

Unknown Faulkner (1979)

Elizabeth Hardwick

This is a daunting enterprise: 677 pages of unpublished or previously uncollected works of short fiction by William Faulkner, along with interesting notes that tell of the circuitous, tireless creation of the Faulkner canon. They tell, also, of the need for money along the way, the need that turns visions into "submitted manuscripts," pieces of paper chugging along--to the eyes of George P. Lorimer at *The Saturday Evening Post*, to the desk at *Collier's*, and to the editorial scrutiny of other magazines.

This publication is offered to advance, perhaps to complete, the record. An industrious writer of the first rank leaves his inventory, which breeds a sort of marsupial industry of its own, one often endowed with a larger capitalization than the original source. The multiplication of texts, the expropriation, if that is a suitable word, by Faulkner of previous work to be renewed for later work, the absorption of single stories and episodes into large designs: all of this is happy grounding for books, articles, and advanced degrees. Most of the work offered in the *Uncollected Stories* has long been available to scholars working with the various depositories of Faulkner material. Now, divided into stories revised for later books, uncollected stories, and unpublished manuscripts, the work is offered to the general reader.

It is a question whether Faulkner has ever had a general reader, unless the term may be thought to describe those who give their time throughout life to literature without the spur of the classroom or the project. His original union of high classical style and vocabulary with the most daring and unaccommodating experiments with form fractured methods of narration, shifting, shadowy centers of memory and documentation makes an art that was very demanding in his lifetime and not less so now. Perhaps it is more difficult now if the reader must also place upon his mind the inhibiting genealogies, the mythical, unpronounceable kingdom that begins with a *Y*--all of the learning and sorting out that, like all learning and sorting, gives knowledge of a kind. Such knowledge is inevitable without being necessary. What are necessary are the magical, unique texts themselves with their passions that ask everything of the receiving mind, ask that the sensibility submit to a profound saturation. These are not stops for the passer-by. Indeed, not one of the novels will reveal even its form, its story, without submersion again and again.

'On November 7, 1930 Faulkner sent a story entitled 'Lebanon' to *The Saturday Evening Post*, which rejected it.' And one week later, another story to the same magazine, 'but met with no success.' The stories were not written in a week. Sometimes, reading the scholarship, one get the idea that there is no first version of anything in Faulkner, perhaps became of his hallucinated imagination in which forms flow and alter, replace and displace without end. In the same way, he does not often reject what was once brought into being; it reappears, renamed, defined in some new connection.

The Saturday Evening Post accepted many stories, among them the early version of 'The Bear,' and *Collier's* printed the first 'Go Down, Moses.' None was written 'for' the *Post*, 'for' *Collier's*. For instance, in the *Post*, one sentence of 'The Bear' runs to thirteen lines of type and ends '...not even a Moral animal but an anachronism, indomitable and invincible, out of an old dead time, a phantom, epitome and apotheosis of the old wild life at which the puny humans swarmed and hacked in a fury of abhorrence and fear, like pygmies about the ankles of a drowsing elephant: the old bear solitary, indomitable and alone, widower, childless, and absolved of mortality--old Priam reft of his old wife and having outlived all his sons.' We know that to be Faulkner, unconceding. What may be learned from the quotation is the presence of certain amnesties in the prison code of the *Post*.

Sanctuary was, so far as I know, Faulkner's one effort to make, with deliberation, a sow's ear out of a silk purse. The first version, 'a cheap idea deliberately conceived to make money,' was rejected as being too violent for the period, or perhaps too violent for itself. When he rewrote it a few years later, he hoped it would not "shame *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*" and called it a fair job and hoped people would buy it, which they did reasonably and without excess (a pleasant superfluity Faulkner never achieved). Of course, *Sanctuary* is a book unlike any other, one of the author's six or seven masterpieces. Andre Malraux thought of it as "the intrusion of Greek tragedy into the detective story."

Considering the publication of leftover and subsequently revised work in this new volume, the loss, the absence most to be regretted is the disappearance, apparently, of the first version of *Sanctuary*. Led to reread the final *Sanctuary* by thoughts of the writer and money, thoughts of Faulkner's way of working, of what is now called his process, one finds that the novel with its spectacular vitality does not exploit its genre so much as shatter it. What strikes one now is not the exaggeration of the central character, the criminal Popeye, not the stage effects, but the way Faulkner prefigures the vogue of those real-life Popeyes who make their eternal returns to the front pages and into books.

The forlorn criminal mind, beyond interpretation, this bafflement and destiny, filled with gestures, scraps of eccentricity, outbursts, fornication, drinking bouts, and always, of course, murders--its audience has aggrandized and changed. *True Detective* gave the facts but did not know how to solicit the aura. The criminal does not stimulate the contemporary appetite for scandal, either. Scandal now feeds on happy people, beautiful and rich, with their divorces and drugs, and inclinations to behave in ways that have an arresting inappropriateness. The miserable criminal is not a scandal; he is too lowly for that. Instead, he seems to engage the sophisticated mind by his overwhelming thereness--that alone--a thereness that is itself a sufficiency.

The sheer interest of such a man. This is what Norman Mailer takes to be the beginning and the end when he offers a hugeness of detail about the killer Gary Gilmore, and withdraws himself from it as quite unnecessary to the man's totemic sufficiency. Imagine a being with no good intentions and therefore less cant than most. Enter the criminal mind, all underground passages with the only glimmering of light the interviewer and his tape recorder. By the concentration of his own flaming energies Mailer seems to be saying about Gary Gilmore: Few men can make such great claims on our attention.

Popeye, the creation, is certainly imagined in the fullest degree, but he is not unimaginable as a reality. He is, instead, true to the appetite or knowledge produced by a later speculative journalism. He has the necessary excited flatness of character, a flatness arising from his domination by isolated and singular aspects of the will. This is perhaps what Faulkner partly meant by his innocent use of "cheapness" to describe his original idea; that is, a decision to watch the movements of the uncomplicated will, the movement characteristic of pornography and of much detective and crime fiction.

However, a book is written as well as conceived. In this case, the "telling" idea was the rape of a college girl by a corncob, which serves as what Sade might have called the "instrument" for the impotent Popeye. In the rendering of the idea, intensities of language and oblique modes in then narration transform flatness and shock into a contemplation of the mysteries of action. The writing is also impelled by a curious and powerful disgust, the pessimistic insight aroused in particular by the promiscuous, empty, arrogant young Southerners. "He's as good as you are. He gives to Tulane" and "My father is a judge," they like to say.

The brilliant concentration of images by which Popeye is introduced would be a problem for the writer looking at an actual criminal--going over the record, as it were. The strain of verisimilitude, of accuracy, of conformity to photograph and news story would hinder the flight of independent metaphor: "His face had a queer, bloodless color, as though seen by electric light...he had that vicious depthless quality of stamped tin...his tight suit and stiff hat all angles, like a modernistic lampshade."

These are the striking thoughts that led Malcolm Cowley to see Popeye as one of those "who represent the mechanized civilization that has invaded and partly conquered the South." And further as "the compendium of all the hateful qualities that Faulkner assigns to finance capitalism." This is indeed a heavy historical burden for the reduced, perverse, and changeless psychopath, and Popeye can bear it no better than The Misfit in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" ("You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a tire off his car..."). Popeye is relevant only to himself, and his human connections are with others of his type, the replications that turn up year after year to work out their unalterable passages, like birds flying south in the autumn.

Vice, coldness, impulse attached to a nature that is flat and toneless, in spite of a certain bravura and little bits of "style." "Fix my hair, Jack," Popeye says as he approaches the scaffold. Gary Gilmore says: "Let's do it."

Faulkner imagines, in an epilogue, an interesting sociology for Popeye, a sort of placing or rooting of the extreme, which also has its beginnings. The sweep of devastation is not unfamiliar. Popeye's mother meets his father, a professional strikebreaker, on a streetcar. When she becomes pregnant and says they must marry, the father replies, "Well, don't get upset. I just as lief. I have to pass here every night anyway." Of course, the father is soon gone, leaving the mother with Popeye, syphilis, and her own breakdown. The boy is left in the care of a pyromaniac grandmother, and nearly perishes when she burns down the house. He is stunned and abnormal physically, but survives to cut up birds and a half-grown kitten and to be taken off to institutions. In the body of the novel he has some success in bootlegging and commits the two murders that form part of the plot. In the end, refusing counsel, indifferent to his own life, he is hung for a murder he didn't commit. So it is "Fix my hair, Jack," and all is over.

In the *Uncollected Stories* there are two versions of a story about bootlegging written in the late 1920s, a few years before *Sanctuary*. No one would make a connection between the two, not even a Faulkner scholar with his special eyeglasses that can see in the dark. The notes of the *Uncollected Stories* do inform us that Faulkner claimed to have worked at bootlegging in New Orleans around 1925. And we believe it.

Elizabeth Hardwick
"Unknown Faulkner" (1979)
The Collected Essays of Elizabeth Hardwick
(New York Review Books 2017) 294-98