

FAULKNER PRAISES SHERWOOD ANDERSON

from "A Note on Sherwood Anderson" (1953)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

Why, he was one of the finest, sweetest people I ever knew. He was much better than anything he ever wrote. I mean by that he was one of those tragic figures that had just one book, which was *Winesburg, Ohio*....a very fine work.

One day during the months [1922-23] while we walked and talked in New Orleans—or Anderson talked and I listened—I found him sitting on a bench in Jackson Square. Laughing with himself. I got the impression that he had been there like that for some time, just sitting alone on the bench laughing with himself. This was not out usual meeting place. We had none. He lived above the Square, and without any especial pre-arrangement, after I had something to eat at noon and knew that he had finished his lunch too, I would walk in that direction and if I did not meet him already strolling or sitting in the Square, I myself would simply sit down on the curb where I could see his doorway and wait until he came out of it in his bright, half-racetrack, half-Bohemian clothes....

He expected people to make fun of, ridicule him. He expected people nowhere near his equal in stature or, accomplishment or wit or anything else, to be capable of making him appear ridiculous....His was not the power and rush of Melville, who was his grandfather, nor the lusty humor for living of Twain, who was his father; he had nothing of the heavy-handed disregard for nuances of his older brother, Dreiser. His was that fumbling for exactitude, the exact word and phrase within the limited scope of a vocabulary controlled and even repressed by what was in him almost a fetish of simplicity, to milk them both dry, to seek always to penetrate to thought's uttermost end. He worked so hard at this that it finally became just style: an end instead of a means: so that he presently came to believe that, provided he kept the style pure and intact and unchanged and inviolate, what the style contained would have to be first rate: it couldn't help but be first rate, and therefore himself too....

Yet...he found himself to be only a one-or-two-book man....That was why he had to defend the style. That was the reason for his hurt and anger at Hemingway about Hemingway's *The Torrents of Spring* [parody of Anderson's *Dark Laughter*], and at me in a lesser degree since my fault was not full book-length but instead was merely a privately-printed and subscribed volume which few people outside our small New Orleans group would ever see or hear about, because of the book of Spratling's caricatures which we titled *Sherwood Anderson & Other Famous Creoles* and to which I wrote an introduction in Anderson's primer-like style. Neither of us—Hemingway or I—could have touched, ridiculed, his work itself. But we had made his style look ridiculous; and by that time, after *Dark Laughter*, when he had reached the point where he should have stopped writing, he had to defend that style at all costs because he too must have known by then in his heart that there was nothing else left....

He was a sentimentalist in his attitude toward people, and quite incorrect about them. He believed in people, but it was as though only in theory. He expected the worst from them, even while each time he was prepared again to be disappointed or even hurt, as if it had never happened before, as though the only people he could really trust, let himself go with, were the ones of his own invention, the figments and symbols of his own fumbling dream. And he was sometimes a sentimentalist in his writing (so was Shakespeare sometimes) but he was never impure in it. He never scanted it, cheapened it, took the easy way; never failed to approach writing except with humility and an almost religious, almost abject faith and patience and willingness to surrender, relinquish himself to and into it. He hated glibness; if it were quick, he believed it was false too. He told me once: 'You've got too much talent. You can do it too easy, in too many different ways. If you're not careful, you'll never write anything.'...

In the later years when he finally probably admitted to himself that only the style was left, he worked so hard and so laboriously and so self-sacrificingly at this, that at times he stood a little bigger, a little taller than it was. He was warm, generous, merry and fond of laughing, without pettiness and jealous only of the integrity which he believed to be absolutely necessary in anyone who approached his craft; he was ready to be generous to anyone, once he was convinced that that one approached his craft with his own humility and respect for it. I gradually became aware that here was a man who would be in seclusion all forenoon—working. Then in the afternoon he would appear and we would walk about the city, talking. Then in the evening we would meet again, with a bottle now, and now he would really talk...So I began a novel, *Soldier's Pay*. I had known Mrs. Anderson before I knew him....She said, 'Sherwood says he'll make a swap with you. He says that if he doesn't have to read it, he'll tell Liveright (Horace Liveright: his own publisher) to take it.' 'Done,' I said, and that was all.

Liveright published the book and I saw Anderson only once more, because the unhappy caricature affair had happened in the meantime and he declined to see me, for several years, until one afternoon at a cocktail party in New York; and again there was that moment when he appeared taller, bigger than anything he ever wrote. Then I remembered *Winesburg, Ohio* and *The Triumph of the Egg* and some of the pieces in *Horses and Men*, and I knew that I had seen, was looking at, a giant in an earth populated to a great—too great—extent by pygmies, even if he did make but the two or perhaps three gestures commensurate with gianthood.

He probably didn't have a concept of a cosmos in miniature which Balzac and Dickens had, that all he knew was this single man who was humble and ignorant and dreamed better than he was afraid he might ever reach...He knew too little about people, he wasn't interested in people in the way a writer's got to be...He don't have to like people at all, he can loathe people, but he's got to be interested in them, and Anderson didn't know people, he was afraid of people.

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