

FAULKNER'S MYTH OF THE SOUTH

Robert Penn Warren called Malcolm Cowley's Introduction to *The Portable Faulkner* (1946)--excerpted below--"one of the few things ever written on Faulkner which is not hagridden by prejudice or preconception and which really sheds some light on the subject":

"Briefly stated," Cowley wrote, "the legend might run something like this: The Deep South was settled partly by aristocrats like the Sartoris clan and partly by new men like Colonel Sutpen. Both types of planters were determined to establish a lasting social order on the land they had seized from the Indians (that is, to leave some behind them). They had the virtue of living single-mindedly by a fixed code; but there was also an inherent guilt in their 'design,' their way of life; it was slavery that put a curse on the land and brought about the Civil War.

After the War was lost, partly as a result of their own mad heroism (for who else but men as brave as Jackson and Stuart could have frightened the Yankees into standing together and fighting back?), they tried to restore 'the design' by other methods. But they no longer had the strength to achieve more than a partial success, even after they had freed their land from the carpetbaggers who followed the Northern armies. As time passed, moreover, the men of the old order found that they had Southern enemies too: they had to fight against a new exploiting class descended from the landless whites of slavery days. In this struggle between the clan of Sartoris and the unscrupulous tribe of Snopes, the Sartorises were defeated in advance by a traditional code that kept them from using the weapons of the enemy. As a price of victory, however, the Snopeses had to serve the mechanized civilization of the North, which was morally impotent in itself, but which with the aid of its Southern retainers, ended by corrupting the Southern nation....