

# The New Criterion

## Books

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### Faulkner & modernism

by [James Tuttleton](#)

A review of William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist by Daniel J. Singal

In *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist*, Daniel J. Singal, a professor of history at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, remarks that “intellectual historians have almost invariably steered clear” of Faulkner with the effect that “one subject remains largely unexplored—the structure and nature of his thought.”<sup>[1]</sup> This will come as a surprise to Faulkner’s bibliographers, who are inundated each year with fresh historical, critical, textual, and biographical studies galore. Faulkner is very probably the most extensively analyzed and most frequently criticized of American writers. Practically every scrap of his literary expression has been subjected to repeated interpretation. But it *is* the case that most of the criticism of Faulkner has been produced by students of literature rather than of history. The boundary of these disciplines having been blurred, however, novels are now, for better or worse, the historian’s domain and history the literary critic’s. Mr. Singal therefore intends to relate Faulkner’s work “to the cultural and intellectual discourse of the era”—a project that necessarily involves, I should imagine, the novelist’s relationship to the modernist movement in all its salient forms.

In offering to trace this relationship, Mr. Singal provides an introductory chapter defining the cultural and intellectual temper of the Victorian era. He then turns to the era of aesthetic modernism and defines its typical characteristics, as abstracted from some of the major modernist works of the early twentieth century. The balance of the book is a series of chapters devoted to Faulkner himself: his family origins in Oxford, Mississippi—particularly the importance of his great-grandfather, Colonel W. C. Falkner, author of *The White Rose of Memphis* and an embodiment of the flamboyant “Cavalier” sensibility of the old South; Faulkner’s World War I experience and its aftermath; the *fin-de-fin-de-siècle* character of his literary apprenticeship; his eventual discovery of “Yoknapatawpha County” as an adequate field of fictional invention, a discovery brilliantly justified in that modernist masterwork *The Sound and the Fury* (1929); his rejection of the Cavalier myth, or the illusion of a Southern aristocracy, as he struggled to achieve a “modernist identity,” a struggle that culminated in the pivotal work *Light in August* (1932); the growing mastery of Faulkner’s historical understanding, as it was reflected in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936); and Faulkner’s slow artistic decline, beginning with *Go Down, Moses* (1942), culminating in his death in 1962.

I confess at the outset to a particular liking for cultural history, for criticism that relates an author to the intellectual and artistic tendencies of his age. Literary study is now so disfigured by polysyllabic gobbledygook, so taken up with ideological posturing and with the arcane theories of unreadable Continentals, that it is a pleasure to follow the discussion of a matter-of-fact historian who admires Faulkner and wants to make plain why we ought to admire him, too.

Mr. Singal's analysis, which has a number of fine paragraphs, concludes that Faulkner was no racist but a deeply sensitive white who felt a personal and familial burden of guilt over slavery and projected in black characters such as Dilsey, Joe Christmas, and Lucas Beauchamp a complexity of motive and an intuitive understanding as well as a strength of will not merely admirable but heroic in an especially modern sense. Singal's account of Faulkner's several heroines also absolves the novelist from the charge, so often found in lightweight feminist criticism, that Faulkner is somehow a male chauvinist who subordinated or even degraded women—a charge that arises from erroneously identifying the novelist with some of his most misogynistic characters.

Mr. Singal is also to be credited with a responsible summary of at least some of the qualities of literary modernism as it developed in Faulkner's era. He is quite good at showing how modernism was more than a "radical experimentation in artistic style, a deliberate cultivation of the perverse and decadent, and the flaunting of outrageous behavior designed to shock the bourgeoisie." In stressing the "intense self-knowledge" pursued by modernists, he also notes their felt obligation "to loosen restraints, open oneself to the world, and perfect one's ability to experience experience," their ambition to explore and fashion meaning "in a world where meaning must constantly be re-created."

But as much as I cotton to this kind of critical study, it must be said that Mr. Singal's intellectual history falls disastrously short of the mark. Trouble signs begin to appear early in his definition of the Victorian ethos that preceded modernism. This historical epoch has been the subject of a significant reassessment by many excellent and well-informed historians: one thinks, for example, of Gertrude Himmelfarb in *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (1995) and James Lincoln Collier in *The Rise of Selfishness in America* (1991). But Singal treats the Victorian period exactly as *les jeunes*, the modernists themselves, saw it—as a period of old-fashioned fuddy-duddies who espoused "thrift, diligence, and persistence" only to sustain "a burgeoning capitalist economy." For Singal, the Victorian vision of the world was "largely free from sin and discord, reflecting ... immense optimism about the progress that the industrial order would bring." "For intellectually inclined southerners," he remarks, "Victorian thought meant typically the 'sweetness and light' of Matthew Arnold."

Did it? Such remarks give no idea of the lively intelligence and the spiritual turmoil of the period. That such optimism was wholly alien to the Christian foundations of Anglo-American Victorian culture, which took original sin and the ubiquity of evil as the norm, seems never to have occurred to Singal. The final flaw of Victorianism—the one that Singal seems most indignant about—is that "the Victorians saw art as didactic in purpose—as a vehicle for communicating and illustrating preordained moral truths." The historical antecedent of this idea, which had its origin in classical antiquity and which remains alive even today (extending past the defunct modernism of Faulkner's time), seems never to have occurred to Mr. Singal.

In any case, *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist* notes the mixture in Faulkner of traditional and youthful values (something true of all of us, I should think). But he insists on there being "two William Faulkners," "two central selves--old-fashioned country gentleman and contemporary writer," a Victorian Faulkner and a modernist Faulkner. Singal, it must be said at once, doesn't care a rap for the conservative Victorian self that stood for values such as honor and courage and compassion and pity, or for an art that pretended to communicate timeless truths. For him, there aren't any.

I shall return to the idea of "two" Faulkners in a moment. But first it is necessary to say that *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist* does not really establish a connection between Faulkner's mind and work and the cultural history of the modernist era. Although a great many ideas about the physical and psychological nature of man entered modernist discourse, there is nothing in this book relating Faulkner's thought to any new scientific understanding. The world wars, the stock market crash of 1929, and the Great Depression go virtually unmentioned, as do other cultural phenomena

and the ideas and explanations that attended them. Huge sections of the Faulkner *oeuvre* go unmentioned as well.

Only three “ideas,” by my count, inform Mr. Singal’s intellectual and cultural history of Faulkner’s work. The first is Freudianism. About Freud, Faulkner—perhaps evasively—said he knew nothing whatsoever. Still, he was better read than he let on and may have been covering his tracks. In any case, Freudianism was everywhere in the air. And certainly Singal is right that modernism coincided with the spreading influence of Freud in America. I do not disagree with Singal’s inference that “it should be no surprise that identity would take its place as a major subject—perhaps *the* major subject—of [Faulkner’s] fiction.” I am even sympathetic with Mr. Singal’s interest in how “the Cavalier sensibility, a ‘faulty identity’” derived from the antebellum planter class—an identity that we see reflected in the romanticism of *Flags in the Dust*, *Sartoris*, and other such fiction—“could be held directly responsible for the catastrophe of the Civil War, as well as the South’s subsequent descent into virulent racism and poverty.” Singal, I believe, is quite right to find Faulkner devoting “the greater part of his efforts as a modernist writer both to savaging the mythic Cavalier and to searching for an ideal twentieth-century southern identity with which to replace it.”

But I for one do not find essential to modernism, or to Faulkner, the notion that the self is a provisional quantity, an unstable, fluid, and changing element continually redefined by experience. Yet repeatedly we find sentences like the following:

There is, after all, no such thing as a generic human persona that remains the same in all times and places. On the contrary, Warren Susman informs us, the self is to a large extent historically determined, with each cultural era producing its own characteristic “modal” self as individuals construct their identities from the norms and prototypes that happen to be in circulation at the moment they come of age.

Is this indeed the case? Faulkner did not think so, nor do I. And of what authority in such matters, by the way, is Warren Susman, author of *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (1984)?

The second idea that seems to inform this book is an impossibly vague notion of existentialism. Once in a while Singal identifies it with Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. All it seems to come down to is the idea of authenticity, but there is no adduced evidence that Faulkner read or knew of either author. Inasmuch as Singal has virtually nothing to say about it, neither shall I.

The third idea involves politics and modernism. Singal is disposed—as Irving Howe and Lionel Trilling were before him—to turn modernism into “an ‘adversary culture’ originating in bohemia but later adopted more generally by twentieth-century intellectuals in their estrangement from mass society.” I have no objection to this identification as such. But I do object to an equation of the adversary culture with leftist politics. Most of the important literary modernists—as we see in the cases of Pound, Eliot, Stevens, Wyndham Lewis, E. E. Cummings, D. H. Lawrence, W. B. Yeats, et al.—were conservative in cultural and political matters. This won’t do for Singal, who wishes to equate modernism with Communism, feminism, and radical integrationist politics.

This necessity of affirming leftist politics leads Mr. Singal to elevate one of Faulkner’s most fatiguing novels, *The Mansion* (1959), into “the culminating example of modernist heroism in Faulkner.” This novel is the third in the “Snopes Trilogy,” after *The Hamlet* (1940) and *The Town* (1957). In Greenwich Village, “the citadel of American Modernism,” Linda Snopes “enters into a passionate relationship with Barton Kohl, a young sculptor of Jewish descent and an ardent Communist. This ‘virile, alive’ man, ‘who loved what the old Greeks meant by laughter,’ completes her immersion in contemporary culture.” Although Mr. Singal is sure that, “as a Modernist, she is aware that no immutable laws exist to govern behavior,” she inevitably goes off to fight fascism in

Spain. As much male as female, and therefore (for Singal) an embodiment of “heroic androgyny,” she delivers herself of tedious and ungrammatical blather about “hope, millennium dream; of the emancipation of man from his tragedy, the liberation at last and forever from pain and hunger and injustice, of the human condition.” Linda Snopes is for Singal “a female Christ” who,

though a woman, a Communist, and, at least in name, a Snopes, ... also represents Faulkner’s final literary incarnation of his most revered ancestor [Colonel Falkner], the man whom he was still trying so hard to emulate in the late 1950s. A much improved, thoroughly Modernist version of the Old Colonel who preserves all his best attributes and reverses his defects, she is truly the Knight of the White Plume.

Readers are entitled to be thunderstruck, as I was, at the ease with which Linda Snopes, whom Cleanth Brooks called “an almost clinically pure example of a woman who is restless, alienated, and disturbed,” is transformed into an incarnation of great-granddaddy and an exemplar of some kind of latent Communist strain in Faulkner. But it gets worse. Carried away with this wild nonsense, Singal goes on:

Where the real-life Faulkner advocated gradualism and caution, the Modernist Faulkner was busy creating what at the time must have seemed the very model of an impatient militant, anticipating in an uncanny way that small legion of activists who in the 1960s would overthrow the South’s oppressive racial traditions once and for all.

I shall pass over this bland assurance that the South’s oppressive racial traditions have been permanently overthrown. And it would be cruel for me to probe this preposterous identification of Linda Snopes with Colonel Falkner. But it is plainly irresponsible in a work of literary criticism to identify the novelist with any of his characters, especially the deranged ones, and particularly with Linda Snopes. The Faulkner of the 1950s became increasingly conservative on racial matters, not merely taking a gradualist position on desegregation, but even holding the line and asserting that black and white Southerners needed to be left alone by the North to work out their own problems, which he was confident they would do. Far from being an embodiment of the leftist adversary culture, the novelist (taking an absolute states’ rights position) remarked in 1956 that if it came to an invasion of Yankee marshals and detestable Northern civil rights workers, and “if it came to fighting I’d fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes.”

Luckily for Faulkner, and for us, it never came to that, never came to another civil war because Southerners as a whole wisely understood the inherent justice of civil rights legislation and the necessity of obedience to the Constitution in matters of equal justice under the law. As to Faulkner, he was a child of his own time and place. He was descended from Victorians and steeped in the romance of a tragic but glorious Southern past. As a young man, he wanted—like most of us—to be awfully modern, but as he matured he found in the old ways much to affirm. These facts about the man and the novelist could have been explored and defined without creating a schizoid Faulkner or a prophet of Nineties academic political correctness. Singal has made him into both.

## Notes

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1. *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist*, by Daniel J. Singal; University of North Carolina, 366 pages, \$29.95. [Go back to the text.](#)

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