

TIME AND CHARACTER IN THREE NOVELS BY
WILLIAM FAULKNER

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I

An author's awareness of reality is revealed in many ways: character, setting, and action are his most basic materials, and through his manipulation of these he defines his more abstract concepts, his beliefs about the nature of the human situation. Often he sees this situation in terms of man's previously established, external limitations, such as birth and death, time and space. Since time and space are the limits that exist all through the time between birth and death, since it is existence in time and space that defines our humanity, an author's view of the human situation is qualified and specified by his view of these two limitations. As Margaret Church says in Time and Reality, "The understanding of the form, content, thought and motif of fiction depends on the understanding of an author's attitude towards time and space."¹

In setting up his construct of reality, William Faulkner creates a definite and quite intricate world, one that is more expansive than the Yoknapatawpha County that he so carefully outlines and populates. Indeed, he creates a whole hierarchy, complete with a god of sorts. The Divine Being is referred to variously as the Player (in Light in August), the Creditor

¹Margaret Church, Time and Reality (Chapel Hill, 1949), p. 4.

(in Absalom, Absalom!), or the Lord who "giveth and taketh away" (in As I Lay Dying). It is this rather nebulous figure who has placed man in his situation and who will eventually remove him. He is in control: He gives man life, and at the end of life He puts death in its place. Along with life, the Divine Being gives man certain media in which to operate. Because man is a physical, tangible being for the duration of his existence on earth, he must exist in space. The other medium that the Creator offers is time, and it is this which offers the greater possibilities. The Player or the Creditor creates the limits--birth, death, time, and space--which he offers to the creature man as those within which he is to live out his life. Space represents the area in which physical man exists, but it is through time only that he progresses from one end of his life to the other. Thus it is time and man's use of it which chiefly determine the effectiveness of his operation in this existence. Because an understanding of time is so important to Faulkner, those characters in his novels who come the closest to achieving the heroic dimensions he thought man capable of are those who also understand time, who make use of it to gain a greater knowledge of themselves, who perhaps become so knowledgeable about man's condition that society can no longer tolerate them.

In order to determine which of Faulkner's characters succeed in struggling with and reconciling themselves to

time and the conditions it imposes, one must first examine Faulkner's view of time and man's place in it.² Margaret Church, again in Time and Reality, discusses the time sense of Bergson and Proust and relates them to several contemporary authors, of which Faulkner is one. According to her interpretation³ Bergson says that what we mistakenly conceive of as time, in which impressions, emotions, and feelings are put into an order one after the other, is really only space. Time cannot be divided and enumerated, but rather exists as what Bergson calls duration or durée in which the present is not separated from the past or the future. Time seen in this way has a fluid quality with states of consciousness blending into one another continuously. Thus the past, though it is definitely past and will not happen in the same way again, is continually a part of the present, always moving into the present and the future. As Bergson puts it, "Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the

²Margaret Church's is the most helpful study of time of those used. For some other studies of time in William Faulkner, see Sartre, "Time in Faulkner: The Sound and the Fury" in Three Decades of Criticism, ed. by Hoffman and Vickery; Peter Swiggart, "Time in Faulkner's Novels: in Modern Fiction Studies, May, 1955; Karl Zink, "Flux and the Frozen Moment: in PMLA, Volume LXXI; Richard P. Adams, Faulkner, Myth and Motion, 1968; Morris Beja, "A Flash, A Glare: Faulkner and Time," in Renascence, Volume XVI; Olga Vickery, "Faulkner and the Contours of Time," in The Georgia Review, Volume 12; and Jean Pouillon, "Time and Destiny in Faulkner" in Faulkner, ed. by Robert Penn Warren, 1966.

³Margaret Church, p. 6.