending his whole life in such a place himself. He was a foremost international modernist, yet his subjects and characters are unimaginable apart from the history and sociology of what was the most backward state in the Union. He experimented endlessly with narrative structure, and developed a difficult unorthodox style, yet he described his goal as simply trying to get at the truth of "the human heart in conflict with itself" ("Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature," *Speeches, Essays, Public Letters*, p. 119).

Although such contrary features of Faulkner's imagination might seem to indicate the sort of genius that just transcends usual measures – think of him as the American Shakespeare – the purpose of this book is to show how his world's contradictions were a key to Faulkner's originality. Faulkner continues to speak to our contemporary world because his fiction described the seismic upheavals that formed modern life. Such disruptions caused a good deal of confusion and ambivalence, as one predominant way of life gave way to another. These changes seem commonplace now, and their stories familiar ones. But the sheer volume and degree of transformations can hardly be overestimated.

During Faulkner's life (1897–1962), America grew from a disorganized second-rate federation of regions into a modern centralized economic empire and international political giant. A primarily rural and agricultural nation became a vast network of metropolitan centers; capitalism developed from the simple production of goods for local markets into a system of national and international corporations. America expanded its foreign might by seizing its first territories outside the continent in the Spanish-American War in 1898, then pursuing a course through two world wars that made it a Cold War super-power by mid-century. Longstanding civil rights movements brought the vote to many women in 1920 and to most African Americans by the 1960s. Centuries of lawful racial discrimination came to an end. Sexual behavior was transformed by new social patterns fostered by World War I. Developments in technology reinvented almost every aspect of everyday life. Faulkner's father owned a livery stable in their hometown; twenty years later his son was flying airplanes. A child who grew up hearing tales about Civil War battles fought with saber and pistol, became the man who delivered his Nobel Prize speech four years after the US had dropped the first atomic bombs. Moreover, the events of modernity were hardly restricted to the United States. Throughout Western society similar changes were taking place, while across the globe peoples formerly controlled by European colonial empires began the struggle for independence and integration into the modern world.

It is not surprising that Faulkner's fiction should emerge as one of the most valuable imaginative records we have of the changes that created much of our present world. His novels, one by one, take up all the crucial elements of the event of modernization. In *Soldiers' Pay* (1926), his first novel, he concentrates on the way a traditional "provincial" society like the South's was violently inducted into a modern "cosmopolitan" one like the New America's after World War I. *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) tells the story of the eclipse of the South's landed gentry as a heartfelt tragedy; in his multiple novels about the Snopes family (starting with *The Hamlet* in 1940), Faulkner produces a corresponding comedy about the upward trickle of poor folk and the formation of a modern bourgeoisie. *As I Lay Dying* (1930) describes the awkward but determined journey of a family from its dying farm to the alluring town, while *Sanctuary* (1931) probes what Faulkner takes to be the horrific effects of urban mass entertainment and a culture of vicarious spectacle. In *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *Go Down, Moses* (1942), Faulkner descends into the painful history of the plantation system, one whose origins he rightly locates in the earliest violations of the New World by European settlers, whether in North America or the West Indies. Some non-Southern novels take up other alarming features of the modern age, most monumentally, perhaps, in *A Fable* (1954), Faulkner's ambitious meditation on the origins of the 1950s' atomic age military-industrial complex in the America of World War I.

Beyond the power of Faulkner's individual books, his achievement is especially remarkable for its determination to see a great multitude of local and discrete events as parts of a larger inter-related story. Faulkner organizes a lifelong creative project around the saga of an imaginary county in Mississippi that he calls Yoknapatawpha (its name a trace of the Native Americans who first occupied such places). By making so many of his separate novels installments in the description of an entire principality, Faulkner conveys the sense of the importance of region and history in shaping the lives of individuals. This is true particularly for a past-obsessed region like the American South, where many found it difficult to surrender the frustration and humiliation of losing the Civil War, along with a way of life they thought superior. As one of Faulkner's characters memorably remarks, "The past is never dead; it's not even past" (*Requiem for a Nun*, p. 535). But it is also true more broadly for all those global "Souths" that continue to find their way into modernity, confronting histories of colonial exploitation and dependence, struggling with racially complex societies created by the violence of invasion and slaveholding, and learning how to tell new stories in new ways.

Faulkner's situation as an artist and citizen generated tremendous personal conflict, perhaps the decisive element in his temperament as a writer. At the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the young Quentin Compson completes his harrowing account of the South by protesting, "I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!" As Faulkner himself commented about *The Sound and the Fury*, he found himself having to "indict" the South for its grievous sins while longing to "escape" into fantasies of its glorious past. Such powerfully divided sentiments are a product of the massive dislocations of loyalty, faith, and knowledge produced by the shift from one social regime to the next. The bravery of Faulkner's life as a writer and a person was that he did not dodge difficulty. He deliberately chose to live his entire life in Oxford, Mississippi, because it tortured him as much as it nurtured him. Unlike many other modernists who found artistic fellowship in New York or Paris, Faulkner set a solitary course. He lived sharply alienated from almost every intimate relation he forged, including those with his wife, his family, his lovers, his town, and his region. Personally, it was by living as an outsider within the world that had created him that he could represent the nuances of individual dramatic conflict with such authority and precision. Artistically, it was by subjecting his tradition-steeped Southern culture to the alienation of modernist methods for rendering time, language, consciousness, and history that Faulkner could figure out how to retell the stories of a place he knew too well.

Retelling those stories for national audiences became critical at just the moment Faulkner came of age as an artist in the 1920s. The South for a century had been locked into a succession of mythologies that exalted the antebellum ideal of plantation life, the kindness of Southern slavery, the nobility of the Confederate cause, the "natural" hierarchies of race and gender, and the honoring of regional pride over class conflict. In the aftermath of the Great War, the South attracted national attention for its racism (lynching remained a serious problem), anti-intellectualism (the Scopes "Monkey" trial occurred in 1925), and chronic poverty (Franklin Roosevelt called the South the nation's number one economic problem as late as 1938, toward the end of the Depression). Faulkner welcomed the destruction of such injurious myths and behavior, but he remained suspicious of what would replace them.

My subtitle, then, points to the several ways Faulkner fashioned art of universal appeal from his native material. Clearly, he saw human nature through the lens of his own experience, one defined fundamentally by its Southernness. In addition, his writing sought to penetrate the deceptions and delusions of a morally bankrupt and obsolete tradition, to see through its hypocrisies and pretensions. But in committing himself over decades to participating in, and bearing witness to, the difficult evolution of his South, Faulkner also determined to see the place he loved through its troubles.

Not much of this would matter, of course, had Faulkner not written some of the most breathtaking prose in the English language. As in everything, Faulkner made no concessions to simplicity. His conflicted sentiments toward the South, his determination to create the sensation of a long past alive at every point in a unified world, and the inscrutability of deeply-conditioned human motives and behavior – such aspirations place enormous pressure on the descriptive and evocative capacities of language. Faulkner's sentences arc across centuries, rotate endlessly around mesmerizing moments, turn familiar concepts inside out (one character grieves for a "nothusband"), and uncannily render characters' private thoughts as readable script. His characters ache with the burden of unwanted knowledge, their utterances wracked for admitting too much of what they don't want to acknowledge at all. It is the nearly inhuman devotion to making language exceed itself that creates the glory of Faulkner's difficult style. This is not writing for everyone's taste, but there is by now little question that it represents an achievement of the highest order, a coalescence of profound subject matter and originality of expression that embodies consummate literary artistry.

Imagine you are in your early thirties, and you've spent the first ten years of adulthood trying to establish yourself in your career. You won accolades for your early accomplishments, but fewer as you've gone along. One day you learn that your two biggest projects are being rejected, and that you're probably going to be demoted. On top of that, your fiancée announces it's time to get married now.

That was roughly William Faulkner's predicament as a writer in 1929. After concentrating on poetry during his college years, and getting one book of poems published, Faulkner had begun to sense that his real gift was for fiction. In 1925 he had spent some time in New Orleans, where he began to publish prose sketches in a literary magazine there called *The Double Dealer*. Sherwood Anderson, already a famous author, took an interest in the novice writer's fiction, and reinforced Faulkner's sense that he had a goldmine for future novels in the stories and characters the Mississippian had absorbed growing up. Faulkner lived in a small Southern town in an area where his family had been prominent for generations, from frontier times; his world was full of exotic, larger-than-life figures – many of them proud and ambitious, also hot-headed, violent, domineering, lecherous; others longsuffering, resentful, bitter; a few humble, conscience-stricken, honorable. Faulkner had been hearing tales about them from birth, so he always felt like a natural-born storyteller, with things to say about the human condition that his peculiar part of the world could illustrate. By the mid-1920s he became convinced he had a gift for fiction that would enable him to write at the level of the literary giants he so admired, like Dostoyevsky, Dickens, Flaubert, Thomas Mann, and Conrad. And while no one was making money in the 1920s writing poetry, successful short story writers and novelists had begun to earn thousands of dollars publishing in national magazines and getting on bestseller lists. In 1925 Faulkner moved to New Orleans and started concentrating on fiction – first short sketches and stories, then longer pieces. Over the next three years Faulkner made a splash by authoring a pair of well-reviewed novels. This is easy, thought Bill.

But instead of Faulkner's career taking off, it seemed to hit a dead end. His third novel, *Sartoris*, appeared soon, but only after the publisher insisted on radical revisions and cuts – changes so extreme Faulkner agreed to them on the condition that someone else actually do them. He was finishing another novel, and believed it was his best, but he was also making it as true to his vision of what great art should be as he could. The result was a work even his best friends found baffling, and his publisher turned down. Accepting the possibility that this book was too innovative ever to get printed, Faulkner devised a plan to write a *really* popular novel instead, one aimed to capitalize on the recent craze for gangster fiction, laced with gunplay and racy sex. As he turned thirty-two, though, Faulkner got the bad news that his publisher found the new book so obscene he figured they'd both end up in jail if he printed it.

Now what? As bad as his professional outlook appeared, Faulkner's personal life had just gotten a whole lot more complicated too. Ten years earlier, the girl he had first grown infatuated with in grade school, but whose father had forbidden them to marry following high school, had gone on to wed an international lawyer, with whom she had had two children. In 1929, though, Estelle Oldham Franklin and her husband divorced, leaving her free to marry Faulkner. Soon the struggling writer became the head of a household of four; less than a year later he purchased his first home, a ramshackle pre-Civil War "mansion" that he began to fix up himself. In this tight spot, Faulkner called on one of his main traits: perseverance. He acted as he was to do repeatedly during the course of his life as a writer: he just kept writing.

By the time of his marriage in late June of 1929, Faulkner had already received some encouragement; *The Sound and the Fury* would be published in October by a new company headed by one of his former editors, though it was clear that no one involved expected much in the way of general critical appreciation or sales. Just as it was coming out, he began his next novel, *As I Lay Dying*, which he finished quickly, in January. By the time it was published in the fall of 1930, Faulkner had also been surprised with word that his new publisher was now willing to give his pop novel a go; *Sanctuary* appeared in early 1931.

Although Faulkner's career was enjoying a sudden boost, he soon realized that the more "literary" novels he preferred to write were not going to earn him the royalties to be gotten from sensationalistic books, like the ones he aped in *Sanctuary*. Even this one "shocker" didn't sell as well as he'd expected. Faulkner found that his income fell short of what he needed to support his family. By 1932 Faulkner had committed himself to two other sorts of professional writing: short stories and screen plays. Throughout his career these more commercial venues subsidized and informed his novel-writing, even as they interfered with it. Since authors might be paid as much as $2,500 per short story by top mass circulation magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post* – F. Scott Fitzgerald was one well-paid star – Faulkner got himself an agent, took some of the material he was producing for novels, and began packaging it as short stories. Throughout his career Faulkner carefully recycled his creative goods. Sometimes he would split off a piece of whatever he was working on and publish it as a short story ahead of the novel. Other times, since Faulkner was capable of holding vast narratives about whole families and regions of his imaginary domain in his head, he would publish stories years ahead of their eventual integration into novels. And sometimes Faulkner seemed to work backward, taking strands of published novels and developing further (or possibly dusting off) discarded or preliminary versions. Whatever the immediate method, Faulkner always spoke resentfully of the need to cannibalize his fiction, since it was only in his novels that he felt he was creating authentic art.

Faulkner's habitual frugality in the use of his creative work – paradoxical in a way, given the spectacular fertility of his imagination –

leads me to one of the organizational principles of this book. Faulkner's short stories tend to orbit his novels. But since he was designing them to appear in more popular venues, the stories treat their subject matter more directly, with greater accessibility. At the same time, Faulkner's genius never pandered to mass audiences or mindlessly followed commercial formulas; he compromised ingeniously on issues of artistry, never forfeiting the responsibility of presenting his deeply misunderstood part of the country in complex and subtle ways. Many of Faulkner's stories brilliantly recast his subjects from fresh perspectives opened up by commercial pressures. Often the stories play a kind of double game, reflecting on the very market conditions of modern culture under which they appear – especially the mass production and consumption of cultural goods, and the commoditization of human relations.

One of Faulkner's early short stories dramatizes the tension between artistic and commercial obligations. Written in 1931, as he was reconciling himself to the necessity of marketing his fiction to the magazines, "Artist at Home" brings two sorts of authors into conflict. Having struck paydirt with his first novel and bought a comfortable home in the Virginia countryside, Roger Howes represents the successful commercial novelist. Then Howes's prospects cloud; he suffers writer's block as he works on his second novel, while his wife Anne resents the steady stream of struggling writers and painters from Greenwich Village who show up to ask the secret of making art that pays. One of these visitors seems especially unlikely to prosper, a sensitive young man, apparently dying of tuberculosis (once known as consumption, and considered the disease of poets because of its association with John Keats), who writes poems about rejection in love and who scorns the bourgeois conventionality of the Howes's household. The tortured poet eventually declares his infatuation with Anne, who indulges his passion conspicuously enough to stimulate her husband's suspicion. The doomed John Blair expires, though, after standing vigil outside the house on the rainy night he nobly renounces his love for the other artist's wife. It turns out that Howes has been using the episode of his wife's infidelity and the poet's suffering as material for his new story. Inspiration turns out to be little more than finding the right experiences to feed off – the artist as parasite. Even the down-home narrator of the story, a local who appreciates little about the artist-types who invade his rural Virginia town, understands that Howes has rediscovered a “[b]ull market in typewriting, you might say” (*Collected Stories of William Faulkner*, p. 639).

It would be tempting to interpret “Artist at Home” as a little fable about the crassness of the commercial writer, who plunders the lives of others amorally to get a marketable story, versus the high-minded literary artist, who renounces the world out of respect for beauty and love too fine for it. But Faulkner won’t settle for such platitudes. In fact, the story suggests that the divide between commercial and literary art is hardly absolute. Blair and his comrades may have contempt for the art market, but, as Anne points out, the only thing the poet wants to know when he shows Howes a poem is “ ‘Will this sell? not, Is this good? or Do you like it? Will this sell?’ ” (p. 633). It’s true that Howes comes across as a heartless exploiter of others’ personal lives, converting intimate matters into entertainment commodities. But Faulkner also satirizes the self-dramatizing poet, who talks too much and writes too little, who shies away from the sheer hard work necessary to get yourself into print, who maybe never gets “mad enough to really write something” (p. 632). Without the friction of domestic or economic challenges, Faulkner suggests, a writer may have too little to overcome ever to write well.

“Artist at Home” derives, ironically, from an episode in Faulkner’s own life. As an aspiring poet, Faulkner was introduced to a cultivated young woman named Elizabeth Prall when he lived briefly in New York City in the early 1920s. When Prall married the newly famous writer Sherwood Anderson and moved to New Orleans, she invited the Mississippian to visit. Faulkner revered Anderson’s early work, and eagerly accepted the invitation. Faulkner and Anderson became close for a time, with the established writer even recommending Faulkner’s first novel, *Soldiers’ Pay*, to his publisher. Naturally, there was also a fair amount of rivalry embedded in their friendship, and later the relationship turned sour. In “Artist at Home” Faulkner may be gibing at Anderson, who has figured out how to turn his personal life into paying copy. (As if in confirmation, Anderson wrote a story himself based on an encounter with Faulkner; it’s called “A Meeting South.”) But Faulkner mocks himself as well in the figure of Howes; Faulkner was routinely censored by his family and friends for violating their private lives and pasts for source material. At the same time, he must also be ridiculing himself in the figure of the fey poet Blair, who suffers like Shelley, rages like Byron, and ends all too tragically like Keats.

Perhaps this story helps exorcise the unworldly poet Faulkner was – one also fond of dramatic posing, while embracing the contradictions and ethical ambiguities of writing for profit.

I'm beginning our investigation of Faulkner's life as a writer by concentrating on a central difficulty for him: the anxiety produced by the sense that he was betraying intimate knowledge of a secluded part of the country in order to satisfy the almost voyeuristic curiosity of a national audience. For numerous historical reasons, the rest of the US had routinely associated the South with gothic weirdness – from the creepy tales of the Virginian Edgar Allan Poe, through the exuberant satire of Mark Twain, to the grotesque comedy of Erskine Caldwell and Flannery O'Connor. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, an elderly woman breaks forty-three years of silence to tell her bizarre story of raging insult and grief to her young townsman, Quentin Compson, who is preparing to leave Mississippi for his freshman year at Harvard. She points out, with amused bitterness, that he could find the story worthwhile, since one day he might "enter the literary profession as so many Southern gentlemen and gentlewomen too are doing," and someday when his "wife will want a new gown or a new chair for the house . . . you can write this and submit it to the magazines" (*Absalom, Absalom!*, p. 5).

The historical moment at which Faulkner comes to maturity as a writer offers him unprecedented possibilities: as Rosa Coldfield suggests above, speaking in 1909, opportunities to capitalize on the national magazines' appetite for regional fiction, especially about the exotic South, had never been better.[1] An important reason for that interest, however, was the growing sense among urban, professional reading classes that regional life was dying out. Sherwood Anderson's hit book, in fact, was *Winesburg, Ohio*, which in 1919 detailed the strange, fading distinctiveness of small town "grotesques." Left behind by the dynamo of commercial, industrial, and technological progress centered in the modern city, the outlying regions of the country looked increasingly like vanishing enclaves to be savored nostalgically. So the conditions of modernity both created new publishing opportunities for writers about region, as well as situated those writers in the crease of modernization, in which old ways seemed to be coming to a close and new ones emerging.[2]

Faulkner could not have written such sustained lamentations about the receding traditional South without witnessing its demise. Such a position reinforced his ethical and imaginative conflict with the society that had produced him; in writing *The Sound and the Fury* he described having simultaneously to "indict" the contemporary South while "escap[ing]" into the "makebelieve region" of "swords and magnolias and mockingbirds which perhaps never existed anywhere" ("An Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*," in *The Sound and the Fury*, p. 229). Nor could he avoid indicting that makebelieve region either, since the delusion, the nightmare, of a certain South's way of life comes to an end in modern America, and the dreamers must awaken to their guilt and shame and sorrow. It was Faulkner's privilege – such a heavy one, though – to write about the familiar as a stranger, to betray inside stories to outsiders. He became a writer because modern audiences had formed for his stories, and those stories issued from the break-up of a world that, in its very disappearance, became the subject that made his career.

Precisely these anxieties trouble another of Faulkner's early stories, "There Was a Queen," which sketches a few supporting members of the vast edifice of founding families in his imaginary county of Yoknapatawpha. This make-believe region, as we shall see, corresponds in significant ways to the actual county in north central Mississippi in which Faulkner lived most of his life.[3] Lafayette (pronounced in a most un-French fashion, with an accent on the middle syllable and a long "a" there as well: Luh-FAY-ette) County can trace its history back to Native American occupants, primarily of the Choctaw tribe. It eventually developed as a rich cotton-growing plantation realm in the period before the Civil War. Agricultural success went hand-in-hand with commercial prosperity, and Lafayette's county seat became a small hub of market and financial entrepreneurialism. Faulkner's great-grandfather made money as a cotton planter and town lawyer, though the family fortunes did not reach their zenith until after the Civil War, when the Old Colonel (the rank of his Confederate combat service) speculated in railroad-building, and his son, the so-called Young Colonel, founded the first bank in the town of Oxford. In Faulkner's imaginary domain several prominent families embody the ambitions, triumphs, and flaws of this dominant class.

"There Was a Queen" relates an episode that yokes the fortunes of two of the last survivors of the Sartoris clan, perhaps the most elite of Faulkner's plantocracy. Published in 1933, as one of a barrage of stories

Faulkner launched at the market during the decade, "Queen" contrasts the shock of modern ways with the death-like rigidity of an outmoded tradition. Narcissa Benbow has married one of the twin male descendants of Colonel John Sartoris, the major planter and businessman in the town of Jefferson, county seat of Yoknapatawpha. By the time of the story's events in 1926, all that remains of the main family are Bayard Sartoris's widow Narcissa, their child Benbow (Bory), and the ancient Aunt Jenny, the Civil War-widowed sister of the Colonel. The crisis of the story unfolds around the blackmailing of Narcissa at the hands of a federal agent who has come into possession of scandalous letters involving her. Years earlier, Narcissa had been the recipient of a series of anonymous obscene notes from someone in town infatuated with her. The perpetrator turns out to have been a member of a clan of hill farmers, the Snopeses, who have gradually been working their way into the economic and social life of Jefferson. As a bookkeeper in Colonel Sartoris's bank, Byron Snopes had begun fantasizing about Narcissa when she stops by on business; finally he begins spying on her, and addressing his longings to her. Narcissa has told no one about the letters, but, somehow intrigued as much as disgusted by the lust she has inspired, she keeps them in a packet in her bedroom. After Byron steals the letters back before he flees town with embezzled bank funds, they are recovered by one of the authorities who pursue him. Years later the agent contacts Narcissa with a proposition about returning them: he wants to exchange them for sex with her.

The crassness of the deal (to which, surprisingly, Narcissa agrees) suggests the heat with which Faulkner was mulling over the consequences of bartering stolen intimate secrets for profit. The dynamic of the story captures a number of conflicting motives and reactions that encode authorial anxieties. From the moment the letters disappear from her possession, Narcissa has been "wild" with the idea that the letters might be made public: "I thought of people, men, reading them, seeing not only my name on them, but the marks of my eyes where I had read them again and again. I was wild" (*Collected Stories*, p. 739). The letters may represent certain dirty secrets of Southern community – that the virginal innocence of the Southern belle (Narcissa refers to herself as a "lady," and dresses in white) masks sexual frustration and even class boredom; that ladies end up splitting themselves between public serenity and private hysteria; and even that there's something therapeutic and enlivening in betraying such secrets to the wider world. Is Narcissa wild with shame, or arousal? In this case, the FBI agent is an outsider – with an exclamation point: Narcissa understands him to be "that Jew" (p. 740), while Aunt Jenny thinks of him as "this Yankee." What matters is that the mystique of Southern community – the ideal of close personal and familial attachments thought to be the glories of fading regional life – appears here as a slipping fiction, under which messier realities like unfulfilled sexual desire and groundless ethnic pride squirm.

To the extent Narcissa's predicament involves what happens to private letters when they become public, it also reflects Faulkner's own activity as one who trades on stories of pollution, or, perhaps, as one whose trading itself is a kind of pollution. All novelists hoard the intimate stories of others, exactly so that their secrets may be betrayed – as letters bundled for strangers to read. By revealing the South's dirty secrets, an author like Faulkner may make himself wild with mortification and regret. At the same time, he may also arouse himself with their sensational icon-smashing force. Like the young Faulkner, and a generation of other Jazz Age escapees from hidebound Southern propriety, Narcissa takes some pleasure in her moment of scandal. She overplays how indifferent she is to the trading of her body to protect her family's name, supremely capturing a modern woman's scorn for the ideal of female chastity fetishized by the traditional South. Faulkner used to parade around Oxford as a spectacularly underemployed, overly boozed dandy – dubbed "Count No 'Count" because he was clearly of no account, and outfitted in full air force officer's regalia from a war he never fought, in a uniform he'd had to buy. He may have venerated the ancients of his family, but he also thought there was something laughably hypocritical and pretentious about the decorousness of Southern "community." As in Narcissa's imagining strange men like the FBI agent reading obscene depictions of her, there must have been something exhilarating in Faulkner's traffic with New York literary agents for the purpose of publishing scandalous tales. Faulkner's anxieties and thrills find their way into Byron's voyeurism and smutty writing; into Narcissa's furtive, compulsive, even autoerotic rereading; and into an anonymous reader's gratification via commodified letters.

Only the crack-up of a world provides such opportunities for demystification, however. It is precisely because the Sartorises and their class no longer rule that the story can show the flaws in a formerly dominant world view. Narcissa's behavior conveys the conflict between old and new orders: she prostitutes herself in order to save her respectable name, acting, without apparent personal investment, on behalf of her august aunt and the sole surviving Sartoris, her fatherless son. Narcissa's going through the motions like this suggests that the whole set of values and customs formalizing the power of elite families like the Sartorises has now become little more than empty rituals outdated by the shifts of modernity.

At the conclusion of Faulkner's related novel, *Sartoris*, published in 1929, the narrator sardonically describes the foolishness that has constituted Sartoris behavior through the generations: male recklessness, violence, exaggerated honor. "[B]ut perhaps," the narrator concludes, "Sartoris is the game itself – a game outmoded and played with pawns shaped too late and to an old dead pattern, of which the Player Himself is a little wearied" (*Flags in the Dust*, p. 875). We shall see that the "glamorous fatality" associated with the Sartorises is a trait Faulkner diagnoses as a deadly self-destructiveness within the plantation South's design.

In the snapshot of aristocratic decline Faulkner composes in "Queen," the figure of the moribund Old South is Aunt Jenny. With her direct ties to the plantation South's origins in the Atlantic colonies of the Carolinas, Aunt Jenny encapsulates the whole span of Southern slaveholding family plantation history. Dignity and pride have carried her and her kind through tides of fortune, but now she confronts the end of an era. Her rigid form is "framed by the sparse and defunctive Carolina glass" that she has brought from home, like a pioneer who has carried the design of plantation luxury to the frontier. Reduced to immobility by age, she is "tended" to "as though she were a baby" (*Collected Stories*, p. 728). Such regression signifies her obsolescence, but it also exaggerates the arrangements that have always supported dependent lives like hers. Jenny's domestic servant Elnora, an African American, nurses her mistress, whose physical attributes point to an embedded history of relations between whites and blacks in the South: Aunt Jenny is "a thin, upright woman with a delicate nose and hair the color of a whitewashed wall. About her shoulders lay a shawl of white wool, no whiter than her hair against her black dress" (p. 730).

Not only does Jenny's being draped in stark white and black evoke the optics of Southern race, it also suggests the fundamental link between race and labor, mistress and slave. Elnora serves; Jenny is waited upon. Yet something about Jenny implies a "whitewash"-ing, the refusal to recognize the false face of race – race itself a fiction of masters who deny the humanity of blacks while depending upon them for life itself.

Around the edges of the failing edifice of Sartoris domination spills the evidence that condemns the South for laying its cornerstone upon the injustice of slavery. Even in the South of 1926, the denial enabling a dominant Southern way of life continues to falsify human relations. Early in the story we encounter a classic instance of Faulkner's syntactical ambiguity:

> As Elnora crossed the back yard toward the kitchen door she remembered how ten years ago at this hour old Bayard, who was her half-brother (though possibly but not probably neither of them knew it, including Bayard's father), would be tramping up and down the back porch, shouting stableward for the Negro men and for his saddle mare. (p. 727)

We may use this sentence as an example of the way Faulkner's notorious stylistic difficulty is a function of his effort to portray the often confused, even contradictory states of mind of his characters. In this case we have a sentence describing Elnora's memory of a Sartoris patriarch, old Bayard, son of Colonel John, exercising the prerogatives of country master. An owner's force of rule over animals and slaves comes through in the detail of stomping on the porch, which may also imply the kind of irrational violence necessary to establish authority. But the sentence loses its way momentarily when the term "half-brother" comes up, because Elnora is not just the descendant of African slaves; if old Bayard is her half-brother, then her father was Colonel Sartoris, who, in a manner familiar to slaves, must have fathered her by one of his slave women. Elnora's mother is never named. The sentence's parenthetical qualification captures the tangle of knowledge and denial necessary to slaveholding. If "possibly but not probably neither of them knew it," then the narrator is uneasily, indirectly asserting that Elnora and Bayard likely *do know* that they are brother and sister. The dangling phrase, "including

Bayard's father," however, proves hopelessly noncommittal. If the half-siblings know, presumably through Elnora's mother, there is no reason to doubt that the Colonel knew as well. But the ambiguity is telling; it does not matter whether any white Sartoris knows or not about their non-white relations. Even to refer to the Old Colonel as *Bayard's* father is to cancel out the importance of his being Elnora's father too. *Their* father? Impossible. To possess any negro ancestry was to be negro in the slaveholding South (this definition became even more emphatic after Emancipation, and culminated in legal codes defining blackness as the possession of a single "drop" of "black blood." It didn't matter that the concept of black blood has never had a shred of scientific evidence.).[4] To possess any negro ancestry in the slaveholding South was also to be no one in the eyes of the master's law. Thus the "possibly but not probably" underscores, subtly, deftly, the power of social denial in the plantation South. Historically, what whites knew about their inter-relation with black slaves and the reality of mixed families simply was put aside by the force of ideological insistence, which acted to rationalize economic exploitation by a ruling elite. Faulkner sharpens the irony of his insight here by immediately reporting that Elnora's husband is in the penitentiary for "stealing" and that her son Joby had "gone to Memphis to wear fine clothes on Beale Street" (p. 727). Criminalizing a negro's petty thievery obscures the moral obscenity of a master race stealing millions of black bodies and their labor; smiling at a negro's fondness for splashy clothes diverts attention from a national garment industry founded on the raw material flowing from Southern cotton fields, on the raw backs of slaves.

Elnora functions as a transitional figure. Victimized in fundamental respects by the family and system that denies her recognition, she nonetheless defends its core values. She is the one who complains about the last Sartoris, the child Bory, growing up without a sense of ancestral pride, like common "trash." She is the one who refuses to speak Narcissa's name because she looks down on townspeople, and who disapproves of modern violations of decorum. But she is also the one who is going to have to find a new role for herself when the Sartoris name ends. Notice how Faulkner offers a brilliant image for Elnora's function in the Sartoris edifice: "The two women [Aunt Jenny and Elnora] were motionless in the window: the one leaning a little forward in the wheel chair, the Negress a little behind the chair, motionless too and erect as a caryatid" (p. 731). The syntax of the sentence ought to balance Virginia Du Pres as "the one," with Elnora as (the reader might predict) "the other." But Faulkner substitutes "Negress" for "other" in the expected pair "the one/the other." The syntax suggests how Southern habits of identification assume the oneness of a white person, independent and prior, as well as the otherness of the negro, different and secondary. The strange word "caryatid" deepens the effect. "Caryatid" is an architectural term referring to the figure of a woman incorporated into a supporting column, so that it appears as if the upper part of a structure rests upon pillars of women's bodies. The device is used in classical Greek architecture, the term said to derive from the women of the town of Caryae. Faulkner could hardly have found a better word to convey the function of slaves and some women in plantation dynasties. People like Elnora must work silently, as if inanimate components of the monuments built by Deep South masters in tribute to themselves. The unfamiliarity and awkwardness of the word "caryatid" arrest the reader; here is an uncommon term, in which a long history of bondage is secreted away, and whose very obscurity mimics the difficulty, especially for those who have profited from it, of reading slavery's scandal: black women turned into fixtures of labor, humans reduced to stone.

A word to the reader: you can relax. I'm not going to analyze every line of Faulkner with this kind of scrutiny. But at the outset we do need to establish how dense and rich Faulkner's language is, and how his circuitous, polysyllabic style is not just personal eccentricity, or a symptom of alcoholism, or artistic ineptitude, or even some resentful torture of the reader, but an audacious bid to write like no one ever wrote before, and to do so because more than anything Faulkner wanted the reader to feel the world to be as intensely moving as he did himself. That he strained language to its breaking point conveys less a reluctance to communicate anything than a desperate determination to communicate everything. As he put it once, his ambition was to put his whole world in one gigantic sentence, between a single capital and period. "Artist at Home" and "There Was a Queen" illustrate in miniature some of the tensions Faulkner encountered as he began to write about the part of the world he knew intimately, for a public that was curious, often to the point of prurience, about a region that had always seemed backward, strange, even grotesque to outsiders. Faulkner's artistic method tried to encompass the massive, abrupt transformations the South underwent as it became more and more like the rest of the modern nation, even as his art brought the country face to face with Southern ties it had so long sought to deny.

CHAPTER 1

An Artist Never Quite at Home: Faulkner's Apprehension of Modern Life

The prevailing view of Faulkner emphasizes his preoccupation with the past. Faulkner comes across foremost as the descendant of a distinguished family with origins in the Old South's plantation society, creator of the master emblem of modern Southern nostalgia in the person of his character Quentin Compson, and a cantankerous skeptic about many newfangled notions – including, at various times, the onset of a culture of credit, consumption, and labor-saving convenience; the spread of new technologies for communication and commerce; the urgent pace of social change in the South, culminating in women's and black Americans' civil rights; and the relaxation of proper manners and the right to privacy that his class associated with the virtues of a civilized Southern way of life. Recently, some literary critics have even begun to complain that Faulkner's obsession with the Southern past – with its monumental achievements as well as its ruinous evils – stunted modern Southern writing for generations. Faulkner's indisputable greatness as a writer meant, according to this view, that in order to establish their own credentials as Southern writers in a Faulkner-haunted landscape, his successors had to take on Faulkner's subjects – history, race, regional identity, and the despair of one group of individuals (primarily white males of the owning class), who suffer guilt and shame over their past and who fail to create a future. Perhaps this is what Flannery O'Connor meant when she joked about Faulkner's influence on subsequent writers: as one herself, she said, she didn't want her mule and wagon on the tracks when the Dixie Limited roared through.

What I want to argue instead, by way of correcting this portrait of an imagination obsessed by the past, is that Faulkner also responded strongly to the opportunities for novelty presented by the modern age. It is true that perhaps the most famous line in all of Faulkner is a remark made by one of his characters, usually attributed to "Faulkner" himself, that "the past is never dead. It's not even past" (Gavin Stevens, *Requiem for a Nun*, p. 535). But if Quentin Compson feels as a twenty-year-old that his entire life is already over, crushed by the weight of his ancestors' deeds, his head a "commonwealth" of voices that have already said all there is to say, his mind intent on a suicide that feels redundant – for all that, his is not the only fate Faulkner can imagine. Despite the grotesques of passion, greed, indulgence, selfishness, crudeness, and ignorance that populate Faulkner's chronicle of a world becoming modern, he never turns his back on the wondrous capacity of humankind to invent new possibilities for itself. Even a monster of modernity like the rapacious, soulless businessman Flem Snopes impresses his creator with his ingenuity and determination. And Faulkner remarked famously in one of his few comments about his artistic philosophy that "life is motion," and that the aim of the artist was to arrest that motion so that readers years later could make it move again.[1] The changes in the world he knew powerfully affected the young writer Faulkner, and motivated his early efforts to capture change on the tip of his pen. There was something thrilling about what was happening to the world at his moment in time. Faulkner's art responds to the sensation of exhilaration as much as to a sense of horror at these transformations. He asks how individuals process the massive upheavals associated with modernity, and how their varying reactions tell us about their distinct characters, backgrounds, and futures.

In the remainder of this chapter I want to discuss a number of Faulkner's earlier works by considering two main issues we identified in "Artist at Home" and "There Was a Queen." We'll look at some short stories and novels that represent the shock of new forms of social and cultural behavior to the world into which Faulkner was born. The South of the 1920s, after World War I, experienced strong shifts toward modernity: the arrival of automobiles and the building of new roads; the electrification of towns and farms; plentiful consumer goods and the growth of national merchandising through catalogues; the attempt to secure greater personal liberties by black Americans who had fought in Europe and realized that Jim Crow segregation was not universal; the extension of the ballot to women in 1920; a liberalization of sexual mores; the popularity of movies and a culture of celebrity; the power of national magazines and advertising; the modernization of education and public health; the development of local industries, the increase of wage labor, the decline in small farm ownership; and the inevitable rearrangements of wealth, social prestige, and power in communities of the Deep South. These works will help us to see that Faulkner *apprehended* modern life in several senses: he tried to comprehend it by imagining its effects on all sorts of different people; he tried to track down and "indict" what caused suffering in his society, as new evils evolved from past ones; but he was also made apprehensive by modernity even as he granted its ability to excite and liberate. We'll also keep in mind the question of modern cultural forms. What did it mean for Faulkner to think of himself as a modern artist? In what ways did modernist experimentation with literary form and style itself embody the idea of modern change? In what ways might it have resisted them? How did new developments like mass magazines and the movies change the economics of Faulkner's professional life, and how did they affect his subject matter, technique, and sense of audience?

Faulkner seriously committed himself to the vocation of writing during his early twenties. As a neophyte, Faulkner at first sought recognition from individual readers and authors whom he knew; they were critical in affirming his sense of himself as *a writer*. Even when he was in grade school, Billy Faulkner had once answered a teacher's question about what he wanted to be when he grew up by saying that he intended to be an author, like his "great-grandpappy." The Old Colonel, John Clark Falkner (as he spelled his name), had written romance novels about the old South. As Faulkner reached his high school years, he realized that some girls were impressed by artistic types, and he took to composing books of hand-lettered poems, the pages of which he meticulously sewed together and illustrated with pen-and-ink drawings. Faulkner crafted volumes like this for his eventual wife Estelle, as well as for a few other young women he became enamored with.[2] Faulkner also developed a close friendship with a young man from another prominent Oxford family, Phil Stone, who shared his enthusiasm for literature; together they discussed the latest modern verse, experimental fiction, and avant garde literary journals.