

In and Out of Yoknapatawpha

William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond, by Cleanth Brooks, *New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978. xviii + 445 pp. \$17.50.*

WHEN CLEANTH BROOKS' *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* appeared in 1963, I observed in a review that it was the book on Faulkner for which we had all been waiting. I might very well say the same thing of the volume now under

discussion, adding only that it is liable not to be of so great interest as the earlier one simply because of the lesser stature of the Faulkner works studied here. But this in no way detracts from either Faulkner's achievement or Professor Brooks'. In Flannery O'Connor's words, Yoknapatawpha County was decidedly William Faulkner's "true country"; and he was never at home, or at his best, anywhere else.

I believe that it is the burden of Brooks' argument here, whether explicit or implied, that this is the case. But it was important, even necessary, for Faulkner to try his hand elsewhere, in order to see what he could—and could not—do. And then only after he had stepped outside the picture frame of his life, with his early forays into romantic, even *fin de siècle* poetry (he said he was a failed poet who had to turn his hand to prose) and his beginnings in the non-Yoknapatawpha novel—e.g., *Soldiers' Pay* and *Mosquitoes*—could he come "home." Brooks, whom most will recognize for the distinguished critic he is—Gray Professor of Rhetoric Emeritus at Yale, is at pains to show wherein lie such excellences as these early works possess: never have his sympathy and tact as a reader been exercised more graciously. He gives these early works all that he can, without being blind to their defects. He notes the echoes of Yeats and Keats, Eliot and Housman in the poems. And he suggests the influence of Joyce and Sherwood Anderson, even James Branch Cabell, in the novels. But of course these novels cannot be of the same intrinsic interest as *Flags in the Dust* (not published until 1973), which was the earlier and longer version of the first Yoknapatawpha novel, *Sartoris* (1929). The earlier works, as does the later non-Yoknapatawpha novel, *Pylon* (1935), point the way toward some of Faulkner's major thematic concerns—the plight of man in the modern world, often without a place or without a past; of man who cannot, as John Crowe Ransom observed, fathom or perform his nature. But Faulkner had not as yet found his true country, not until he en-

tered upon his Yoknapatawpha domain and discovered there the perfect context, the perfect world's body (to quote Ransom again) to give form and substance to his imagination.

One cannot hold this against Faulkner. What writer can be held strictly accountable for his *juvenilia* or even for some of his occasional later vagaries (and *A Fable*, published in 1954, certainly counts as one of them) as long as he remains faithful to his genuine, his ultimate muse? Such an attitude is implicit in much of what Brooks says here. And if anything, it makes the genuine article, the Yoknapatawpha novels, loom even greater than they might. And Faulkner was never false for long to that country, that story, after he found it—or it found him.

Again and again Brooks insists that Faulkner was never writing for export: he wasn't writing local color and he wasn't writing news. And his reporting from Mississippi is always rooted in a *commitment* to Mississippi—and the people and places who make it up—as a community and a living one at that. (Of many literary figures in the modern world Flannery O'Connor once scornfully observed, "They ain't *frum* anywhere." And Eudora Welty has said that all good writing must be rooted in, *committed* to place.) So Miss Emily Grierson in "A Rose for Emily," Faulkner's first published story, is not just a case study of a crazed old maid who kills her lover and then keeps his body by her for the rest of her life. Nor is she a symbol of the decadent Southern culture which tries to hold on to the dead past, to set up the ravenous grave in the house, as Allen Tate might wryly suggest. Rather, she is a tragic, even heroic figure who does hold her lover and does impose her will on the community, let it think what it will, and in her very isolation from the community become, as it were, public property. No, she's not a case study and she's not a symbol either—at least a sociological one. (Brooks is always, and quite properly, on the lookout for symbol-monsters.)

I myself found most rewarding the chapter on Faulkner's view of time and history and also the appendices on the character of Thomas Sutpen of *Absalom, Absalom!* and on Faulkner's possible relationship with William Butler Yeats. Brooks is most persuasive—and most eloquent—when he, as a Southerner himself, points out his own sympathy with the views of history and geography implicit in much of Faulkner's fiction:

Most of us who grew up, as he did, in the South of the early decades of this century had talked to Confederate veterans, who were in some instances our own grandfathers. We felt a sense of identity as "Southerners." We believed that we really constituted a kind of subnation within the United States, and were very much aware of the consequences of the South's defeat in the war. Such a defeat did make a difference in one's present life. Our loss of the war had political and economic consequences that had affected and continued to affect us.

The South, with its "agricultural society" and its "family centered" nature, its "long tradition of story-telling, folk songs, and oratory of both the pulpit and the political varieties," had a history which was "a meaningful story." As such the dream, the myth, of the Old South provided a rebuke to that other great vision, the American Dream, which is millennial and forward-looking, full of innocence, full of optimism and finally naiveté. This is pretty much the same point that C. Vann Woodward has made in *The Burden of Southern History*, and it's gratifying to see Brooks coming more or less to the same chastening and subduing assessment of the Southern situation and of Faulkner's own fictional interpretation of it.

Thomas Sutpen was a man ignorant of history in some ways, just as he seems to have been ignorant of geography and all other wild particulars (to quote Donald Davidson) which condition and differenti-

ate the individual human being. In seeking to impose an abstract "design" on the raw material of life and human experience he was more than trifling with the gods and as such doomed to inevitable destruction—he and his "design" (which may be but a perversion of the American Dream) as well. Brooks is at pains here, as he was in his earlier volume on Faulkner, to point out that Sutpen really has more in common with the robber barons of the Gilded Age in the Northeast than he does with the planter-aristocrats of the Old South.

The affinities and similarities Brooks points out between Faulkner and Yeats are highly suggestive, particularly their both coming from cultures which were firmly grounded in the spoken word and the sung song and in an ordered, traditional society. Furthermore, their attitudes toward both *nature* and *history* seem in some measure consonant. For both they seem to have held a proper piety—in some ways, an "unmodern" one. We might well be reminded here that, in *Ideas Have Consequences*, Richard M. Weaver observed that the modern industrial, urbanized society of the West was characterized by three forms of impiety: impiety toward the past, impiety toward nature, and impiety toward other human beings. Faulkner could never follow Yeats into the cyclical view of history, but history for him was alive and well—and very sobering—in the here and now. And for him nature had to be revered and also finally transcended if man were to be more than a purely "natural" creature.

By its very nature this study cannot have the tight cohesiveness of Brooks' first volume on Faulkner. At times it seems more a collection of essays on disparate topics than a continuous, tightly integrated entity. Still it is worthy of standing on the shelf beside the earlier work. I can give it no higher praise than that. And the "moral" abides: Faulkner may have fumbled his way toward Yoknapatawpha but, when he got there and stayed there, he was "home free."

Reviewed by ROBERT DRAKE