

WILLIAM FAULKNER
ON *MOBY-DICK*: AN EARLY LETTER

In his later years, William Faulkner referred to *Moby-Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn* as possibly the greatest books in American literature¹ and assigned Mark Twain and Melville the top positions among American novelists up to the end of the nineteenth century,² whereas he seems to have had less regard for Hawthorne and Henry James whom he once called « not truly American writers ».³ His final perception of the greatness of *Huckleberry Finn* and its author stands in marked contrast to the low opinion he had of Mark Twain much earlier when he called him « a hack writer who would not have been considered fourth rate in Europe, who tricked out a few of the old proven 'sure fire' literary skeletons with sufficient local color to intrigue the superficial and the lazy ».⁴ Faulkner wrote this at the age of twenty-three, but even in 1947, mentioning *Huckleberry Finn* in reply to the question whether 'The Great American Novel' had been written yet, he still had reservations about Mark Twain as an artist: « Twain has never really written a novel ... His work is too loose. We'll assume that a novel has set rules. His is a mass of stuff—just a series of events ».⁵

1. *Faulkner in the University*, eds. FREDERICK L. GWYNN and JOSEPH L. BLOTNER (Charlottesville, Va., 1959), p. 15.

2. *Faulkner at Nagano*, ed. ROBERT A. JELLIFFE (Tokyo, 1956), p. 140.

3. *Ibid.* See also p. 15 and p. 26.

4. WILLIAM FAULKNER, « American Drama: Inhibitions », *The Mississippian*, March 17, 1922, p. 5; recently reprinted in WILLIAM FAULKNER, *Early Prose and Poetry*, ed. CARVEL COLLINS (Boston, 1962), p. 94.

5. R. M. ALLEN « Notes on William Faulkner » (mimeographed transcript of a classroom interview at the University of Mississippi, Spring 1947), p. 4. This is apparently a more accurate transcript of the session than the

Thus Faulkner's evaluation of Mark Twain underwent a tremendous change in the course of his adult life until he came to view him in the same way Hemingway had done before him, calling him « the first truly American writer », from whom all later writers in America descended,⁶ and the grandfather of the writers of his own generation.⁷

His opinion of *Moby-Dick*, however, seems to have been persistently high from an early period. In a number of interviews during the fifties he named it as one of the books he used to read again and again.⁸ In 1940 he told a visitor in his Oxford home that he was reading *Moby-Dick* to his daughter Jill, who was only a child then.⁹ The fullest and finest remarks Faulkner ever publicly made on *Moby-Dick* occur in a letter he wrote as early as 1927, at a time when the Melville « revival » had barely begun. The letter was published in the section « Books » of the *Chicago Tribune*, July 6, 1927, p. 12, as part of a series called « Confession ». This series appeared over a number of years and was edited by Miss Fanny Butcher who solicited answers from well-known authors to the question what book they would like most to have written.

Faulkner replied:¹⁰

version published by LAVON RASCOE as « An Interview with William Faulkner », *Western Review*, XV, 300-304 (Summer, 1951).

6. *Faulkner at Nagano*, p. 88.

7. *Faulkner in the University*, p. 281.

8. *Faulkner in the University*, p. 50; *Faulkner at Nagano*, p. 42;

CYNTHIA GRENIER, « The Art of Fiction: An Interview with William Faulkner - September, 1955 », *Accent*, XIV, 168 (Summer, 1956); JEAN STEIN, « The Art of Fiction XII: Faulkner », *Paris Review*, XII (Spring, 1956), reprinted in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, ed MALCOLM COWLEY (New York, 1958), p. 136. In this latter interview the explicit reference is to Melville, but one may safely assume that *Moby-Dick* is what is meant.

9. DAN BRENNAN, « Journey South », *University of Kansas City Review*, XXII, 3 (Autumn, 1955).

10. I owe my knowledge of this letter to the clippings from the series « Confessions » which Mr. Herbert Kleist of the Widener Library, Harvard University, has collected. The letter is not listed in JAMES B. MERIWETHER'S excellent book *The Literary Career of William Faulkner* (Princeton University Library, 1961).

Dear Miss. Butcher:

It is a difficult question. I can name offhand several books which I should like to have written, if only for the privilege of rewriting parts of them. But I dare say there are any number of angels in heaven today [particularly recent American arrivals] who look down upon the world and muse with a little regret on how much neater they would have done the job than the Lord, in the fine heat of His creative fury, did.

I think that the book which I put down with the unqualified thought « I wish I had written that » is *Moby Dick*. The Greek-like simplicity of it: a man of forceful character driven by his sombre nature and his bleak heritage, bent on his own destruction and dragging his immediate world down with him with a despotic and utter disregard of them as individuals; the fine point to which the various natures caught [and passive as though with a foreknowledge of unalterable doom] in the fatality of his blind course are swept — a sort of Golgotha of the heart become immutable as bronze in the sonority of its plunging ruin; all timeless phase: the sea. And the symbol of their doom: a White Whale. There's a death for a man, now; none of your patient pasturage for little grazing beasts you can't even see with the naked eye. There's magic in the very word. A White Whale. White is a grand word, like a crash of massed trumpets; and leviathan himself has a kind of placid blundering majesty in his name. And then put them together!!! A death for Achilles, and the divine maidens of Patmos to mourn him, to harp white-handed sorrow on their golden hair.

And yet, when I remember *Moll Flanders* and all her teeming and rich fecundity like a market-place where all that had survived up to that time must bide and pass; or when I recall *When We Were Very Young*, I can wish without any effort at all that I had thought of that before Mr. Milne did.

WILLIAM FAULKNER

It can only be conjectured when Faulkner first read *Moby-Dick*. At the time of his death he owned two copies of the book, both acquired after the publication of his letter.¹¹ One was an

11. *A Catalogue of the Library of William Faulkner*, ed. and comp. JOSEPH L. BLOTNER (manuscript; to be published by the University of Vir-

edition published by Random House in 1930, which apparently was given to him by the publishing company and bears his autograph signature and the date « New York, 26 Oct 1931 ». The other was the 1950 Modern Library edition which Faulkner had among the books he kept in Charlottesville. Thus Faulkner's library does not give a clue as to his first readings of *Moby-Dick*. However, in March, 1922, Mr. Phil Stone of Oxford Miss., Faulkner's friend and literary mentor in this early period, ordered a copy of the novel from his bookdealer.¹² As Mr. Stone ordered many books for Faulkner to read, it is fairly safe to assume that this was one of them and consequently possible that at some date soon after March, 1922 Faulkner read *Moby-Dick* for the first time.

It should not be surprising that Faulkner also names *Moll Flanders* in his letter. The picaresque is of considerable importance in his own work, and he revealed an especial fondness for rogues when he named his favorite characters later in his life. On several occasions he showed the high regard he had for the English novel of the eighteenth century. And, finally, self-reliance, endurance, and independence such as *Moll Flanders'* are likewise characteristics of many women in Faulkner's works.

Again, Mr. Stone's list of book orders provides an indication as to when Faulkner may first have read Defoe's novel. The book was ordered in January, 1927. It therefore is very likely that Faulkner was still freshly impressed by his reading when he named *Moll Flanders* as the second book he would like to have written. His interest in the book seems to have continued throughout his life, a supposition borne out by the fact that he had two copies of it in his library, one bearing his signature and the date « Rowanoak, Dec. 1933 », the other, an edition published in 1950, kept in Charlottesville in his last period.

The mentioning of A.A. Milne's *When We Were Very Young* in the third place is a little baffling. Of course, the book

ginia Press). I am indebted to Mr. Blotner for letting me read his manuscript.

12. « Book Purchases and Orders by Phil Stone » appendix in *A Catalogue of the Library of William Faulkner*.

had already proved to be an extraordinary success. First published in 1924, it was in its ninety-third printing in the United States by September 1927. To understand Faulkner's predilection for the book, one must remember that throughout his life he enjoyed telling and reading stories to children. And among his unpublished writings there is the charming fairy-tale « The Wishing-Tree » which, written in the 1920's for a little girl, like Milne's children's books shows some traces of the influence of Lewis Carroll. But even so it remains somewhat strange for the literary critic to find *Moby-Dick* and a book of children's rhymes here cited in one breath, unless one simply takes it as one of Faulkner's jokes which it may well be.

HANS BUNGERT