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WILLIAM FAULKNER'S DEMONS

In his own life, the novelist failed to truly acknowledge the evils of slavery and segregation. But he did so with savage thoroughness in his fiction.

By Casey Cep

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A new book, "The Saddest Words," examines Faulkner's struggles with himself. Illustration by Seth

What if the North had won the Civil War? That technically factual counterfactual animated almost all of William Faulkner's writing. The Mississippi novelist was born thirty-two years after Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox, but he came of age believing in the superiority of the Confederacy: the South might have lost, but the North did not deserve to win. This Lost Cause revisionism appeared everywhere, from the textbooks that Faulkner was assigned growing up to editorials in local newspapers, praising the paternalism and the prosperity of the slavery economy, jury-rigging an alternative justification for secession, canonizing as saints and martyrs those who fought for the C.S.A., and proclaiming the virtues of antebellum society. In contrast with those delusions, Faulkner's fiction revealed the truth: the Confederacy was both a military and a moral failure.

The Civil War features in some dozen of Faulkner's novels. It is most prominent in those set in Yoknapatawpha County, an imaginary Mississippi landscape filled with battlefields and graveyards, veterans and widows, slaves and former slaves, draft dodgers and ghosts. In "Light in August," the Reverend Gail Hightower is haunted by his Confederate grandfather; in "Intruder in the Dust," the lawyer Gavin Stevens insists that all the region's teen-age boys are obsessed with the hours before Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg. In these books, no Southerner is spared the torturous influence of the war, whether he flees the region, as Quentin Compson does, in "The Sound and the Fury," or whether, like Rosa Coldfield, in "Absalom, Absalom!," she stays.

A new book by Michael Gorra, "The Saddest Words: William Faulkner's Civil War" (Liveright), traces Faulkner's literary depictions of the military conflict in the nineteenth century and his personal engagement with the racial conflict of the twentieth. The latter struggle, within the novelist himself, is the real war of Gorra's subtitle. In "The Saddest Words," Faulkner emerges as a character as tragic as any he invented: a writer who brilliantly portrayed the way that the South's refusal to accept its defeat led to cultural decay, but a Southerner whose private letters and public statements were riddled with the very racism that his books so pointedly damned.

It's too late to cancel Faulkner; he already cancelled himself. "I will protest to the last: no photographs, no recorded documents," he wrote in a letter to the critic Malcolm Cowley on February 11, 1949. "It is my ambition to be, as a private individual, abolished and voided from

history, leaving it markless, no refuse save the printed books; I wish I had had enough sense to see ahead thirty years ago and, like some of the Elizabethans, not signed them."

Cowley was the editor of "The Portable Faulkner," a 1946 anthology that collected and excerpted Faulkner's short stories and novels, ordering them chronologically according to their story lines rather than by their publication dates. It was an attempt to rescue Faulkner from an unsurprising obscurity: many of his books are difficult, and many had been published during the Great Depression or the Second World War, when both the money and the appetite for such writing was scarce. To make a living, Faulkner had turned to writing screenplays, including those for "The Big Sleep" and "To Have and Have Not." Cowley made the case for Faulkner's genius, providing in the anthology a figurative as well as a literal map that showed the contours and connections of Yoknapatawpha County and its people. The volume put Faulkner's earlier novels back into print, and helped readers make sense of his modernist texts. Cowley had already published a similar anthology of Hemingway's work; it was a subsequent profile of "Papa" for *Life* that occasioned Faulkner's letter begging off any such publicity.

Faulkner expressed his desire for authorial anonymity in other venues, too. "If I had not existed, someone else would have written me, Hemingway, Dostoyevsky, all of us," he told *The Paris Review*. "Proof of that is that there are about three candidates for the authorship of Shakespeare's plays. But what is important is *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, not who wrote them, but that somebody did. The artist is of no importance. Only what he creates is important."

It's hard to say whether those sentiments grew out of Faulkner's aversion to publicity in general or were instead a response to his particular stumbles with the press, but he seemed to know how much his personal reputation might damage the reputation of his work. Faulkner had grown up using racial slurs and deployed them in correspondence; after he became well known, he continued to write and say things that were just as scandalous, if not more so. In a letter to the editor of a newspaper in Memphis, he suggested that justice was delivered by juries and lynch mobs alike and that no innocent man of any race had ever been lynched. In an article for *Life*, he seemed to equate the N.A.A.C.P. with the white-supremacist Citizens' Council, and opposed what he called the "compulsory integration" of the South by the North. He told the New York *Herald Tribune* that he longed for the return of the "benevolent autocracy" of slavery, in which "Negroes would be better off because they'd

have some one to look after them." In 1956, several years after he won the Nobel Prize and around

the time the federal government began deploying him as an international ambassador for democracy and human rights, he told a journalist that if that same government used troops to enforce integration in the South he would do as his Confederate great-grandfather had done before him. "If it came to fighting," he said, "I'd fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes."

The outcry was swift. W. E. B. Du Bois challenged Faulkner to a debate on the steps of the Mississippi courthouse where Emmett Till's murderers had been acquitted the year before. Faulkner declined, saying, "I do not believe there is a debatable point between us." He also issued a carefully hedged statement: the words attributed to him, he insisted, were ones "no sober man would make, nor, it seems to me, any sane man believe." (Faulkner was a notorious drunk, but elsewhere he seemed to subscribe to the in-vino-veritas model of alcohol consumption.) He also published an apologia in *Ebony* titled "If I Were a Negro," calling for moderation on racial questions and appealing for civil-rights advocates to "go slow, pause for a moment."

The remarks were not well received, and the denials convinced no one who was not already intent on defending Faulkner. James Baldwin excoriated him in the pages of *Partisan Review*, writing that Faulkner was exactly like "the bulk of relatively articulate white Southerners of good-will," in that his arguments "have no value whatever as arguments, being almost entirely and helplessly dishonest, when not, indeed, insane." Baldwin understood that there was no middle ground between segregationists and integrationists, and no reconciling the equal rights and freedoms articulated in the Constitution with the discrimination and oppression of Jim Crow. With regard to Faulkner, he asked, "Where is the evidence of the struggle he has been carrying on there on behalf of the Negro? Why, if he and his enlightened confreres in the South have been boring from within to destroy segregation, do they react with such panic when the walls show any signs of falling?"

Gorra has no direct answer to Baldwin's question, and he acknowledges that some readers may find in these biographical facts reason enough to banish Faulkner from syllabi, if not from shelves. But Baldwin's essay is a condemnation of the writer's personal politics, not his work; it never mentions Faulkner's fiction. Gorra's argument, however, depends on close readings of everything from individual sentences to symbols and characters and themes across the author's novels, which

collectively make the case that a racist person can be a radical writer. "Faulkner the man shared many of the closed society's opinions and values," Gorra writes. "But when the novelist could inhabit a character—when he slipped inside another mind and put those opinions into a different voice—he was almost always able to stand outside them, to place and to judge them."

Faulkner was unwilling in his own life to adequately acknowledge the evils of slavery and segregation, but he did so with savage thoroughness in his fiction. He was a Hieronymus Bosch of prose: his tortured imagination filled story after story with sins of every form and with characters turned grotesque by committing them. Though much historical fiction is escapist, Faulkner's is brutalizing, depicting a South debased first by degeneracy and then by the refusal to atone for it, even in the face of defeat. In 1936, the same year that Margaret Mitchell offered the world a romance between the roguish Rhett Butler and the Southern belle Scarlett O'Hara, Faulkner published a story of rape and incest and racist terror. It was the seventy-fifth anniversary of the start of the Civil War, and Americans made clear which version of events they wanted to remember: "Absalom, Absalom!" sold around ten thousand copies; "Gone with the Wind" sold more than a million and won the Pulitzer Prize.

"Absalom, Absalom!" was Faulkner's ninth novel, published ten years after his first. In that astonishing decade, he also wrote "The Sound and the Fury," "As I Lay Dying," and "Light in August." A high-school dropout, Faulkner experimented with poetry as a teen-ager, then enlisted to fight in the First World War with the Royal Air Force. It's unclear why he didn't join the U.S. Army; in any case, the Armistice arrived before he had finished training, and he was discharged. Faulkner brought home an officer's uniform and the "u" he had added to his family's surname to make it seem more English. Both were part of the persona he cultivated at the University of Mississippi, where fellow-students mockingly called him Count No 'Count. His family had once been prominent in the part of Mississippi where he was born—his lineage included bankers and businessmen—but Faulkner was not much of a student. He took a few literature and language classes but ended up spending more years on campus as the school's postmaster. That didn't last long, either: busy playing cards and golfing during business hours, he neglected to forward mail, misdelivered some letters while throwing others in the garbage, refused to prepare return receipts, and, when he could be bothered to open the office at all, often sat inside it working on his first book.

That was a collection of poetry, "The Marble Faun," probably the most traditional and certainly the least remarkable of all the books Faulkner published—he borrowed the title from Nathaniel Hawthorne and the style from the Romantics and the Symbolists. But the prose that followed was all his own. Faulkner's fiction does not have influences so much as analogues. He burned down houses with the gothic zeal of Edgar Allan Poe, staged moral crises as dramatically as Dostoyevsky, and fashioned fanatics who would have pleased Herman Melville. He created characters who migrated from one novel to another, and he wrote stream-of-consciousness narration that featured broken syntax and typographical experiments. A single, almost thirteen-hundred-word sentence in "Absalom, Absalom!" includes parentheses, question marks, granddaughters, spinsters, demons, dragons, chickens, coffins, Washington, Lincoln, and Faustus.

That novel has many narrative voices, but the character connecting them is Quentin Compson, who also appears in "The Sound and the Fury," published seven years earlier. Quentin is a descendant of a Confederate general and a governor of Mississippi and the heir to an estate first acquired from a Chickasaw chief in the early nineteenth century, now crumbling in the center of town and subdivided to cover the cost of his college tuition. "The Sound and the Fury" has four sections, each devoted to a different character: Quentin, his brothers Benjy and Jason, and the Compson family's cook, Dilsey. The novel is a passion play in which the two heirs to authority and power are deceitful and depraved and the two reviled members of society are honorable and decent. The novel begins on Holy Saturday inside the constrained and tender consciousness of Benjy, who is profoundly mentally disabled, and it ends on Easter Sunday with Dilsey, whose sincere piety and caregiving contrast with the degeneracy of the family she serves and that of the former Confederacy, in which she is trapped. While the sections focussed on Benjy, Quentin, and Jason are told in the first person and reflect the wandering or wayward character of their minds, the final section features an omniscient narrator and includes a sermon on how society is redeemed by its least respected members. Listening in the sanctuary are the "idiot" of the Compson family, who is Christlike in his needs, and their Black servant, who is Christlike in meeting them.

The last shall be first, and in Faulkner's novel they already are. For all their philosophizing, Jason and Quentin and their father cannot reason their way out of evil and toward goodness. An American Hamlet, Quentin is half mad and half in love with his sister; he is so consumed by his obsession with

sexual purity and racial honor that not even leaving the South for Harvard allows him to escape the fate of all the other failed members of his family. It is from one of his desolate soliloquies that Gorra takes the title of his book. Sitting in his dorm room more than a thousand miles from Mississippi, Quentin reconstructs a partial memory of something his father once told him: "every man is the arbiter of his own virtues but let no man prescribe for another mans well-being and i temporary and he was the saddest word of all there is nothing else in the world its not despair until time its not even time until it was."

A lawyer by training and an alcoholic by nature, Quentin's father is a source of torment to all four of his children—the three boys and their sister, Caddy. Although the family's fortune is wasted, the father remains obsessed with the power and wealth of the earlier generations, living in the land of "was" rather than "is" or "will be," subjecting his children to his theories of time and ethics and civilization, so preoccupied with the past that he can offer them no way to live in the present or prepare for the future. That is why, just before Quentin commits suicide, he returns to the "saddest word" speech, breaking his grandfather's pocket watch to stop time and arriving at his own idea of tragedy: "Again. Sadder than was. Again. Saddest of all. Again."

In "The Saddest Words," Gorra posits that Quentin represents Faulkner's view of tragedy as recurrence. "Again" was the saddest word for the character and the author alike because it "suggests that what *was* has simply gone on happening, a cycle of repetition that replays itself, forever." Both the real and the fictional Southerner were trapped in that cycle, aware that the fall of the Confederacy was right and just but unable to shed their sympathy for the antebellum South. "What *was* is never over," Gorra writes, pointing out that the racism that ensnared Faulkner in the last century persists in this one: "There have been moments in our history, brief ones, when the meaning of the Civil War has seemed settled. This isn't one of them, not when the illusion that this country might become a postracial society lies in tatters. *Again*. That's precisely why Faulkner remains so valuable—that very recurrence makes him necessary."

Plenty of Faulkner's characters appear in multiple novels and stories, but Quentin represents the height of the writer's talents and the depths of his identification with his doomed protagonists. Faulkner's pessimism, notable even among the Lost Generation, seemed prescient during the civil-rights movement, and seems even more so today. His "Again . . . Again . . . Again" is the American

version of Shakespeare's tragic invocation, in "Macbeth," of "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow." A novelist born a full generation after the end of the Confederacy insists that he would have no choice but to repeat the racist and secessionist violence of his ancestors; a country a hundred and fifty-five years past its Civil War is still violently divided over the flags and monuments of that conflict.

Gorra argues that the racism and the failures in moral reasoning that characterized Faulkner's life refract brilliantly in the work: "They speak to us of a riven soul; of a battle in which the right side doesn't always win." Rather than separating the artist from his art, Gorra suggests that the two are entwined; Faulkner's racism informed his devastating portrayals of it. Earlier Faulkner apologists tried to minimize aspects of his politics that they found disagreeable, whether by denying their existence, insisting that he could have been worse, or mendaciously elevating selected parts of his biography as if they excused all the rest, like the eulogy he delivered for his family's Black maid, Caroline Barr, to whom he dedicated his book "Go Down, Moses." But there is no defending Faulkner's character, only his characters. As the writer himself knew, the best art will always exceed the artist who creates it. Transcendence isn't just an aesthetic experience for readers; it can be one for writers, too.

Few of Faulkner's contemporaries, even those who addressed the horrors of the war or the racial segregation that followed, wrote about the intimate versions of those conflicts—the sexual exploitation of slavery, the realities of interracial love, the social and emotional entanglements of Black and white families, the lived experience of miscegenation, and the perils of passing. Faulkner's novels, meanwhile, are full of confusion over racial identity, with mixed-race characters struggling to determine their origins, or knowing them and struggling to understand how they fit into the world, and, either way, struggling to find an identity that can sustain them in a racially essentialist society. These characters include some of the most remarkable creations in American fiction: Joe Christmas, Clytemnestra Sutpen, Charles Bon, Lucas Beauchamp. Faulkner also wrote white characters who were obsessed with racial categories, like Quentin, who sits beside a Black man on an integrated streetcar in Massachusetts, thinking, "A nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among."

While Baldwin excluded these characters from his consideration of Faulkner's politics, other Black

writers have drawn inspiration from them. The novelist Toni Morrison wrote her master's thesis

partly on Faulkner and his depictions of what she called "alienated" individuals, including Quentin. The scholar James A. Snead observed in his study of Faulkner, "Figures of Division," that, in a society of polarity, where people were divided into strict categories of male or female, rich or poor, white or Black, the writer saw through such dichotomies: "Faulkner's genealogical research discovers not purity but rather merging and chaos, states against which the traditions of social classification and division vainly struggle." What Faulkner recognized was the ubiquity of such struggles over identity and their centrality to the American experience—the way that the question "Who am I?" is always connected to the question "Who are we?"

Gorra is most captivating when he tends to these pervasive private battles, leaving military sites and other tourist destinations behind. "The Saddest Words" lags only when it turns into a travelogue of his adventures in Faulklandia: visits to Faulkner's ancestral graveyard in Ripley, Mississippi; to the grand estate he bought in Oxford and called Rowan Oak; to the Confederate statuary on Monument Avenue, in Richmond, and the present-day Emmitsburg Road, in Gettysburg. A park ranger can provide a better tour of the troop movements at Shiloh; a literature professor can articulate what a novel does with such history. Gorra has thought for decades about Faulkner's writing, and he is a remarkably illuminating teacher—in one masterly paragraph, he explicates the first sentence of "Absalom, Absalom!," pointing out how its adjectives become verbs and pile up like cars in a traffic jam, and how the place it describes is so stuffy and static that the only things moving within it are motes of dust. Of the novel as a whole, Gorra writes, "No one can read it quickly or even entirely with pleasure, but anyone who can hear its flowered dissonance will know that such books are why we read at all."

Quentin Compson, Gorra points out, is a broken vessel for all this history and description; Faulkner's readers are guided by "the fractured mind of a boy who seems already half-ghost." Faulkner knew that the tortured self was his own true subject, and his narrators are always wrecked by the knowledge they possess. In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, Faulkner said that it was "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat."

Race was the most salient manifestation of that conflict for Faulkner's characters, and for Faulkner

himself. As Baldwin suggested, Faulkner had pleaded with civil-rights activists for "time in which the Southerner will come to terms with himself." Yet Faulkner's own novels acknowledged that a century had not been enough time for that peace to be made.

After Faulkner was gone, his family continued to demonstrate how Quentin's "Again . . . Again . . . Again" was not fiction but fact. Faulkner died in the summer of 1962, at the age of sixty-four. A few months later, federal courts ordered the University of Mississippi to admit its first Black student, James Meredith. The state legislature passed a bill declaring that those charged with crimes of moral turpitude could not be admitted as students to a state university, and, the day it became law, Meredith was convicted of voter fraud, a crime he had not committed. The Kennedy Administration intervened to secure his admission, sending hundreds of federal law-enforcement officers to accompany Meredith when he enrolled.

Two people died and more than a hundred and fifty federal marshals were injured in the ensuing riots, which became known as the Battle of Oxford. As Gorra notes, that battle featured Faulkners on both sides. Six years after the novelist declared that if it came down to it he would fight for Mississippi against his nation, one of his nephews broke an arm commanding the local National Guard unit enforcing the federal integration order. That man's brother was among those who rioted. ♦

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Casey Cep is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of "Furious Hours: Murder, Fraud, and the Last Trial of Harper Lee."