ANALYSIS

THE STYLE OF WILLIAM FAULKNER

(1897-1962)

"This cheerful little fable is filtered through the medium of a style peculiar to Mr. Faulkner. It seems peculiar to me, too. First, we have the Non-Stop or Life Sentence. The first two and a half pages of *Absalom, Absalom!* consists of seven sentences, composed of 123, 155, 9 (something wrong here), 146, 66, 93, and 135 words respectively. Average: 104. To penetrate Mr. Faulkner's sentences is like hacking your way through a jungle. The path closes up at once behind you, and in no time at all you find yourself entangled in a luxuriant mass of modifiers, qualifications, and other indications of a Great Style. All of Mr. Faulkner's shuddery inventions pale in horrendousness before the mere notion of parsing him.

After the Life Sentence comes the Far Fetch, or Hypertrope. Very few things in the book remain themselves. Each one reminds Mr. Faulkner of something else. 'Her legs hung…clear of the floor with that air of impotent and static rage like children's feet.' See it? No? Join me at the foot of the class, where you belong."

Clifton Fadiman
"Faulkner, Extra-Special, Double-Distilled"
New Yorker (31 October 1936)

"Small wonder if even the most passionate of Mr. Faulkner's admirers—among whom the present writer honors himself by enlisting—must find, with each new novel, that the first fifty pages are always the hardest, that each time one must learn all over again *how* to read this strangely fluid and slippery and heavily mannered prose, and that one is even, like a kind of Laocoon, sometimes tempted to give it up….

OVERELABORATE

In short, Mr. Faulkner's style, though often brilliant and always interesting, is all too frequently downright bad; and it has inevitably offered an all-too-easy mark for the sharpshooting of such alert critics as Mr. Wyndham Lewis. But if it is easy enough to make fun of Mr. Faulkner's obsessions for particular words, or his indifference and violence to them, or the parrotlike mechanical mytacism (for it is really like a stammer) with which he will go on endlessly repeating such favorites as 'myriad, sourceless, impalpable, outrageous, risible, profound,' there is nevertheless something more to be said for his passion for overelaborate sentence structure.

Overelaborate they certainly are, baroque and involuted in the extreme, these sentences trailing clauses, one after another, shadowily in apposition, or perhaps not even with so much connection as that; parenthesis after parenthesis, the parenthesis itself often containing one or more parenthesis—they remind one of those brightly colored Chinese eggs of one's childhood, which when opened disclosed egg after egg, each smaller and subtler than the last. It is as if Mr. Faulkner, in a sort of hurried despair, had decided to try to tell us everything, absolutely everything, every last origin or source or quality or qualification, and every possible future or permutation as well, in one terrifically concentrated effort: each sentence to be, as it were, a microcosm. And it must be admitted that the practice is annoying and distracting.

IMMERSION

It is annoying, at the end of a sentence, to find that one does not know in the least what was the subject of the verb that dangles *in vacuo*—it is distracting to have to go back and sort out the meaning, track down the structure from clause to clause, then only to find that after all it doesn't much matter, and that the obscurity was perhaps neither subtle nor important. And to the extent that one is annoyed and distracted, and does thus go back and work it out, it may be at once added that Mr. Faulkner has defeated his own ends. One has hand, of course, to emerge from the stream, and to step away from it, in order properly to see

it; and as Mr. Faulkner works precisely by a process of *immersion*, of hypnotizing his reader into *remaining immersed* in his stream, this occasional blunder produces irritation and failure.

WITHHELD MEANING

Nevertheless, despite the blunders, and despite the bad habits and the willful bad writing (and willful it obviously is), the style as a whole is extraordinarily effective; the reader *does* remain immersed, *wants* to remain immersed, and it is interesting to look into the reasons for this. And at once, if one considers these queer sentences not simply by themselves, as monsters of grammar or awkwardness, but in their relation to the book as a whole, one sees a functional reason and necessity for their being as they are. They parallel in a curious and perhaps inevitable way, and not without aesthetic justification, the whole elaborate method of *deliberately withheld meaning*, of progressive and partial and delayed disclosure, which so often gives the characteristic shape to the novels themselves. It is a persistent offering of obstacles, a calculated system of screens and obtrusions, of confusions and ambiguous interpolations and delays, with one express purpose; and that purpose is simply to keep the form—and the idea—fluid and unfinished, still in motion, as it were, and unknown, until the dropping into place of the very last syllable.

CONTINUUM

What Mr. Faulkner is after, in a sense, is a *continuum*. He wants a medium without stops or pauses, a medium which is always *of the moment*, and of which the passage from moment to moment is as fluid and undetectable as in the life itself which he is purporting to give. It is all inside and underneath, or as seen from within and below; the reader must therefore be steadily *drawn* in; he must be powerfully and unremittingly hypnotized inward and downward to that image-stream; and this suggests, perhaps, a reason not only for the length and elaborateness of the sentence structure, but for the repetitiveness as well. The repetitiveness, and the steady iterative emphasis—like a kind of chanting or invocation—on certain relatively abstract words ('sonorous, latin, *vaguely* eloquent'), have the effect at last of producing, for Mr. Faulkner, a special language, a conglomerate of his own, which he uses with an astonishing virtuosity, and which, although in detailed analysis it may look shoddy, is actually for his purpose a life stream of almost miraculous adaptability. At the one extreme it is abstract, cerebral, time-and-space-obsessed, tortured and twisted, but nevertheless always with a living *pulse* in it; and at the other it can be as overwhelming in its simple vividness, its richness in the actual, as the flood scenes in *The Wild Palms.*

THEME IN FORM

Obviously, such a style, especially when allied with such a concern for method, must make difficulties for the reader; and it must be admitted that Mr. Faulkner does little or nothing as a rule to make his highly complex 'situation' easily available or perceptible. The reader must simply make up his mind to go to work, and in a sense to cooperate; his reward being that there is a situation to be given shape, a meaning to be extracted, and that half the fun is precisely in watching the queer, difficult, and often so laborious evolution of Mr. Faulkner's idea. And not so much idea, either, as form. For, like the great predecessor whom at least in this regard he so oddly resembles, Mr. Faulkner could say with Henry James that it is practically impossible to make any real distinction between theme and form."

Conrad Aiken
"William Faulkner: The Novel as Form"
The Atlantic Monthly
(November 1939) 650-54

"Half the time we are swimming under water, holding our breath and straining our eyes to read off the meaning of submarine phenomena, unable to tell fact from figure, to fix the reference of pronouns, or distinguish between guess and uncertainty. From time to time we come to the surface, gasping, to breathe the air of concrete fact and recorded truth, only to go foundering again the next moment through crashing waves of doubt and speculation."

Joseph Warren Beach
American Fiction: 1920-1940 (1941)
quoted by Frederick J. Hoffman

Introduction (1960), *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*
(Harcourt/Harbinger 1963) 23

"No other contemporary American novelist of comparable stature has been as frequently or as severely criticized for his style than has William Faulkner. Yet he is a brilliantly original and versatile stylist. The condemnations of his way of writing have been in part just; but the most idolatrous of Faulkner's admirers must have wished he had blotted a thousand infelicities. However, an enumeration of his faults in style would leave still unsaid the most important things about his style. There is need here for a reapportionment of negative and positive criticism.

DEVELOPMENT

It is true that the preponderant excellences of Faulkner's prose, when recognized, make his faults all the more conspicuous and irritating. And under criticism Faulkner has not only remained guilty of occasional carelessness, especially in sentence construction, but seems to have persisted in mannerisms. On the other hand, his progress as a stylist has been steady and rapid; his third novel, *Sartoris*, while still experimenting toward a technique, was a notable advance over his first two in style as well as in theme and narrative structure, and in his fourth novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, style is what it has continued to be in all his subsequent work, a significant factor, masterfully controlled. This growth has been made largely without the aid of appreciative criticism, and in the face of some misunderstanding and abuse of the most dynamic qualities in his writing. It is quite possible that Faulkner would have paid more attention to the critics' valid objections if these had not been so frequently interlarded with misconceptions of his stylistic method, or indeed complete insensitivity to it.

REPETITION

Repetition of words, for instance, has often seemed an obvious fault. At times, however, Faulkner's repetitions may be a not unjustifiable by-product of his thematic composition. Some of his favorites in *Absalom, Absalom!*—not just Miss Rosa's 'demon,' which may be charged off to her own mania, nor 'indolent' applied to Bon, but such recurrent terms as effluvium, outrage, grim, indomitable, ruthless, fury, fatality—seem to intend adumbration of the tale's whole significance and tone. Nor is the reiteration as frequent or as obvious here as in earlier books; perhaps Faulkner has been making an experiment over which he is increasingly gaining control.

NEOLOGISMS

Faulkner often piles up words in a way that brings the charge of prolixity. He has Wilbourne say of his life with Charlotte in Chicago: 'It was the mausoleum of love, it was the stinking catafalque of the dead corpse borne between the olfactoryless walking shapes of the immortal unsentient demanding ancient meat.' However, these word-series, while conspicuous at times, may have a place in a style as minutely analytical as Faulkner's. In their typical form they are not redundant, however elaborate, and sometimes their cumulative effect is undeniable—for example, the 'long still hot weary dead September afternoon' when Quentin listens to Miss Rosa's story. Colonel Feinman, the wealthy exploiter of impecunious aviators, has as secretary 'a young man, sleek, in horn rim glasses,' who spoke 'with a kind of silken insolence, like the pampered intelligent hateridden eunuch mountebank of an eastern despot,' and here the amplification redounds to the significance of the whole scene. Quite often, too, these series of words, while seemingly extravagant, are a remarkably compressed rendering, as in the phrase 'passionate tragic ephemeral loves of adolescence.'

PROFUSENESS

In fairness it must be noted too that Faulkner's later work never drops to the level of fantastic verbosity found in the thematic paragraph introducing his second novel, *Mosquitoes*. Nor does he any longer break the continuum of his narrative with rhapsodies like the notable description of the mule in *Sartoris*, a sort of cadenza obviously done out of exuberance. In the later books profuseness of language is always knit into the thematic structure. Thus the elaborate lyrical descriptions of the sunrise and of a spring rain in book three of *The Hamlet* furnish by their imagery and mood a sharp, artistically serviceable contrast to the perversion of the idiot Ike Snopes, and as such they deepen the melancholy perspective from which this episode is observed.

ELABORATION

Faulkner's studied use of a full style and his sense of its place in the architectonics of an extended and affecting narrative is well displayed in the last chapters of *Light in August*, chapter nineteen closing with the first climax, of Joe Christmas' death, poetically expressed; chapter twenty closing similarly in the second and more comprehensive climax of Hightower's final vision; and then chapter twenty-one, which completes the book, furnishing a modulation to detached calm through the simply prosaic, somewhat humorous account, by a new and neutral spokesman, of the exodus of Lena and Byron into Tennessee. Indeed, one of the best indexes to the degree of Faulkner's control of eloquence is in a comparison of the novels' conclusions—some of them in a full descriptive style, as in *Soldier's Pay, Sartoris, Sanctuary,* and to a degree in *The Sound and the Fury* and *The Unvanquished*; more of the novels closing with a meaningful but plainly stated utterance or gesture of a character, as in *Mosquitoes, As I Lay Dying, Pylon, Absalom, Absalom!, The Wild Palms,* and *The Hamlet*—(the last that wonderful 'Snopes turned his head and spat over the wagon wheel. He jerked the reins slightly. 'Come up,' he said.') This ratio suggests that while Faulkner does not avoid elaboration, neither is he its slave.

DICTION

Faulkner's diction, charged and proliferate though it may be, usually displays a nice precision, and this is especially evident in its direct imagery. An example is in the glimpse of Cash, after he has worked all night in the rain, finishing his mother's coffin: 'In the lantern light his face is calm, musing; slowly he strokes his hands on his raincoated thighs in a gesture deliberate, final and composed.' Frequently, however, Faulkner proceeds in descriptive style beyond epithet and abstract definition to figurative language. Having written: 'It is just dawn: that gray and lonely suspension filled with the peaceful and tentative waking of birds,' he goes on in the next sentence to a simile: 'The air, inbreathed, is like spring water.'

IMAGINATIVE COMPARISONS

The novels abound in examples of his talent for imaginative comparisons; for instance, the bard-boiled flier Shumann, dressed up: 'He wore a new gray homburg hat, not raked like in the department store cuts but set square on the back of his head so that (not tall, with blue eyes in a square thin profoundly sober face) he looked out not from beneath it but from within with open and fated humorlessness, like an early Briton who has been assured that the Roman governor will not receive him unless he wear the borrowed centurion's helmet.'

LYRICAL EMBROIDERY

There is nothing unique, however, in Faulkner's use of direct and forceful diction or fine figurative image. What is most individual in his style is its persistent lyrical embroidery and coloring, in extended passages, of the narrative theme. In this sense, Faulkner is one of the most subjective of writers, his brooding temperament constantly probing and interpreting his subject matter. Thus his full style is comprehensive in its intention. He may often be unfashionably rhapsodic, but he seldom falls into the preciosity that lingers over a passage for its own sweet sake. Definition of his story as a whole and the enhancement of its immediate appeals to the imagination are his constant aims.

MULTIFORM STYLE

The latest of Faulkner's novels demonstrates the grasp he has developed upon all the devices of his style. *The Hamlet* is a sort of prose fantasia; the various episodes employ colloquial tall stories, poetic description, folk humor, deliberate reflective narration, swift cryptic drama, and even a grotesque allegory, of Snopes in hell. Differing in tone from the elegiac brooding of *Light in August,* or the exasperated volubility of *Pylon*, the modulant intricacy of *The Unvanquished,* or the eloquent turbulence of *The Wild Palms, The Hamlet* seems an extravaganza improvised more freely in a more detached mood, the author apparently delighting in the realization of varied subject-matters through the flexibilities of his multiform style.

PURPOSE

A number of passages in *The Hamlet* give precise indications of Faulkner's purpose as a stylist, inasmuch as they are reworkings of material released as short stories in magazines from four to nine years before the novel's publication. 'Spotted Horses,' which appeared in *Scribner's* for June, 1931, contains in germ Flem Snopes' whole career in *The Hamlet*. The story is in first person; Ratliff is the reciter, but he is not quite the shrewd and benevolent spectator he becomes under the touches of Faulkner's own descriptions in the third-person narrative of the novel. The short story moves faster, of course, pitching the drama more broadly and making no pause for brooding lyrical interpretation. Faulkner's omniscient narration of the episode is almost twice as long as Ratliff's simple monologue, and rises to an altogether different plane of conception and diction. The contrast is almost like that between a ballad and a tone poem.

This difference, which certainly must indicate Faulkner's free and considered choice and his fundamental aesthetic inclination, can be defined by a comparison of parallel passages from the horse-auction scene, when the Texan tries to hold one of the animals and continue his sales talk….In the novel the parallel passage has been recast in the third person….Obviously the difference is not only quantitative but qualitative. Instead of Ratliff's 'that old two-gallon hat come sailing out like a fat old hen crossing a fence' there is Faulkner's 'the broad clay-colored hat soared deliberately outward'; Ratliff sees 'that ere Texas man's bootheels like a couple of walnuts on two strings,' but Faulkner shows a 'kaleidoscope of inextricable and incredible violence on the periphery of which the metal clasps of the Texan's suspenders sun-glinted in ceaseless orbit with terrific slowness across the lot.' This latter represents the style Faulkner has chosen to develop; he can do the simpler and more objective narration, but when given such an opportunity as in the amalgamating of these magazine stories into a novel, he insists on transmuting the factual-objective into the descriptive-definitive colored by his imagination and elaborated by his resourcefulness in language. In his typical exercise this style gives image only incidentally and exists primarily to enhance and sustain mood….This organic quality of Faulkner's style, sustaining through essentially poetic devices an orchestration of meaning, makes it impossible to judge him adequately by brief quotation….

REALISTIC COLLOQUIALISM

Yet side by side with this richly interpretive style there exists in almost all of Faulkner's work a realistic colloquialism, expressing lively dialogue that any playwright might envy, and even carrying over into sustained first-person narrative the flavor of regionalism and the idiosyncrasies of character. In the colloquial vein Faulkner's brilliance is unsurpassed in contemporary American fiction. He has fully mastered the central difficulty, to retain verisimilitude while subjecting the prolix and monotonous raw material of most natural speech to an artistic pruning and pointing up. *Sanctuary*, for example, is full of excellent dialogue, sharply individualized. And Faulkner's latest book [*The Hamlet*] not only contains some of his most poetic writing but has one of his best talkers, Ratliff, both in extended anecdote in monologue and in dramatic conversations. Ratliff's reflective, humorous, humane, but skeptical nature, a triumph in characterization, is silhouetted largely out of his talk about the hamlet's affairs.

Faulkner also can weave colloquial bits into the matrix of a more literary passage, with the enlarging effect of a controlled dissonance. Thus Quentin imagines Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon, at the end of the war, Charles determined to marry Judith, Henry forbidding; and then into Quentin's elaboration of the scene breaks the voice of his father, continuing the story, giving its denouement in the words vulgarly uttered by Wash Jones….'Henry has done shot that durn French feller. Kilt him dead as a beef'…His chief concern, though, is with a lyric encompassment of his narrative's whole meaning rather than with the reticences of objective dramatic representation.

BLENDED VOICES

Thus many of his characters speak with the tongues of themselves and of William Faulkner. As Quentin and his Harvard roommate Shreve evolve the reconstruction of Thomas Sutpen's story which constitutes the second half of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Quentin thinks when Shreve talks, 'He sounds just like father,' and later, when Quentin has the floor, Shreve interrupts with 'Don't say it's just me that sounds like your old man,' which certainly shows that Faulkner realizes what he is doing. Actually he does make some

differences among these voices: Miss Rosa rambles and ejaculates with erratic spinsterish emotion, Mr. Compson is elaborately and sometimes parenthetically ironic, Quentin is most sensitively imaginative and melancholy, Shreve most detached and humorous. What they have in common is the scope and pitch of an almost lyrical style which Faulkner has arbitrarily fixed upon for an artistic instrument. The justification of all such practices is empirical; imaginative writing must not be judged by its minute correspondence to fact but by its total effect; and to object against Faulkner's style that men and women don't really talk in such long sentences, with so full a vocabulary so fancifully employed, is as narrowly dogmatic as was Sinclair Lewis in *Main Street*, insisting that Sir Lancelot didn't actually speak in 'honeyed pentameters.'

ARTICULATION

Typical instances of Faulkner's endowing his characters with precise diction and fluency may show that on the whole it is not an unacceptable convention. Thus Wilbourne's full and finished sentence, 'We lived in an apartment that wasn't bohemian, it wasn't even a tabloid love-nest, it wasn't even in that part of town but in a neighborhood dedicated by both city ordinance and architecture to the second year of wedlock among the five-thousand-a-year bracket,' though it is not stylistically rooted in his manner as characterized up to this point, is not inconsistent with his personality and sensibilities, and it does get on with the story. Equally acceptable is Ratliff's remark about the platitudinous family-fleeing I. O. Snopes, 'What's his name? That quick-fatherer, the Moses with his mouth full of mottoes and his coat-tail full of them already half-grown retroactive sons?'

ELEVATED LANGUAGE

Its keen diction and nice rhythm are not essentially false to Ratliff, but only an idealization in language of the percipient humorous sewing-machine salesman the reader already knows. The same is true of those tumbling floods of phrases, too prolonged for human breath to utter, with which the reporter in *Pylon* assaults the sympathies of editor Hagood; they are not so much a part of dialogue as an intense symbol of the pace of racing aviation and the reporter's frantic concern for his proteges among the fliers.

It is interesting to note that Faulkner's full style somewhat resembles older literary uses, such as the dramatic chorus, the prologue and epilogue, and the *dramatis personnae* themselves in soliloquy and extended speech. The aim of any such device is not objective realism but revelation of theme, a revelation raised by the unstinted resourcefulness and power of its language to the highest ranges of imaginative outlook. No wonder that with such a purpose Faulkner often comes closer than is common in these times to Shakespeare's imperial and opulent use of words. If unfortunately his ambition has sometimes led Faulkner to perpetrate some rather clotted prose, perhaps these lapses may be judged charitably in the light of the great endeavor they but infrequently flaw.

DESCRIPTIVE IMAGERY

More particularly Faulkner's full sentence structure springs from the elaborateness of his fancies ramifying in descriptive imagery. Thus editor Hagood, perpetually beset by small annoyances and chronically irritated by them, drops himself wearily into his roadster's low seat, '…whereupon without sound or warning the golfbag struck him across the head and shoulder with an apparently calculated and lurking viciousness, emitting a series of dry clicks as though produced by the jaws of a beast domesticated though not tamed, half in fun and half in deadly seriousness, like a pet shark.'

MUSING SPECULATION

Another typical source of fullness in Faulkner's sentences is a tendency to musing speculation, sometimes proceeding to the statement of alternative suggestions. Thus Miss Rosa speaks of wearing garments left behind by the eloping aunt in 'kindness or haste or oversight,' that doing its bit in a sentence well over three hundred words long….Even the most elaborate and esoteric of these speculations are not limited to third-person narrative; Faulkner's pervasive subjectivity injects such abstractions too, as well as extended imagery, into the reflections and speech of many of his characters, again most typically those who contemplate and interpret the action of the stories, who act as chorus or soliloquize. Here too the device proves itself in practice. When such characters brood over the events, painstakingly rehearsing details,

piling one hypothesis upon another, their very tentativeness creates for the reader the clouded enigmatic perspective of reality itself. Thus Miss Rosa's account, with reinterpretation imposed upon memory, of Sutpen's driving in to church with his family….

EXTREME ECCENTRICITY

The foregoing examples, however, do not illustrate Faulkner's style at its most involved, as in this passage from Quentin's consciousness, while he listens to Miss Rosa's reconstruction of the Sutpen family history: 'It should have been later than it was; it should have been late, yet the yellow slashes of mote-palpitant sunlight were latticed no higher up the impalpable wall of gloom which separated them; the sun seemed hardly to have moved. It (the talking, the telling) seemed (to him, to Quentin) to partake of that logic- and reason-flouting quality of a dream which the sleeper knows must have occurred, stillborn and complete, in a second, yet the very quality upon which it must depend to move the dreamer (verisimilitude) to credulity—horror or pleasure or amazement—depends as completely upon a formal recognition of and acceptance of elapsed and yet-elapsing time as music or a printed tale.'

By its parenthesis and involution and fullness this last sentence illustrates that occasionally extreme eccentricity most often and most rightfully objected to in its author's style. At the same time this sentence may give a key to Faulkner's entire method and typify its artistic purposefulness—to create 'that logic- and reason-flouting quality of a dream,' yet to depend upon the recognized verisimilitude of 'elapsed and yet-elapsing time.' Such a product is not necessarily mere nightmare; it is often a real quality of experience at its greatest intensity and acuteness. In his most characteristic writing Faulkner is trying to render the transcendent life of the mind, the crowded composite of associative and analytical consciousness which expands the vibrant moment into the reaches of all time, simultaneously observing, remembering, interpreting, and modifying the object of its awareness. To this end the sentence as a rhetorical unit (however strained) is made to hold diverse yet related elements in a sort of saturated solution, which is perhaps the nearest that language as the instrument of fiction can come to the instantaneous complexities of consciousness itself. Faulkner really seems to be trying to give narrative prose another dimension.

DREAMLIKE

To speak of Faulkner's fiction as dream-like (using Quentin's notion as a key) does not imply that his style is phantasmagoric, deranged, or incoherent. Dreams are not always delirium; and association, sometimes the supplanter of pattern, can also be its agent. The dreaming mind, while envisaging experience strangely, may find in that strangeness a fresh revelation, all the more profound in that the conventional and adventitious are pierced through. Similarly inhibitions and apathies must be transcended in any really imaginative inquiry, and thus do Faulkner's speculative characters ponder over the whole story, and project into cumulative drama its underlying significations. Behind all of them, of course, is their master-dreamer; Faulkner's own dominating temperament, constantly interpreting, is in the air of all these narratives, reverberant. Hence no matter how psychological the story's material, Faulkner never falls into the mere enumeration which in much stream-of-consciousness writing dissolves all drama and reduces the narrative to a case history without the shaping framework of analysis, or even to an unmapped anachronistic chaos of raw consciousness. Faulkner is always a dynamic story-teller, never just a reporter of unorganized phenomena. His most drastic, most dream-like use of stream-of-consciousness, for instance, in *The Sound and the Fury,* is not only limited to the first two sections of the book, but it sketches a plot which in the lucid sections that follow gradually emerges clearcut.

KALEIDOSCOPIC

As clear-cut, at least, as Faulkner's stories can be. Here again is illustrated the close relation of his style to his while point of view. If Faulkner's sentences sometimes soar and circle involved and prolonged, if his scenes become halls of mirrors repeating tableaux in a progressive magnification, if echoes multiply into the dissonance of infinite overtones, it is because the meanings his stories unfold are complex, mysterious, obscure, and incomplete. There is no absolute, no eternal pure white radiance in such presentations, but rather the stain of many colors, refracted and shifting in kaleidoscopic suspension, about the center of

man's enigmatic behavior and fate, within the drastic orbit of mortality. Such being Faulkner's view of life, such is his style.

RHYTHM

To this view the very rhythm of Faulkner's prose is nicely adjusted. It is not emphatic; rather it is a slow prolonged movement, nothing dashing, even at its fullest flood, but surging with an irresistible momentum. His effects insofar as they depend on prose rhythms are never staccato, they are cumulative rather than abrupt. Such a prose rhythm supplements the contributions of full vocabulary and lengthy sentence toward suspension rather than impact, and consequently toward deep realization rather than quick surprise. And the prolonged even murmur of Faulkner's voice throughout his pages is an almost hypnotic induction into those detailed and darkly colored visions of life which drift across the horizons of his imagination like clouds—great yet vaporous, changing yet enduring, unearthly yet of common substance.

DRAMATIC PERCEPTION

It might be supposed that his occasionally crowded and circumlocutory style would destroy narrative pace and consequence. Actually this hovering of active imagination, while employing the sustained lyricism and solid abstraction which differentiates Faulkner from the objective realist, furnishes the epitome of drama. The whole aim is at perspective, through the multiple dimensions of experience, upon a subject in that suspension which allows reflection. The accomplishment is the gradual, sustained, and enriched revelation of meaning; in Faulkner's novels drama is of that highest form which awaits the unfolding of composite action, characterization, mood, and idea, through the medium of style.

NARRATIVE METHOD

Faulkner's whole narrative method, as described, may seem to be a retrogression in technique. Two main tendencies in modern fiction have been [1] toward a more and more material dramatic presentation, depending simply upon the naming of objects and acts and the reporting of speech, and on the other hand, [2] toward an ostensibly complete and unbroken reproduction of the free flow of consciousness. These methods have produced books as radically different as *The Sun Also Rises* and *Ulysses,* yet they have elements in common. In both types the author attempts to conceal himself completely behind his materials, to give them the quality of integral phenomena, and in line with this purpose the style aims at pure reproduction, never allowing definition and interpretation from any detached point of view.

These have been honest attempts, a great deal of fine craftsmanship has gone into them, and some of the products have been excellent in their kind. Yet at their most extreme these have been movements in the one direction toward bareness, impoverishment, and in the other toward incoherence. Confronted by the imperfections and confusions of the present scene, and made hyperskeptical by deference to scientific methods, the writers who have attempted absolute objectivity (whether dramatic or psychological, whether in over event or stream of association) have sometimes produced what looks like an anti-intellectual aesthetic of futility and inconsequence. So in another sense Faulkner's narrative technique, particularly as implemented by his full style, instead of being a retrogression may represent one kind of progression through the danger of impasse created by too great submission to vogues of photographic or psychographic reproduction.

HEMINGWAY AND JOYCE

Yet Faulkner's is not altogether a return to an older expressiveness, not a complete departure from the modern schools of Hemingway and Joyce. In his colloquial passages he is quite as objectively dramatic as the one, in his rehearsal of the fantasies of acute consciousness he follows the other—and it should be remembered that he is superlatively skillful at both, so that it cannot be said that he puts these objective methods aside because he cannot use them. Furthermore, Faulkner is fond of employing in extended passages one of the favorite modern means of objectivity in fiction, the first-person narrator, using the device toward its most honored modern purpose, the attainment of detached perspective and the creation of realistic illusion concerning large vistas of the story.

SYNTHESIS

In short, there is not a method in modern fiction which Faulkner does not comprehend and use on occasion. Fundamentally, Faulkner's only heterodoxy by present standards of style is his fullness, especially as it takes the form of descriptive eloquence or abstraction and definitiveness. What is stylistically most remarkable in his work is the synthesis he has effected between [1] the subtleties of modern narrative techniques and [2] the resources of language employed in the traditionally poetic or interpretive vein. That such a synthesis is feasible is demonstrated in the dynamic forms of his novels, and it may be prelude to significant new developments in the methods of fiction."

Warren Beck
"William Faulkner's Style"
American Prefaces (Spring 1941) 195-211
reprinted in *William Faulkner: Two Decades of Criticism*
eds. Frederick J. Hoffman & Olga W. Vickery
(Michigan State 1954) 147-64

"In the end one must always return to Faulkner's language and his conception of style, for his every character and observation are lost in the spool of his rhetoric, and no more than they can he ever wind himself free. That rhetoric—perhaps the most elaborate, polyphonic rhetoric in all American writing—explains why he always plays as great a role in his novels as any of his characters to the point of acting out their characters in himself; why he has so often appeared to be a Laocoon writing in all the outrageous confusions of the ineffable; why he has been able, correlating the South with every imagined principle and criticism of existence, writing in many styles, to project every possible shade or extremity of character, and to persuade us of none.

In one sense, of course, Faulkner has sought to express the inexpressible, to attain that which is basically incoherent in the novel and analogous only to the most intense mysticism in poetry, where sensations contract and expand like tropical flowers. Yet his novels are not poetry or even 'poetic'; they are linked together by a sensational lyricism, itself forever gasping for breath…What one sees always in Faulkner's rhetoric, with its pseudo-classical epithets and invertebrate grandeur, its inherent violence, is the effort of a writer to impose himself upon that which he cannot create simply and evocatively….With all its occasional felicity and stabbing appropriateness of phrase, Faulkner's style is a discursive fog, and it is not strange…that his extremities should seem intimations of grandeur and the darkness within which his characters move an atmosphere of genuine tragedy."

Alfred Kazin
On Native Grounds
(Doubleday/Anchor 1942, 1956) 358

"Added to these narrative peculiarities are the purely stylistical ones: the lavish use of epithets ('the long still hot weary dead September afternoon…' in the second sentence of *Absalom*) and the immoderate length of sentences, laden with subordinate clauses, which bewilder and overwhelm the reader. (Proust is short-winded compared to Faulkner.) Take, for example, the six-page sentence of 'The Bear' in *Go Down, Moses* which contains a two-page parenthesis to boot, or the long, confusing sentence in Caddy-Candace's biography in the appendix to *The Sound and the Fury*, supposedly written to clarify events occurring in the last part of the novel….Like Mallarme, Faulkner seems to have been stubbornly bent upon injecting a little more obscurity into a reality which appeared to him too orderly and not chaotic enough."

Claude-Edmonde Magny
"Faulkner or Theological Inversion"
L'Age du Roman Americain
trans. Jacqueline Merriam
(Paris: Editions du Seuil 1948) 196-243

"Much has been said about the extremes of obscurity and the unnecessary complication of [the] language, and there is undoubtedly some truth in the suggestion that Faulkner suffered from his isolation from fellow-workers in the craft. The excesses of Faulkner's style are perhaps most unfortunately seen in

the way in which the texture of his prose of *Intruder in the Dust* violates the context of that novel. But there is no question of the general effectiveness of his style; it is not designed to make simple facts obscure but to give honestly the sub-surface complexities of his subjects."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Modern Novel in America
(Regnery Gateway 1951-63) 178

"Faulkner's imagery…is fairly well limited to the following uses, which may be summarized thus: (1) for developing tone through ironical contrasts, and atmosphere through a pathetic fallacy coloring of the natural background; (2) for introducing flashbacks and antecedent exposition; (3) for describing characters; (4) for carrying significant parts of the main narrative itself; (5) for unifying the main narrative through structural refrains; (6) for relating the chaotic world of appearances to what Faulkner considers the equally chaotic cosmic realm; and, finally (7) for embodying the very bitter satire which seems inspired by his comprehensive pessimistic philosophy. Some parts of his imagery, to be sure, fail to perform any of these functions well, but far more frequent are the metaphorical passages which have contributed in a significant way to his becoming, not a great poet, but a great poetic artist in prose fiction."

Harry Modean Campbell and Ruel E. Foster
William Faulkner: A Critical Appraisal
(U Oklahoma 1951) 40

"The trouble is that many of Faulkner's devices seem only to prevent the story from getting itself told. I know it is the thesis of some of his more fanatical admirers that a bad sentence is not a bad sentence when he writes it, but I cannot believe that such indulgence will really serve Faulkner's needs in the long run or that he himself could be content to survive as the darling of a coterie. The truth is that when he is at his worst Faulkner's style is barbarous—barbarous in its abundant solecisms, barbarous in its intolerable purple passages, and barbarous, most of all, in its unending, anaconda-like involutions. That it is at the same time the style of a man of genius I freely grant, but this does not cancel out the barbarisms."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 424-25

"The language, the 'metaphysical' style of the writer, perhaps decadent, is indefensible from the point of view of correctness or of clarity, but it is marvelously proper for showing the unity of an interior and a qualitative world. As for this vision reality is perhaps only the concrete vesture of ideas, similarly in the style, these concrete details are united to abstractions, in the most singular combinations, and lend them a strange life; one recalls the 'succession of creak-wheeled and limpeared avatars' of Lena. In the same spirit Cash the carpenter is making Addie's coffin, 'sawing the long hot yellow days up into planks and nailing them to something…'

If finally ideas and representations are what make up the human world (as the 'metaphysicals' thought), there is no separation between the most concrete, the most physical of sensations and abstractions of all degrees; inversely, none of all this concreteness is simply 'physical' or 'material,' and cosmic relations are implied in every sensation. In all that is abstract, everything is charged with the physical, the immediate; in all concrete particulars, everything is charged with the highest abstractions; and the extraordinary range of Faulknerian adjectives describes this arc. No vain conceit, no affection is implied by Faulkner when he writes in *Pylon* of the new aerodrome…built upon the mud of a lagoon, as 'the flat triangle of land, reconquered and tortured, restored by the slow violence of machines to the air and to the flickering of the light...' Here William Faulkner moves into the company of Sir Thomas Browne."

Jean-Jacques Mayoux
"The Creation of the Real in William Faulkner"
Etudes Anglaises
trans. Frederick J. Hoffman
(February 1952) 25-39

"We must speak of the famous Faulkner style which has a tendency toward obscurity, if not unintelligibility. Is he obeying an artistic impulse, or is it merely an instinct for reserve that causes him to swathe his thought in the artifices of form? Both, probably. About fifteen years ago in certain literary circles in America, it was thought very admirable that William Faulkner followed no chronology of events in his books, and the reason given for it was that he denied the existence of time, and so could shuffle the time periods at will, or, in telling a story, begin at the end or in the middle. This admiration seems to have outgrown itself, and his apologists seem to have abandoned (in the name of Faulkner) this rather simple philosophy. However, it was neither his eccentricities nor, if I may say so, his somewhat too obvious obscurity, which won him French readers. In this respect, the latter have been spoiled by their own writers, and have been for a long time blasé toward such singularities."

Marcel Ayme
"What French Readers Find in William Faulkner's Fiction"
Highlights of Modern Literature: essays from *The New York Times Book Review*
ed. Francis Brown
(1949; New American Library/Mentor 1954) 104-05

"The prose [in *A Fable*] is written as incantation, in swelling and diminishing monologue; it is filled with purple patches, conceits, epigrams, and lapidary phrases, and those images that paralyze movement but intensify the moment. For Mr. Faulkner's aim, as an historian, is to isolate and freeze each moment of the past or to give each moment of time or experience its final own fatal judgment or epithet. The only criticism we make is the old one: that all Mr. Faulkner's moments have the same intensity."

V. S. Pritchett
"Time Frozen: *A Fable*"
Partisan Review XXI 5
(September-October 1954)

"In *The Sound and the Fury*, four distinct styles are employed, all scrupulously differentiated, and the short stories are a record of endless stylistic experimentation. All the narrators [in *Absalom*] speak in two voices—their own idiom, when engaged in casual conversations with each other, and the highly stylized orations in which they serve as narrators of the legend. (For Quentin, a third style, stream-of-consciousness, is also maintained.) Miss Rosa's decorum as a Southern maiden lady is conveyed in her initial address to Quentin…By means of a few strokes of realistic dialogue, the narrators are established as real; once established, they become the instruments for Faulkner's own poetic formulation of his material. Thus, while we must take each narration in its own terms, making allowance for the disposition of the teller, all the mythologizing is unified by the dominance of a single rhetorical style….

The rhetorical style of *Absalom, Absalom!* is essential to its conception, excessive as it may at times appear when it fails in that perfect felicity in which rhetoric is never questioned. The use of polysyllabics and involved—usually periodic—sentences, while natural to the author, is not a surrender to the line of least resistance. Prefixes and suffixes, especially those containing liquids and nasals in combination with vowels, lend sonorous enrichment; sentence units into which are enfolded a series of phrases and clauses which must be gathered sequentially into the mind before the release of meaning afforded in a final verb, are a means of approximating poetic rhythm in prose medium.

The unceasing flow of language gives the effect, as in *Moby-Dick*, of being tapped under pressure from unconscious or supraconscious sources; the richness of poetic imagery and literary association enlarges its power at every turn. In addition to the allusions already cited, Faulkner echoes familiar lines of deeply tragic import from *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and from A. E. Housman. The intention of heroic enlargement is discernible throughout: Sutpen's wife is a Niobe; Bon is a Lothario, a Lancelot, and a hero out of the Arabian Nights; the young Confederates are the Virgins of Priapus; Sutpen builds "Camelots and Carcassonnes,' and performs "Herculean' labors….

The many memorable utterances, taking for form of maxim-like gems or sustained metaphors, will perhaps remain as the novel's greatest permanent attraction. Miss Rosa's sections particularly reflect this poetizing tendency. Her incisive capsule definitions of hope, defeat, sanity, madness, penury, endurance,

etc., dropped parenthetically into the pauses of her breathless self-justification, are poetry in all but metre. They are reminiscent, in manner as well as idea, of the penetrating formulations of Emily Dickinson. And indeed, the concept of Miss Rosa as a kind of Emily (one is reminded of that cryptic title, 'A Rose for Emily'), may have entered into Faulkner's creation of her: Miss Rosa was the local poetess."

Ilse Dusoir Lind
"The Design and Meaning of *Absalom, Absalom!*"
PMLA (December 1955) 887-912

"Faulkner's complex style may be regarded as consistent with his difficult objective—to keep continuously in focus the immediate character, 'the human heart in conflict,' while evoking that past which is always present with us. His style observes the conventions of a new prose, no more strict or unnatural than the conventions of poetry, and similarly intended to engage the imaginative participation of the reader and to provide a language more subjective and flexible than ordinary prose. This rhetorical convention—the dislocation of logical construction in the free association of images, often apparently, but only apparently, irrelevant to each other—facilitates Faulkner's psychological approach, the projection of events through the memory or consciousness of the character in the form of 'interior monologue.' No doubt Faulkner's style puts a burden on the reader, but whether or not he carries it further than may be necessary for his purposes, it has the effect of music and poetry in requiring active correspondence between the artist and the audience."

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, & E. Hudson Long, eds.
The American Tradition in Literature 2, 3rd edition
(Norton 1956-67) 1363

"Again and again…Faulkner describes objects and events in terms which at once suggest motion and immobility. A large number of wagons, buggies, and engines are described as moving 'without progress' or with an effect of 'nonmotion.' The carcasses of hogs hang 'immobilized by the heels in attitudes of frantic running.' Rosa Coldfield and Clytie face one another: 'I motionless in the attitude and action of running, she rigid in that furious immobility.' Psychological conditions are often similarly rendered….Sound and silence, also, are frequently presented as existing simultaneously…Perhaps the most common physical and psychological conditions presented by Faulkner are ones which simultaneously contain elements of quiescence and turbulence. A flood is likely to exhibit a calm, still surface above its raging currents or to suggest 'fury in itself quiet with stagnation'….

In every Faulkner novel an astonishing number and variety of characters and events are described in oxymoronic or near oxymoronic terms….In *Light in August,* Doc Hines is 'paradoxically rapt and alert at the same time' and has the ability 'to flux instantaneously between complete attention that does not seem to hear, and that comalike bemusement in which the stare of his apparently inverted eye is as uncomfortable as though he held them [his companions] with his hand.' His wife's face is at the same time 'peaceful and terrible' and her attitude is 'at once like a rock and like a crouching beast.' The face of Hightower, with whom the Hineses are talking, is 'at once gaunt and flabby'…Some of Faulkner's oxymorons are brilliant and completely justified by their context; others seem mechanical or excessive…What I wish to emphasize is their remarkable frequency and variety, remarkable even in our contemporary literary environment which prizes paradox and linguistic shock….

Like Faulkner's writing in general, the oxymoron involves sharp polarity, extreme tension, a high degree of conceptual and stylistic antithesis, and the simultaneous suggestion of disparate or opposed elements. Moreover, the figure tends to hold these elements in suspension rather than to fuse them. Both terms of an oxymoron are in a sense true. One's recognition that the contradiction is apparent rather than real does not eliminate the tension between the terms, for the conflicting elements remain. Neither negates the other. The oxymoron, on the one hand, achieves a kind of order, definiteness, and coherence by virtue of the clear and sharp antithesis it involves. On the other, it moves toward disorder and incoherence by virtue of its qualities of irresolution and self-contradiction. Its validity is usually intuitive and emotional rather than logical or intellectual. It does not so much explore or analyze a condition as render it forcefully. Traditionally it has often been used to reflect desperately divided states of mind….

Comparable to [his] mixed metaphors in effect are Faulkner's frequent synesthetic images which may be considered psychological oxymorons. Typical examples are 'dark cool breeze,' 'visibility roaring soundless down about him,' and 'walked out of their talking'….The essential purpose and effect of most of Faulkner's oxymorons, I believe, is not to force the reader to grasp a reality or unity beneath an apparent contradiction but to leave him with the tension of the contradiction itself. We are to feel and to continue to feel, for example, that the struggle between Houston and his wife had in it 'something both illogical and consistent, both reasonable and bizarre."

Walter J. Slatoff
"The Edge of Order: The Pattern of Faulkner's Rhetoric"
Twentieth Century Literature III (1957) 107-27

"Faulkner's digressive, violent lyricism is the resonance of that primitive, unhewn rock of humanity. Images and visions flow into one another, the fantastic mingles with the real, the abstract feeds on the blood of things, the sense fraternize in their joint sovereignty over the world, and objects assume personality. A railway train sweeps wailing through the solitary landscape like a mourning spirit; memories become a peaceful corridor peopled with kind and nameless faces and voices; the taste and scent of the forgotten can never fade from the palate of consciousness….It is the language of complete and authentic realism, enveloping all of reality, rather than that academic realism which mistakes the material, tangible surface of things for the things themselves."

Gunter Blocker
"William Faulkner," *Die Neuen Wirklichkeiten*
trans. Jacqueline Merriam
(Argon Verlag 1958) 112-23

"Just as Faulkner's language is full of words, like 'avatar' and 'outrage,' which are really private symbols left over from his unceasing meditation, and just as his style is formed from the fierce inner pressure of problems which give no solution, so the actual texture of *Light in August* suggests, in the tension and repetition of certain verbal motifs, that man can never quite say what the event originally meant, or what he is to think of it now. Language never quite comes up to the meaning of events…. Faulkner's grim, sarcastic asides show that he views language as in some basic sense unavailing. The astounding repetition of certain key phrases and verbal rhythms in his work signifies his return back and back on the question….[In *Light in August*] memories are endless and the style in which they are described is overcolored in a way that shows how static action often becomes in Faulkner's work, how much it serves as the raw material for reflection, which is why he can lavish so many Joycean compound words on objects which do not seem to move of their own accord, but to be rallying points in Faulkner's tortured concern with guilt."

Alfred Kazin
"The Stillness of *Light in August*"
Twelve Original Essays on Great American Novels
ed. Charles Shapiro
(Wayne State 1958) 257-83

"Faulkner's rhetoric has several sources: it is indebted to Tennyson and to Swinburne, to the elegance of *la fin de siecle,* to the Ciceronian periods of Southern oratory, and to a Southern folk tradition that is anti-grammatical and colorful. Perhaps his major styles can be classified as 'high rhetoric' and as 'folk language.' The two styles meet in *The Hamlet,* and there are varieties of the folk language in most of his books. When people speak of Faulkner's rhetoric, however, they commonly mean the 'high rhetoric.' Millar MacLure…says: 'Faulkner's prose has an archaic sound, like a hunter's horn.' This is the best characterization of it I have read. Faulkner's prose has a nineteenth century quality, it belongs to a different world from the present….

For many writers the paragraph, or the chapter, or even the over-all argument or thesis is the chief unit of composition. For Faulkner the chief unit is the sentence. His ideal, as certain sections in *Requiem for a Nun* suggest, would be a booklength sentence. His public statements and short speeches show that Faulkner is not a gifted expository writer, and he seems incapable of developing a thesis slowly or subtly. Faulkner's sentences evoke, they do not state. Perhaps I should qualify this argument to the extent of saying

the sentence is the chief unit in those books that most depend upon the high style. The parallel phrases, the repetitions, the circling of the subject, or the piling up of adjectives—everything contributes to a self-contained and static world. Faulkner's sentences are spatial rather than analytical….

DEVICES

(1) The long sentence, with colons, semicolons, dashes, and parentheses; (2) the vocabulary that evokes an older morality and a realm of high romance; (3) the allusions to romantic episodes in history and in literature; (4) the sentence that employs a negative or series of negatives followed by a positive; (5) the use of synonyms for the purpose of repetition; (6) a symbolist or poetic extension of the meaning of words; (7) the reaching out for a metaphor or a simile the 'vehicle' of which is foreign to the subject being discussed; (8) breaking with standard grammatical forms; sometimes solecisms; (9) the use of paradox; (10) the piling up of adjectives; (11) the merging of two words into one word; (12) the use of hyphenated words."

William Van O'Connor
"Rhetoric in Southern Writing: Faulkner"
Georgia Review XII:1
(Spring 1958) 83-86

WORDS

"It has not been sufficiently stated…that the mythical quality is produced, also, by the writer's style, deriving from what Wellek and Warren call 'mythic thinking—thinking in poetic vision,' a kind of thinking which drives a writer to the very edge of what language can do. Much of what has been written about Faulkner's style has stressed the involuted sentence patterns. A prime source of his power, however, is his sense of the word—a substantial factor in giving eloquence and mythical quality to his work. Faulkner explores the language: he employs seldom-used words; he coins words when the language seems inadequate; he uses the word as motif and for the accumulative effect of repetition; he dares to use feelingly and freely abstract nouns with strong associational meanings; and in order to increase intensity, which is his key mood, he makes use of negative words of ultimate degree. Faulkner is extremely conscious of words as tools, although he does not trust them….

LOGOS FOR *MYTHOS*

Perhaps it is this distance between the deed and the word, the idea without form and the form which it must take, however imperfectly, which accounts for Faulkner's intensity, his attempt to make words do more than they can do—to find *logos* for *mythos*. It is his distrust of words which makes him critical of rhetoric as a way of life. Two of his characters, in particular, are extraordinarily articulate men—Horace Benbow and Gavin Stevens. Benbow says that he has 'always been ordered by words,' and Faulkner labels him with the phrase 'delicate futility.' Stevens, much given to dialectic, ironically spends his time talking while more practical people—often women, children, or Negroes—do the deeds he talks about. Both of these men intellectualize: the doers act upon intuition, common sense, and folk wisdom….

A thorough vocabulary study of such an original writer as William Faulkner yields valuable insights into the writer: his emotional and intellectual quality, the tensions which may underlie his literary concept, and clues to his view of man and the universe. Consider, for example, four Faulknerian practices particularly concerned with the word, sampled sketchily from the abundant data in his novels: (1) his use of abstract words, chiefly nouns; (2) his special words of intensity—'negative ultimates'; (3) his coined compounds; (4) his repetitions of certain words from chapter to chapter and from book to book.

ABSTRACTIONS

Faulkner's use of abstract words is a factor in his eloquence. He refuses to accept at face value the contemporary faith in concrete words. He can and does expertly use them at will, writing meticulously objective reports of the simplest actions…But unlike his contemporaries, Faulkner dares to generalize, to utter judgment upon evil doing, and to evaluate an act, in words, in the larger context of man's long

journeyed destiny. In such passages his eloquence mounts and mounts. He knowingly faces the inadequacy of language; he...confronts the impossibility of understanding the imponderables. Making use of abstract terms around which have clustered untold associations, he makes language transcend itself by hypersuggestion. Admittedly, complex syntax is often an agent in the process, but he frequently uses simple structure for these judgments. Any structure would lose power without these spine-tingling abstract words. Faulkner's feeling about such words is very different from that of Mr. Hemingway…[as in the famous passage rejecting corrupted abstractions in *A Farewell to Arms*]…One writer favors the clean-cut, sparse objective expression; the other explores many avenues between concept and vehicle and glories in the abstract word….

PAIRED ABSTRACTIONS

The pairings of certain abstract words in paradoxical phrases give expression to some of the thematic tensions in the whole Yoknapatawpha story—such phrases as 'glamorous and old disastrous things,' 'glamorous fatality,' 'defeat and glory,' 'travail and glory,' 'leashed violence,' 'brooding violence to temporary repose,' 'doomed immortality and immortal doom,' and 'childlike…incompetence and paradoxical reliability.' These phrases and their like hold the soul-searing compulsions of the Sartoris-Compson element, the ineffectual wrath of the white farmer group, and the black-white tension. By the rhetoric of abstractions Faulkner repeatedly impregnates the simplest acts with cosmic significance….

EVOCATION

Labove, the young schoolteacher in Frenchman's Bend (*The Hamlet*), studying far into the night, is 'measuring the turned pages against the fleeing seconds of irrevocable time like the implacable inching of a leaf-worm.' Eight-year-old Eula Varner's entrance into Labove's schoolroom is a 'moist blast of spring's liquorish corruption, a pagan triumphal prostration before the supreme primal uterus.' The abstract words in such phrases are not substitutes for the concrete, nor could they be, but they define, evaluate, and interpret the specific situation or character, life it from its earthbound state to universal significance, and ponder the human dilemma. Phrases like these, of which there are a great number, are, without a doubt, one of the means by which the Yoknapatawpha County story becomes myth.

NEGATIVE ULTIMATES

Another vocabulary practice frequently encountered in Faulkner is the use of what may be called negative ultimates. They being with a negative prefix, or, as in a few cases, they end in *less*. They create a sense of negation by the very nature of the prefix or suffix but beyond that, they variously suggest other areas of meaning. Note six of these areas, categorized after examination of several hundred usages, with a few words to illustrate each area: (1) The inability to comprehend, to believe, or to do—*impotent, uncomprehending, incredulous, incapable.* (2) Absolute fixity, inaccessibility, or immutability—*immobile, impenetrable, ineradicable, impervious, implacable.* (3) Predetermination and hopelessness (closely allied with the previous classification)—*inescapable, inexorable, irrevocable, unavoidable, irremediable, inevitable.* (4) Lacking physical substance—*impalpable, sourceless, weightless, intangible, substanceless.* (5) Immeasurability—*unplumable, inexhaustible, insatiable, illimitable, interminable, unfinishability.* (6) The absence of a quality which itself in context has negative connotation—*unillusion, unchaste, unreluctance, unregret, unimpatience, undefeat.*

The function of these 'negative ultimates' is the creation of an overpowering negative intensity which traps the characters, boxing them in with their own ignorance, impotence, or bafflement in an incomprehensible world which, in spite of the land's fecundity, holds violence and terror. These words express, too, the characters' profligacy of misdirected energy, on the one hand, or, on the other, blind or instinctive identification with nature….

ARCHETYPAL

One might say that these 'ultimates,' together with certain abstract word motifs attached to many characters, transform man, through the heightening of his passions and energies, into a creature of intensity. While retaining corporal identity, he at the same time is hyperbolized into pure quality. Young Bayard, for instance, becomes despair beyond grief; Ratliff, uncanny shrewdness; Aunt Jennie, indomitability, even to

the angle of her bonnet; Mink Snopes, blind fury; Eula Varner, voluptuous sexuality; and Flem Snopes, invulnerable cupidity. In becoming, at one level, pure quality, the characters are suitable inhabitants of a mythical world, where pure quality is an essential—even in a literary mythical world. To the extent that the characters approach pure quality they take on something of the archetypal—a state most easily seen, perhaps, in Eula Vanrer, who is potentially the Great Mother, the abiding earth, the primal life force.

COINAGE OF COMPOUNDS

A third aspect of the Faulknerian use of words is the coinage of compounds, of which there are a fantastic number. They can be classified on the basis of their grammatical structure, but more important is their semantic and emotional function. The largest group by far, of a total of several hundred examined, consists of those combining a noun with a participle and expressing instrument or agency. Those depicting man or man-made objects as agent are illustrated by *thumb-polished* (coins), *knife-gnawed* (bench), *heel-gnawed* (porch), *torch-disturbed* (darkness), and *razor-hedged* (crap-game); but overwhelmingly larger is the group expressing the agency of nature. A few of these are *dusk-filled* (study), *day-granaried* (leaf), *sun-impacted* (dust), *swamp-hatched* (butterfly), *shadowbitten* (darkness), *bug-swirled* (lamp), and *hill-cradled* (village)….Immediately evident is the conciseness achieved by these compounds….

Another group consists of those compounds basically metaphoric, such as *wire-taut* (wariness), *broom-tailed* (horses), *stringstraight* (path), *diamondsurfaced* (respectability), *patinasmooth* (earth), *boardflat* (coat tails). The practice of making metaphor by compound is a distinctly poetic device, since the poet seeks the strictest economy and precise imagery….Not only conciseness is served, but also a whole imaginative concept. He began as a poet; he is still a poet, a 'maker' with and of words….The tightly packed images in these words assist in the intensification of the natural forces in Yoknapatawpha County. The great emphasis upon nature in all the compounds extends the fecund earth theme and fills the story with a sense of wonder at the intensity of 'myriad' life and the cycle of eternal change from origin to dissolution. Man, too, is part of this cycle….

FECUND EARTH

Central in the Yoknapatawpha story is the fecund earth—challenge to man, his charge to keep, and not only the stage of life, but its source, too. The word *fecund*, along with *myriad* and *seethe* (another favorite), keeps the reader constantly reminded of the fecundity idea; the earth *seethes* with *myriad* life. One hears the soft sounds of growth and the *sibilance* of insects, smells the breeze carrying the odor of 'turned earth and crabapple,' feels the cool dew and lies in the 'drenched myriad life of grasses.' Joe Christmas, lying on his belly on the 'neversunned earth,' feels it 'strike, slow and receptive, against him through his clothes' and there is 'in his nostrils the damp rich odor of the dark and fecund earth.' Impotent, frustrated Quentin, walking the cold streets of Cambridge, thinks of the 'violent fecundity' of his South….

REPETITION OF WORDS

The fourth of Faulkner's practices to be discussed here is the repetition of certain words, from chapter to chapter and from novel to novel. One learns to expect in many contexts such words as *myriad*, *effluvium*, *miasmic*, *annealing*, *immemorial*, *immolate*, and *endure*….The repeated use of [words] such as miasmic and effluvium, serve to bedim the outlines of the Faulkner geography and the things in it by enveloping them in a kind of mist, as they cloy the senses with excess or elude them with indefiniteness…It is right that a mythical county, whose story transcends plot, should have a tenuous outline in time and space. *Myriad* suggests countless; *immemorial* and *endure* suggest timelessness; miasmic and effluvium, vaporous, misty…The sum of these impressions is a feeling of the illusory, the shadowy, the indefinite….

ENDURANCE

Endure, which, beyond its time content, is an often-repeated word supporting the fecundity theme, is applied to the land, the woman, and the Negro. These three endure neglect, abuse, and violence, but they go on and on. In the famous 'Appendix' to *The Portable Faulkner* the novelist felt the need of only two words after the name of Dilsey, woman *and* Negro: 'They endured'….Out of the many repetitions of *endure*

develops the inference that patient endurance is a virtue and a strength able to meet formidable adversaries because it can wait. The land endures, like the Negro, because of patient acceptance and because it is fecund….On the other hand, there is a force in both man and Nature which rejects patient endurance…. There is a common compulsion to violence. Many characters seem driven, not to placid acceptance, but to a stubborn, fighting submission to their fate, with seemingly no hope and no purpose….

INTENSITY

His characteristic mood, intensity, depends no more, and perhaps less, upon sentence structure than upon word choice. *Sanctuary*, *Sartoris*, and *The Unvanquished*, for instance, where the intensity is as high as in any of the other books, make little use of the involuted sentence pattern, but the practices I have listed are there. In addition to the scope of the Yoknapatawpha narrative, it is the intensity that extends the story beyond mere happening. It is the intensity which creates a violent world inhabited by people of violent emotions and powerful frustrations. Like Van Gogh, who, impatient with his brush, squeezed his violent yellows thickly from tube to canvas, Faulkner, to create his mythic world, discards the more ordinary use of language and draws from some inner rage, or at least, from some deep concern….

SENSE OF WONDER

Primitive or literary, a myth is created by, and in turn creates, a sense of wonder, a sense of the marvelous….So Faulkner's 'mythic thinking' drives him to an intensity achieved not only by his 'deliberately withheld meaning' and his complex syntax, but also by the use of abstract words of high associational meaning, his hyperbolic words and hyperbole through repetition, his coined compounds for compression, and his use of 'negative ultimates.' All these practices help to create a sense of wonder, without which no myth remains myth….Within the violent scene there is the wilderness serene as Eden, and the wilderness theme runs like a clear stream through the land. Man may placidly harmonize with Nature or in fury destroy himself upon it, but it is deserving of wonder. Within the limitations imposed by the very nature of language itself, *mythos* has found *logos* in these novels and made way for *pietas*, whose prerequisite is a sense of wonder."

Florence Leaver
"Faulkner: The Word as Principle and Power"
South Atlantic Quarterly
(Autumn 1958) 464-76

"The number of alternative explanations and unresolved ambiguities in the three accounts of Sutpen suggest the immense difficulties attendant upon the effort to arrive at truth. Adding to this difficulty is the fact that truth must eventually be fixed by words, which by their very nature falsify the things they are meant to represent. This distortion inherent in language is the reason for the torturous style of *Absalom, Absalom!* The characters themselves are engaged in the frustrating attempt to capture truth and then to communicate it. Quentin tries to convey a look on Clytie's face and quickly eliminates 'shock,' 'fear,' and 'triumph' without finding a word to satisfy him. The clearest example, however, is Miss Rosa's account of what was happening at the moment when Clytie stopped her at the head of the stairs. She qualifies, adds, masses analogies, similes, and metaphors, and goes over the same points incessantly as if the repetition would suddenly make everything comprehensible not only to Quentin but to herself. In the final effort to explain Clytie's action and her own reaction, she is forced to reiterate her entire history, her childhood, her dreams, and her disappointments.

The qualities evident in Miss Rosa's description of a single incident are also found in the style as a whole. Whoever the speaker, the long sentences bristle with qualifications and alternatives beneath which the syntax is almost lost. And what is true of the sentence is true also of the paragraph, of the chapter, indeed of the total structure. Hence the style is more closely related to the creation of the legend of Sutpen and to the common effort to fix reality and formulate truth than it is to the characters who retell the story."

Olga W. Vickery
The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation
(Louisiana State 1959, 1964) 86

"Faulkner's style had of course always been a matter of dispute; in the 1930's such dissidents as Bernard DeVoto and Clifton Fadiman used it as a primary scapegoat. Scarcely a dissenting estimate was without protest against its involutions, its three-to-fifty-page sentences, its luxuriance of adjectives, and its use of strange locutions….Wyndham Lewis, writing in 1934 (*Men Without Art*), thought it merely 'second-rate,' cheap poetry masquerading as prose, and proceeded to document, by reference to three of Faulkner's novels, the working of his 'slipshod and redundant artistic machine'….Not only the reader, but every character is 'lost in the spool of his rhetoric,' said Alfred Kazin (*On Native Grounds*, 1942), a rhetoric that is 'perhaps the most elaborate, intermittently incoherent and ungrammatical, thunderous, polyphonic rhetoric in all American writing….' Faulkner's love of this rhetoric was explained at times on the grounds of his 'Southern romantic' inheritance, at other times as a consequence of his constant 'uncertainty' and attempts to evade discipline….

In the last decade [1950s] the pattern changed somewhat. Apologists for the style nevertheless occasionally saw it as excessive; but there was a serious effort, among the younger critics especially, to explain the complexity as essential to Faulkner's purposes….In much of the reviewing, one of the several problems raised by the critic is that of the style outrunning the substance; each successive novel seems to have been the one in which the manner—up to now explicable with effort—has finally raced far ahead of both matter and reason. For the most part, however, critics exerted themselves, not only to adjust their sights to each new verbal display, but to discover a rationale of the manner applicable to the work as a whole….

Much of the analysis of Faulkner's style seems to have taken off from Conrad Aiken's 1939 study, and especially from his suggestion that the involutions were a means of withholding meaning from the reader until it should be fully appropriate that he have it….Seen from this triple perspective—as a device to direct the manner of reading, as a means of communicating the inner 'violence' of the characters, as a continuing representation of the multiplicity of experience—the rhetoric took on a new significance. At Nagano, Faulkner had said in answer to a question about the length of his sentences that the difficulty came from his 'compulsion to say everything in one sentence because you may not live long enough to have two sentences.' This compulsion forced the sentence patterns into rich, ambiguous innovations of 'delayed syntax' and suggested quite new departures in the matter of balancing rhetoric forms against each other. It was, as Russell Roth said (*Western Review*, Spring, 1952), a way of holding polarities in balance. It was certainly the very antithesis of Hemingway's neatly circumspect economy; and Faulkner's own underrating of Hemingway, repeated in several interviews, suggested that he believed Hemingway's 'simplicity' a sign of a lack of daring, as contrasted to Wolfe and himself, who had 'risked much'….

Karl Zink (*South Atlantic Quarterly*, July, 1954) spoke of a 'pervasive syntactical continuousness, a quality of intense suspension, which can be found in almost every novel.' He went so far as to suggest that Faulkner does not write in sentences but in 'prose patterns,' and proposed therefore that he not be analyzed 'in terms of the logical premises of formal grammar.' F. C. Riedel (*South Atlantic Quarterly*, Autumn, 1957) described the surface chaos of the Faulkner sentence: 'A sentence may rush the reader along willy-nilly, forcing upon him seemingly chaotic masses of fact and detail, thought and idea, subtle impression and vivid image, which must sort themselves out to form some semblance of order in the mind as best they may….

Whether disparagingly or not, the general conviction about the style was that Faulkner had more to say than conventional forms of syntax and grammar would allow him to say. His view of character compelled him to show the inner self in uneasy tension with external event. Further, the question of time, Faulkner's major concern to show dramatically the pressure of the past upon the present moment, also required a compressed language and an elaborate syntax; the character often thought in terms of a complex of 'was' and 'is,' and the burden of memory not infrequently made progress in time almost impossible, with the result that the style revealed a new kind of temporal suspension. This made new demands upon the language and forced sentences to proceed at length but actually in a state of energetic and tense simultaneity. It was not merely a matter of 'stream of consciousness.' Indeed, the Faulkner character was rarely entirely free of some kind of auctorial pressure. What [Robert Penn] Warren called 'the voice' forced him to achieve kinds of rhetorical urgency quite beyond his independent capacity for articulation. The

relationship of the 'voice' to Faulkner's characterization is a fascinating but as yet a scarcely touched matter for investigation."

Frederick J. Hoffman
William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism
eds. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery
(Harcourt 1960) 23-24, 42-46

"In parts of *The Bear* he achieves a ruminative bardic style of quiet gravity; in *Absalom, Absalom!* a fierce grinding rhetoric which makes that book so difficult and memorable to read; and in *The Hamlet* a wildly exuberant prose, full of juice and bounce. It would be pointless to deny, of course, that in some of Faulkner's books, especially the later ones, the language tends to cascade wildly, noun upon noun, adjective upon adjective, breathless phrase upon phrase. The syntax can become hopelessly entangled in its own convolutions: a thickly matted jungle of clauses and phrases defying, by clear intention, the schoolbook rules of grammar. Such prose is clearly vulnerable to criticism and even sneering; it involves greater risks than the taut style of a Hemingway, but at least on occasion it also brings greater rewards.

In fiction there is no single 'good' or 'accepted' style. The clumsy, leaden prose of a Dreiser can be remarkably moving and powerful. The artful simplicity of Sherwood Anderson's style can help evoke moods of loneliness and sadness. The touch restraints of Hemingway's prose can give one the exact 'feel' of an object. There are many possibilities in the use of language in fiction, and none can be prejudged, all depend upon the specific context in which they appear and the particular skill with which they are employed. When Faulkner seems to be torturing some of his sentences and wrenching some of his words, crowding into a unit of language more than seems possible for it to bear, this is not because he is indifferent to the need for clarity or the value of communication. His more rhetorical style is the result of his desire not merely to pack into a sentence or paragraph a description of a present state of being or a continuing action, but also to communicate something of its half-buried causes, its complicating consequences, its ironic contraries, its continuous muddle and possible magnificence.

It is as if he were trying to pack into a sentence or a paragraph the sense of simultaneity which is so characteristic of human consciousness, the sense of the palpitating complexity of felt experience. This means that he sometimes strains, sometimes drives too hard, sometimes falls into obscurity. But when he succeeds—and that is often enough—the result is marvelous rich, a full impression of the way an experience feels, the way a relationship moves, the way a human being responds at one and the same time to the pressures of his outer life and the needs of his inner life."

Irving Howe
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 840

"The style of *Absalom, Absalom!* is a style of oratory. Since *Light in August*, Faulkner's books have been filled with the cadences of a voice distinct from the voices of his characters. In *Intruder in the Dust* the oratory is 'official,' groaning with echoes of addresses to Southern state legislatures and Fourth of July speeches in town squares. In *Absalom, Absalom!* it is quite different: private in source and accent, and uncongenial to public expectation. The voice we now hear speaks for an afflicted imagination, a grieved mind familiar with the springs of evil. If the oratory of *Intruder in the Dust* echoes the facile rhythms of public persuasion, the oratory of *Absalom, Absalom!* evokes an image of a man rasping from the heart, perhaps to no one but himself….

The convolutions of Faulkner's prose mirror the reactions of his narrators to the events they uncover. And Faulkner's reactions too; the voice of the ventriloquist laments in romantic cadence and lifts to appalled shriek. *Absalom, Absalom!* is packed with the incongruities and complexities of consciousness, each sentence approaching, remembering, analyzing and modifying the material that has preceded it….A tumbling series of images is suddenly pulled short by a colon and then capped by a general statement, Faulkner's language summarizing what the boy has already seen as picture…But the distinctive vice in the writing of *Absalom, Absalom!* is that the prose is whipped into a fury so habitual as to become mechanical and dull, a mere surrender to the monstrous….

Faulkner's greatest risk, *Absalom, Absalom!* is never likely to be read widely; it is for *aficionados* willing to satisfy the large and sometimes excessive demands it makes upon attention. Wild, twisted and occasionally absurd, the novel has, nonetheless, the fearful impressiveness which comes when a writer has driven his vision to an extreme."

Irving Howe
William Faulkner: A Critical Study
(Random House/Vintage 1962) 226-27, 231-32

"His medium is rhetoric, handled with such power that language spreads on the canvas like painting. In his hands it is a way of painting with words."

Wright Morris
The Territory Ahead
(Atheneum 1963) 176

"For the uninitiated reader, the difficulties of structure and narrative technique are compounded by Faulkner's style. Yet the brilliant effects of the great novels are due, to a great extent, to style, which is also employed to broaden perspective. An analysis of the style may help to alleviate some of the difficulties in reading such works as *Absalom, Absalom!* And also demonstrate how style is one of his greatest achievements.

SOMETIMES SIMPLE

One of the fascinating discoveries one makes in a study of Faulkner's rhetoric is that despite his reputation for prolixity and complexity, Faulkner could and frequently did write simple, clear prose in which concrete nouns and strong verbs dominate the short sentences. In 'The Bear'…[and]…much of the style in *Light in August*…Obviously, such passages could not have provoked the charge of one critic that Faulkner's prose is 'perhaps the most elaborate, intermittently incoherent and ungrammatical, thunderous, polyphonic rhetoric in all American writing.'

OFTEN LUSH

What probably did was a passage such as the following from *Absalom, Absalom!*, where Rosa Coldfield is the speaker. Charles Bon is dead and Rosa runs up the stairs to the room in which his body lies. She meets Charles's fiancee. Judith is cold and calm. Rosa describes her own reaction: 'That's what I found….' This kind of prose has exasperated many readers and critics, provoking an explosion of adjectives, both laudatory and derogatory: *ambiguous, over-elaborate, surrealistic, romantic, precious, lyrical, incantatory, turgid, baroque, archaic, compulsive, hypnotic, lush, bizarre, picturesque, garrulous, eccentric.* To the neophyte Faulkner reader, the prose may seem a continual flow of words that obscures the story action rather than developing it. The difficulties should not be minimized. The diction, the syntax, seem designed to obfuscate, not communicate.

WITHHELD INFORMATION

Faulkner sometimes deliberately withholds important details, and the narrators frequently refer to people or events that the reader will not learn about until much later, making the style seem even more opaque than it actually is. And the long sentences are difficult to follow, with clauses that proliferate, developing not from the main subject or verb of the sentence, but growing out of preceding clauses. As a result, the main thought is often lost in the mass of amplifying or qualifying ideas. Antecedents of personal pronouns are frequently not clear. Faulkner's style does not provide relaxing reading, but forces the reader to participate in the search for understanding and truth.

ORATORICAL

Has Faulkner been a U.S. senator, his speeches would have been squarely in the tradition of Southern oratory. Some of his sentences sound almost like selected passages from a filibuster. Rather than run the risk of interruption and lose the floor, he does not pause; he rolls on, using all the rhetorical devices of the speech-maker: colorful, grandiloquent and emotive words, repetition, parallel structure, a series of negative

clauses preceding a positive, delayed climax. The following example from *Intruder in the Dust* is typical: '…and now he seemed to see his whole native land, his home---the dirt, the earth which had bred his bones and those of his fathers for six generations and was still shaping him…'

The sentence goes on for two more pages. Faulkner is usually not so clearly oratorical, but the passage reveals the vocal quality in his style. Many of his stories and novels are actually oral narratives: in *Absalom, Absalom!* the narrators Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson are talking to Quentin, and Quentin and Shreve, the other narrators, talk to each other. In the famous fourth section of 'The Bear' Ike McCaslin explains to his cousin his reasons for giving up his inheritance. And in the final novel, *The Reivers*, the protagonist is describing his boyhood adventure to his grandchildren. Faulkner seems often to write as if he were listening to a voice and setting down what he hears. Sometimes, as in the preceding quotation, it is the voice of the stereotyped Southern colonel. Often, it is the soft, musing voice of one who narrates what he can hardly believe. In other stories, the voice is outraged and incredulous. Not infrequently, the prose sounds like a recording of a compulsive talker. One of the achievements of this talk-prose is its communication of feeling and attitude. Miss Rosa's bitterness and sense of outrage, Quentin's incredulity and bewilderment establish the tone of their narrations and help to create the atmosphere of *Absalom.*

COMPLEX SYNTAX

The vocal quality of the style also explains, to some extent, the complexity of the syntax. In talk, the sentence as a unit of thought complete in itself is far less important than it is in writing. Much conversation would defy conventional syntactical analysis. Units of the thought are connected by *and* or *but* or *which* or *because* in a continual flow of words. Faulkner's long sentences have this quality. They are not, however, so casual. He makes use of the rhetorical devices of oratory, building his sentences with parallel units. A series of nouns, or verbals, or phrases, or clauses with their modifiers are set in parallel construction: 'It was the summer after that first Christmas that Henry brought him home, the summer following the two days of that June vacation which he spent at Sutpen's Hundred before he rode on to the river to take the steamboat home, that summer after my aunt left and papa had to go away on business and I was sent to Ellen…to stay….' (*Absalom* 145)

The sentence is structured on the predicate noun *summer*. Repeated three times, each *summer* has modifiers. The first two sets of modifiers are in turn modified: the first summer is modified by the prepositional phrase *after that first Christmas* and the noun *Christmas* is modified by the *that* clause. One of Faulkner's favored constructions is a series of parallel verbals: 'But not drifting, these: paddling: because this was upstream, bearing not volitionless into the unknown mystery and authority, but establishing in the wilderness a point for men to rally to in conscience and free will, scanning, watching the dense inscrutable banks….(*Requiem for a Nun* 236) The influence of traditional rhetorical devices is obvious too in the balancing of negatives against positives: 'But the lock was gone; nor did it take the settlement long to realize that it was not the escaped bandits and the aborted reward, but the lock, and not a simple situation which faced them, but a problem which threatened…. (*Requiem* 187)

COMPOUND WORDS

Faulkner's passion for exactness and his almost compulsive need to make words convey not only the image or thought in his mind but the related feelings or mood also contributed to the complexity of his style. When words do not exist, he does not hesitate to create them by joining two words into one—*fecundmellow, Allknowledgeable*—or compounding with a hyphen—*pollen-wroiled, miasmal-distillant*. Often he ignores the dictionary meaning of a word for its connotative effect: '…it looked like an aged or sick wild beast, crawled terrifically there to drink in the act of dying.' *Terrifically* in this sentence conveys feeling rather than meaning. Adjectives, compounded or in series, swell his sentences….Nearly every one of the common nouns in [some sentences have] at least one adjective to modify it.

QUALIFICATIONS

Faulkner's power of observation was remarkably acute and he often appears to have been impelled to include in his descriptions all the minute details his memory recorded. Sometimes he can create a sharp

image with a few words—'yellow slashes of mote-palpitant sunlight'—but more frequently he requires qualifying phrases and even clauses: 'The path (it was neither road nor lane: just two parallel barely discernible tracks where wagon wheels had run, almost obliterated by this year's grass and weeds) went up to the sagging and stepless porch of the perfectly blank house…. (*The Hamlet* 19)

ADJECTIVES

By compounding adjectives or amassing them, Faulkner expresses nuances of thought and feeling. Adjectives, for example, are often contradictory: 'the expression of fatalistic and amazed determination.' *Fatalistic* conveys grim inevitability, amazed would seem to deny inevitability. Compounded, the words capture the tension of the facial expression. In the same way that Faulkner uses single adjectives, he uses series of qualifying or amplifying phrases and clauses…an accumulation of descriptive material though admittedly not easy to follow gives depth and background simultaneously with the development of the story action. The characteristic quality of a Faulkner sentence is, in part, due to his placing modifying elements after the noun. By inverting the usual order, he can keep adding modifier after modifier: '…and always the rider, Pettigrew, ubiquitous, everywhere, not helping search himself and never in anyone's way, but always present, inscrutable, saturnine, missing nothing…. (*Requiem* 188)

CUMULATIVE EFFECTS

Frequently, Faulkner's quest for exactness is apparent in the sentence structure: '…she could write her name, or anyway make something with a pen or pencil which was agreed to be, or at least accepted to be, a valid signature….'(*Requiem* 189) Not only with adjectives, but also with nouns and verbs is Faulkner's invention free-wheeling. Many sentences are developed on a parallel series of appositive nouns, or a series of nouns: 'his plantation: his manor, his kitchens and stables and kennels and slave quarters and gardens and promenades and fields….'(*Requiem* 196). Verbs, too are compounded or massed: 'So it was solved, done, finished, ended.' The words flow in torrents not only because Faulkner sought exactness and completeness but also because he had the poet's love of words, a passion for the sound of them, their cumulative power and force. He was, as one critic called him, a 'verbal voluptuary.' He had a lust for language, and especially for words derived from the Latin. The large number of words ending in *ant* or *able* give his prose a lush quality: *repudiant, scintillant, abnegant, suspirant, palpitant, uninferant, vociferant, intractable, implacable, imponderable, immutable, inviolable.*As a result, Faulkner occasionally sounds stilted, like a self-educated man proudly using the esoteric synonym in place of the one in common usage.

LYRICISM

Faulkner's temperament was romantic and he seems to have responded intensely to the romantic poets. The lyricism integral to his style swells to a crescendo when flowers or trees, sky or earth, are his subject… The passage…from that section of *The Hamlet* describing the idiot boy's love affair with a cow…the excessive lyricism contributes to the ironic tone of the idyll about perversion. Though the excesses of this passage are deliberate, there are many passages whose excesses are obviously not intentional. Faulkner had a strong sentimental streak that could and often did, in his short stories particularly, get out of control. One sample should suffice: at the end of the novel about the Sartoris family he writes, in all seriousness, about the family name: 'For there is death in the sound of it, and a glamorous fatality, like silver pennons down-rushing at sunset, or a dying fall of horns along the road to Roncevaux.' (*Sartoris* 317)

NATURE

Faulkner's romanticism is apparent also in the importance of Nature in his fiction. Many of his finest images and symbols are drawn from Nature; animals are the subject of many passages and stories, and many lines of description are devoted to natural settings. He was very sensitive to the sounds and smells of Nature and to the shifting patterns of color and light….

DIALECTS

Faulkner's ear was also sensitively attuned to the syntax and diction and tone of speech. He reproduced with fidelity the dialects of his Mississippi characters. Without excessive violation of standard spelling he captured the slow drawl of the Southern Negro, the tone of the redneck's speech pattern, and the more refined tones and diction of the educated townspeople. When he uses narrators, he has them speak in their own language….

DIFFERING VOICES

When he uses several narrators as he does in *The Town*, the tone and style shift to fit the character of the narrator. V. K. Ratliff is country-born, and in his section the imagery and speech patterns reflect his background: 'And Lawyer Stevens setting there calm and still, with his face still white and still as paper. And maybe he hadn't learned how to fight yet neither.' (86) In contrast, Gavin Stevens is highly educated and introspective: 'No: that's wrong. It's because you don't dare to hope, you are afraid to hope. Not afraid of the extent of hope of which you are capable, but that you—the frail web of bone and flesh snaring that fragile temeritous boundless aspirant sleepless with dream and hope—cannot match it….' (88) Faulkner's ability to shift style with such ease and effectiveness indicates that he cultivated what we think of as typical Faulknerian prose.

AMBITION

Perhaps Faulkner himself best described the achievement of his style when, speaking of himself and Thomas Wolfe, he declared: 'We tried to crowd and cram everything, all experience, into each paragraph, to get the whole complete nuance of the moment's experience, of all the recaptured light rays, into each paragraph'."

Edmond L. Volpe
A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner
(Farrar, Straus 1964) 36-45

"Many of Faulkner's sentences seem interminably long, with one parenthetical aside dangling from another, and others dangling from that, until the weight of digression may seem to submerge what grammatically the sentence is about. Faulkner may frequently seem compulsively a talker, so fond of his flow of words that he forgets what he had set out to say. He may seem to become…hopelessly involved in his own technical virtuosity. He speaks so profusely that he does not always speak carefully….Faulkner draws on a remarkable and apparently uncontrolled flow of rhetoric. It is not unusual to find…single sentences which speak all in one breath of historical or actual past, traditional or commonly accepted past, and legendary or mythic past, piling suggestions of meaning layer on layer, until the sentence seems to catch up and hold suspended the whole of time….He evoked suggestions of meanings which no words express. Any attempt to explain him, explains him only in part; for what Faulkner wrote its not meant to be explained, only experienced….

The extravagance of William Faulkner, who fills sentences so abundantly, is related also to the extravagance of the American tall tale. It presents the view of an alert but ruminative countryman on whom events and memories impinge with such rapidity that he has no time to sort them to simplicity. He must talk, and endlessly talk, about what he knows and sees and remembers, because he is sure that if he stops talking to order them to system, other sights and memories will pass him by. Faulkner is the talkingest man in modern literature….Faulkner's leisurely voice may not always seem attractive. It moves on in circles, slowly…delaying expectations. Little is ever simplified for the convenience of fast reading….He flew, as old-time aviators used to express it, by the seat of his pants, observant, resourceful, quick at maneuvering, skilled at balance, looping or diving just for the sport of it, or to thrill spectators, but never quite able to explain his movements on charts, although he did know, in a general way, and with confidence no chart could challenge, what he was about and where he was going. If other people did not care to follow, so much the less fun for them."

Lewis Leary
Introduction
Crowell's Handbook of Faulkner
Dorothy Tuck

(Crowell 1964) x, xiv-xv

"Faulkner's style, initially the bane and despair of critics, and more recently the subject of several excellent but fairly tentative essays and articles, is without doubt as important an element in the novelist's craft as are the themes that are found, in various guises, throughout his work. Indeed, the style is almost in itself a theme, a motif, emphasizing by means of technique alone the contradictory and essentially irresolvable conflicts present in the subject matter. The problems of achieving unity of form (the way in which an idea is presented) and content (the idea itself) are more often found in the literary analysis of poetry than of the novel, at least in its more traditional forms. To speak of such a unity in Faulkner's work immediately suggests the experimental nature of much of Faulkner's writing and points to certain stylistic effects that have much in common with the aims of poetic expression.

POETRY

The province of poetry, in the main, is emotional rather than intellectual. Any such generalization necessarily distorts the facts to a degree. Nevertheless, it may be said that poetry tends to be successful as poetry in inverse ration to its easy reducibility to a logical statement of fact. It is not that poetry is *ipso facto* unclear, but that, in seeking to apprehend the profound realities of human existence, it tends toward paradox, toward the logically inexplicable, toward a union of opposites that creates a metaphysical tension and contains in this fusion a truth…[such] characteristics of poetry apply equally to the bulk of Faulkner's work. In an age when the novel has generally tended toward a hard spareness of style and a meticulous rendering of objective detail, Faulkner has persistently maintained his own voice, indifferent to critical jibes at his unstylish verbosity, his romantic rhetoric, his lush obscurity, and his long involuted sentences. There is little question that much of the early, strongly unfavorable criticism of Faulkner stemmed from the simple fact that his work is not easy to read.

Critics of the 1930s, used to the pruned prose of the Hemingway school or the obvious sociological bent of the then blooming proletarian realists, bogged down ingloriously in his marathon sentences and pronounced him a 'bad writer.' Others saw no obvious sociological message in his writing, and therefore informed the public that he wrote of perversion, idiocy, and depravity for their own sake. It seems difficult, at this point, to take these accusations seriously, or even to understand how they could have been made. Faulkner is undoubtedly difficult to read—the most difficult of contemporary American writers. If he is obscure, however, it is never for the sake of obscurity itself; if his writing is occasionally overrich, it is rarely so as a result of his intoxication with his own virtuosity. Faulkner started out a poet in the formal sense. In turning to fiction, he took with him the impetus toward poetic expression that had first moved him to write, and found a technique in which the aims of poetry were largely retained in fictional form.

PURPOSE BEHIND OBSCURITY

Conrad Aiken, writing in 1939, was the first to perceive the basic purpose behind what is usually considered Faulkner's obscurity: it is an 'elaborate method of deliberately withheld meaning…a calculated system of screens and obtrusions, of confusions and ambiguous interpolations and delays, with one express purpose…to keep the form—and the idea—fluid and unfinished, still in motion, as it were, and unknown, until the dropping into place of the very last syllable.' This sense of formal motion is as crucial to an understanding of Faulkner's technique as the identification of life with motion and change is basic to his subject matter. In writing of the hunt, for instance (particularly in the stories in *Go Down, Moses*), he uses the content of the story to underline the theme that all life, as long as it remains vital, is a kind of pursuit. In much of his writing, whether it deals with the metaphor of the hunt or not, the style conveys this same sense of the fluidity and ever-shifting motion of living experience.

FLUIDITY OF LIFE

The idea of motion as a technical recreation of the fluidity of life can be said to be the basic determinant of Faulkner's style. The techniques through which this sense of motion is achieved in form are seen at their most elaborate and most successful in *Absalom, Absalom!*, although they are present in varying degrees in the majority of his novels. The traditional novel ordinarily operates on a linear basis in which characters are

introduced, conflicts set up, and resolution achieved, frequently with due regard to chronology. In contrast to this, Faulkner's novels can best be seen in terms of overlapping circles, with a point of entry that is not, strictly speaking, a beginning, but simply a point in time in which the novelist has chosen to intercept his characters. Faulkner has not merely disordered the chronology of the plot. The chronology may be reconstructed after the fact, but piecing together the events can convey only the facts of the story, not its essence as a recreation of life that Faulkner has given it. The circularity of narration, particularly in *Absalom, Absalom!,* has a very definite purpose: to immerse the reader in the living flow of the narrator's consciousness of Sutpen and, by extension, to capture for a moment out of time a living image of the mind of the South as reflected in the characters of Sutpen, Miss Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, and Quentin.

In an interesting study of Faulkner's rhetoric Walter J. Slatoff has suggested that Faulkner has deliberately left his works in a state of suspension and irresolution; this is reflected stylistically in his use of paradox, oxymoron, the juxtaposition of mutually exclusive conditions such as sound and silence, stillness and frantic motion, and so forth. Mr. Slatoff finds the lack of resolution at the end of the novels intended 'to leave the reader with a high degree of emotional and intellectual tension' analogous to the tension conveyed by the union of contradictory ideas in the oxymoron.

Stylistically, of course, Faulkner's use of paradox and polarity is related to the technique of deliberately withheld meaning, of keeping the form in motion. Contextually, it underlines Faulkner's unwillingness to commit himself to final answers, to offer anything more positive than the ambiguous final statement of the Runner in *A Fable,* or the vague injunction to 'believe' of Nancy in *Requiem for a Nun,* or even the eloquent but essentially unspecific statement of his own faith in man's capacity to endure in the Nobel Prize address. This, however, is not to say that Faulkner is either pessimistic or uncommitted. Rather, it seems to indicate his profound awareness of the impossibility of ever completely resolving, at least more than temporarily, the dualities of existence."

Dorothy Tuck
Crowell's Handbook of Faulkner
(Crowell 1964) 13-15

"Faulkner has a remarkable ear for speech—either in dialogue or in the long narrative monologue, like that of Jason, for instance, or that of Ratliff in 'Spotted Horses,' the early version of the horse auction scene of *The Hamlet.* But generally Faulkner's narratives are sustained not by such reported, or ventriloquist voices, but by a single dominant voice—the highly personal style which, for better or worse, seems to be the index of the subjective drama, and which guarantees to the reader that the story is truly alive in the deepest way. As Albert Thibaudet says of Proust, the tide of his sentences carries with it as it advances the creative elan that gives it life; or as Monique Nathan puts it in her book about Faulkner, there is something 'almost liturgical' in the function of his style. And we might add that, to take the Aristotelian terms, a novel of Faulkner combines the drama (or narrative) and the dithyramb, the latter being the personal medium in which the impersonal renderings of experience are sustained."

Robert Penn Warren, ed.
"Introduction: Faulkner: Past and Future"
Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays
(Prentice-Hall 1966) 12

STYLE IN *As I Lay Dying*

DICTION

"The basic vocabulary is that of common speech, specifically the dialect spoken by the small hill farmers in northeastern Mississippi; it is the rough and simple vocabulary of uneducated country people with improprieties and deformations….This rustic vocabulary serves essentially to designate the concrete and familiar world of everyday life. But whenever these country people experience the need to express ideas or feelings we see them turn naturally to the Bible….For all these Baptists and Methodists, the God of the Bible and all the mythological and ideological background of Christianity are an indispensable framework of reference, and they have recourse to it whenever they attempt to translate their experience of life into consciousness and give it a meaning….One of the many ironies of the book is that for several of its

characters these religious references are purely verbal. Those who use them most readily—Anse, Cora, Whitfield—are also the most hypocritical, and in their devout speeches there is something that sounds not only comic but shallow and false….

The characteristics we have noted so far—nearness to the spoken word, reliance on the plain diction of common speech, occasional use of biblical phrases—can all be related to the tradition of the vernacular narrative initiated in American literature by the humorists of the old Southwest and by Mark Twain….At the simplest level one finds here, as in Mark Twain, Sherwood Anderson or Hemingway, strings of simple declarative sentences….As for Darl…his vocabulary is also infinitely more varied and more learned than that of those around him….In [his] sonorous polysyllables any Faulkner reader will recognize the author's penchant for Latinisms. With Darl, we enter the specifically Faulknerian lexical domain…The close conjunction between physical particulars and abstractions is one of the most typical features of Faulkner's style….A similar effect is obtained by the rhetorical device of hypallage, i.e., the transfer of concrete epithets to abstract nouns: *his slack-faced astonishment, awry-feathered, disgrunted outrage, a curled, gnarled inertness.* These singular combinations bring about a sort of reciprocal contamination of the terms juxtaposed: the abstract, weighed down with materiality, solidifies and acquires the quality of immediate presence while the concrete loses substance and tends to evaporate into the universal….

Like Milton and Melville, Faulkner felt the need to add to these terms some negatives of his own coinage: *unalone, unlamped, uninferant, unvirgin, unwinded…not-fish, not-blood, not-moving*…All these negatives refer us back to the theme of absence, of lack, of nothingness which, as we shall see, pervades the whole novel; they are also indicative of Faulkner's obstinate efforts to overcome the inadequacy of language: the attempt to express the inexpressible….Faulkner was at pains to restore to language all its power of suggestion. Hence, in his novels, the search for the most compact form, which often makes him condense his discourse to the point of opacity.

Hence, too, his verbal inventiveness designed to correct the shortcomings and offset the diffuseness of ordinary speech, which manifests itself most notably in the creation of compounds…*crop-toothed, tooth-cropped, grease-fouled, bone-gaunted, spraddle-legged, dangle-armed*….The novel illustrates abundantly Faulkner's taste for accumulation, particularly with respect to adjectives…*the long hot sad yellow days…a wild, sad, profound and despairing quality; his pale empty sad composed and questioning face.* This piling up of qualifying words is intended to achieve through cumulative effect what the effort of concision attempts to collect and retain in the energy of a single word. But whether Faulkner coins new words or hurls them in handfuls onto the page, the driving force is still the same rage for expression, the same compulsive need to say everything….

SYNTAX

It is to the creative interplay between the colloquial and the literary tradition that Faulkner's style owes its rugged vigor and vitality. His prose, however controlled in its effects, is almost always attuned to the pulse of living speech. In some of his books, to be sure, the vocal comes close to the oratorical, the stream of words broadens and swells into torrential rhetoric. Nothing like this happens in *As I Lay Dying:* it does not contain any of those endless, involuted, labyrinthine sentences in which the reader sometimes gets lost in *Absalom, Absalom!* or *Go Down, Moses*….

Many elliptical constructions are also to be found…The most peculiar sentence structures occur in those parts of the monologues where linguistic coherence tends to melt into the 'stream of consciousness.' Mental disarray makes itself felt through the suppression of semantic links or by irregularities and breaks in construction…The liberties taken with linguistic conventions never lead to complete nonsense….All these anomalies function essentially as signals; the never seriously compromise the readability of the novel….

Through repetition, through words and sentences ricocheting from one paragraph to another, from one section to another, the characters' idiosyncrasies are revealed and their secret obsessions betrayed in all their comic or pathetic urgency: Dewey Dell's monologue in section 14 includes five slightly modified repetitions of the opening sentence, 'He could do so much for me'….Another prominent feature of Faulkner's style in *As I Lay Dying* is the use of parallelism, balance, and antithesis….Faulkner's language remains primarily a language of images and emotions. And when by chance it takes a more abstract turn, as

in Darl's metaphysical exercises in conjugation, it appears more as a mimed dialectic, a sort of verbal gesticulation, than as the expression of ordered and fixed rational thought. This mimicry can become parody: Cash's incongruous catalogue provides an example to be relished. Thought, it might seem, is summoned only to confess its ridiculous or pathetic impotence….

RHETORIC

Throughout *As I Lay Dying* Faulkner's style is astonishingly rich in rhetorical figures. We have already noted the variety of sentence patterns, but one cannot fail to be struck too by the extraordinary profusion of tropes. With Faulkner it is rare for words to retain their literal meaning right to the end. Diverted from their initial function, divested of their usual associations, drawn into a play of substitution (metaphors, metonymies), or else set alongside other words with which they have no natural affinity but whose contagious effect they nonetheless suffer (hypallages, oxymorons), they are subjected to so many manipulations and charged with such a mass of connotations and nuances that they almost generate a semantic system of their own….

As Robert Humphrey has pointed out, Dewey Dell's monologue displays a whole series of figures: personification ('It is *looking out* at the road now, because it can *wait*'—'the *wild* and *outraged* earth'), inversion ('New Hope. 3 mi. it will say'), repetition ('New Hope. 3 mi.'—'I wish'—'too soon'), understatement ('I heard that my mother is dead'), anacoluthon and ellipsis ('It is because…too soon'), anaphora ('It is… It's not…it's that…). What is most surprising is not the presence of this or that figure but that there should be so many in so short a fragment; 'it is,' as Humphrey puts it, 'the piling up of them, the over-all use of *incrementum* that is unique and that, because it indicates a need for close reading and gives an enigmatic tone to the passage, serves to heighten the effect of the privacy of the materials'….

Metaphor is the figure of figures in *As I Lay Dying.* It is consubstantial with the vision and art of the novelist. Of all the demons which presided over Faulkner's work, the demon of analogy was without doubt one of the most intrusive, and in this novel his presence is as strongly felt as in any other. Through the multiplicity of unexpected connections and reverberations they introduce into the book, metaphors reinforce the interrelatedness of its parts; by carrying its meanings beyond literal significance, they expand the fictional world beyond the narrow boundaries of realistic convention and make room for the imagination. Their function within the novel's texture is very similar to that of the symbols within its structure: both are intended to transmute the factual-objective into the poetic….

Figurative language is likely to occur anywhere, almost at random; it may be induced by a chance word, just as it can spring from a telescoping of sensations (synesthesia), as in some of the Vardaman sections: 'I can see hearing coil towards him, caressing shaping his hard shape'….In Faulkner's work, similes are almost a stylistic tic….Addie's monologue likewise presents a remarkable concentration of metaphors and similes…'hearing the dark voicelessness in which the words are the deeds, and the other words that are not the deeds, that are just the gaps in peoples' [*sic*] lacks, coming down like the cries of the geese out of the wild darkness in the old terrible nights…'Oxymoron ('hearing…voicelessness'), synesthesia ('dark voicelessness'), words/deeds antithesis presented in the form of antanaclasis ('words' taken first figuratively then literally), metaphor ('other words' equated with 'gaps'), double simile ('the cries of the geese'—'orphans'), here again we find a very singular interlacing of figures. It is paralleled by the intricacy of the syntax, marked by the alternation of relatives and participles in apposition, and gathering itself in increasing masses, true to the principle of expansion basic to Faulkner's style, which we have already seen working in simpler sentence patterns…

It has poetry's concentrated energy and indefinite powers of suggestion. But in *As I Lay Dying*, as in all Faulkner's great novels, poetry is not only present in these unexpected flashes of lyricism. The whole novel tends toward being a poem. From diction to syntax, from syntax to rhetoric with its rich array of figures, metaphors, sonorities, and rhythms, Faulkner's style is always on the alert, prodigiously active and creative. And it is above all in its irrepressible vitality and nimble inventiveness that it is related to poetic usage. Forging new words or forcing old ones into new uses, twisting syntax into startling patterns of his own making, drawing at the same time upon the resources of colloquialism and of literary tradition, and freely mingling high rhetoric with low prose. Faulkner is ceaselessly reshaping language for his own ends. No

wonder then that language in turn begins to work, to ferment, to take on a new life and reacquire its old magical properties. A system of dead signs—'dead sounds' as Addie calls them in the novel—becomes a living network of symbols, a full and vibrant image of the world, an epiphany of reality."

Andre Bleikasten
University of Strasbourg
Faulkner's As I Lay Dying
trans. Roger Little
(Indiana U 1973) 23-43

STYLES

Faulkner wrote in many different styles, like Joyce. He created individual styles appropriate to each of over a dozen different characters in *The Sound and the Fury* and in *As I Lay Dying*, where he articulates for the inarticulate, from simple to baroque, depending on the consciousness of the character and the situation. However, he became known for his distinctive, unique and recognizable personal style: very long complex sentences, effusive and full of abstractions, shifting back and forth in time, with long parentheses, allusions, figurative language, compound words, neologisms, emotive diction, and passionate intensity. The most organic example of this Expressionistic high style is in "Old Man" in *The Wild Palms*, where Faulkner's flood of eloquence evokes the experience of the convict trying to navigate the literal flood. One of his most spectacular displays of stylistic virtuosity is his parody of sentimental romance in depicting the idiot Ike Snopes courting and eloping with a cow in *The Hamlet.*

Since his style is so significant to the reader, it is ironic that style meant little to Faulkner: "I don't think that style is very important." What mattered to him was "The uplifting of men's hearts." Furthermore, he felt that words were inadequate and often misleading, as he expresses most clearly through Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*: "That was when I learned that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at." Faulkner's style often reflects his sense of the inadequacy of words, as when his sentences seem to be groping and reaching for the truth. Since the most significant truth is ineffable, he must evoke it, as in the scene when Ike sees the bear, using language intuitively while thinking mainly about characters. "I write about people. Maybe all sorts of symbols and images get in—I don't know." He valued plenitude and amplitude in the Romantic tradition: "My ambition is to put everything into one sentence—not only the present but the whole past on which it depends and which keeps overtaking the present, second by second." And then he "tried to crowd and cram everything, all experience, into each paragraph, to get the whole complete nuance of the moment's experience."

Michael Hollister (2015)